

ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE FACE OF THE CONTEMPORARY: AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIC PLEMONS

*ANTROPOLOGIA DIANTE DA CONTEMPORANEIDADE:
UMA ENTREVISTA COM ERIC PLEMONS*

Francisco Cleiton Vieira Silva do Rego

cleiton.vsr@gmail.com

Ph.D. in Social Anthropology

Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the

Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte

Santa Cruz-RN, Brazil

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8852-6212>



Esta obra está licenciada sob uma licença Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Francisco Cleiton Vieira S. do Rego: Professor Eric, thank you for granting me this interview. We are here, in Tucson, at the School of Anthropology from the University of Arizona, where you work, teaching at the Graduate and Undergraduate levels. Besides your work as a researcher and as affiliated faculty at the Institute for LGBT Studies. I want to start this talk by asking you about your last work. In 2017, you won the prestigious Ruth Benedict Award for Best Monograph on LGBT Issues given by the Association for Queer Anthropology, a section of the American Association of Anthropology.

Eric Plemons: Yes.

CVR: This work, an ethnography on facial feminization surgery in trans-women, was the result of your doctoral dissertation (PLEMONS, 2017). How did you become interested in this topic? Tell us a little about your academic trajectory.

EP: I had become interested in working with surgeons who are doing trans-medicine after attending a WPATH Meeting. I was at the conference presentation on vaginoplasty and there was a surgeon from Brazil who got up and explained a series of five vaginoplasties that she had performed, and she had had a lot of complications and bad results. This was back in 2007. And I was surprised by this report of complications because Brazil is not an under-resourced country especially when it comes to doing surgery and so it was surprising to me that this was the case. Later that day I met with a Canadian surgeon and I asked, “why is the team from Brazil having such problems?” And he laughed and he said, “they are doing things we did 10 years ago”. And I said: “why is that true?” He said: “it’s because we don’t publish papers.” So, from

that moment I became very interested in surgical practice and how information about trans-specific procedures travel around the world or does not. How particular people have access to procedures, given the controversial status of trans-medicine, and how culturally specific ideas about masculinity and femininity help fuel the kinds of interventions people have or want in the name of trans-medicine. So, my initial project for the dissertation was going to be in Argentina. I was in Buenos Aires working with two surgeons down there and then, because of a family issue, I needed to stay in the United States to do my dissertation research. A friend of mine happened to know Dr. Douglas Ousterhout, who was the surgeon I wrote about in the book, and she said, “have you met this guy?” and I said, “no, I’ve never heard of him”. I did not know much about facial feminization at the time. And then she said, “do you want to meet him?” I said “sure”. So, I went and met him, and two minutes into our conversation I thought I want to write about this. He was a really interesting person; he was very excited to have me there and to talk to me. He invited me into the operating room, and I just found the whole thing very compelling, the promises he makes, the history of the procedure. And so, from

that minute on, I decided to work on that project.

CVR: What was your main concern with this research?

EP: What was immediately striking to me was having to deal with the differences between the sort of concepts and the theory about gender, especially trans bodies and the actual physical activity of reconstructing a person’s face. And that was the most challenging thing for me to think through, and to make sense of, in this project, right, remaking your identity by remaking your facial structure. So that was what I wanted to think about, mostly, and what was most difficult for me. Ethically speaking, I was concerned about being with people at a very, very vulnerable, and intimate moment in their lives. Many of the people I met arrived at the surgeon after saving money for decades. I had met people who changed their careers so that they could save money so that they could be here. People who have cashed in their insurance policies, sold their houses, did all kinds of things to be in that moment and here I was, this researcher going “hi,” you know, “can I be with you, not only be with you in your exam but talk to you about that?” And then, “can I observe your surgery and, you know, can we talk later?” So that was a big concern of mine, that I wanted to be respectful of people in this very intimate and vulnerable moment. I did not want my presence there, my curiosity, to make their time difficult or feel like there was something taking away, somehow, from that moment in their lives.

CVR: What do you see as the main contribution of anthropology to the study of trans-issues, currently?

EP: I think the strength or what anthropology offers to this topic is what we do well everywhere, which is that rather than being concerned with concepts and then going out to find them in the world, we start with people and peoples' experiences, and then build up theory and engagement from there. So, a lot of what has been the foundational literature in transgender studies, for example, has been from the Humanities and questions of representation and theoretical bodies that are concerned more with the figure of the transgender person than actual transgender people. And I think, what anthropologists, what we do well, is... are... with people. We are with people and listen to the things they care about, and the challenges that they face in their lives and we let that guide the work that we do rather than thinking about the figure of the transgender body as always pushing boundaries, and the figure of the transgender bodies as breaking down barriers, and the figure of transgender bodies refusing binaries, and so on. Yes, there are many people who experience themselves like that, but many others who do not, or who also may have that experience and yet may need to go to the doctor, to travel, need to get a job, need to do all these other things. What I want to do in my work is to be able to engage conceptually with a lot of other pieces of literature, but ground my work in the experiences that people have and the concerns that they have.

CVR: You recently edited a TSQ's issue on surgeries (PLEMONS; CURRAH, 2018). What problems are raised by the anthropological study in this matter?

EP: The TSQ issue is not only anthropological. So, there are types of texts from many different disciplinary backgrounds. There are historical texts, autobiographical, a couple of anthropological, so they work across a number of genres. I think some of the more interesting work on surgery, in general, has not been focused on trans-issues because there is not much anthropology that deals with trans- medicine. The interesting stuff that is happening in anthropology and surgery has been around organ transplant and transfer, limb replacement, and the phenomenology of extending into the world with a different kind of body that has been surgically enabled. There has always been and continues to be, smart work on surgical alteration and reproductive bodies, and so whether that is vasectomy or c-section or other kinds of interventions around reproduction. So, I think that is the most engaged anthropology right now. I know of people who are currently working on the problem in global health of extending surgical capacity in underserved areas that are interesting. There are some people, like Rachel Prentice (2013), who wrote an ethnography of the operating room that expands the long tradition of Erving Goffman's writing on the ethnography of the operating room in the 1950s. He had some really classic pieces that provide a good way to think about social roles in the Goffmanian sense. They are about how the surgeon can be a person who, out in the world, could never take

a knife and cut you, but as soon as they are dressed in their costume and the patient body has turned from the sacred body of an individual to the profane body of the anesthetized object, the cutting is not a break of the social contract, it is actually the heroic act of a savior. So, it is really a great way to think about roles in the Goffman sense. I think that is where the more interesting stuff about surgery is. In terms of the TSQ issue, the pieces that we collected were trying to think through a lot of stuff that animates my work. They were about how differently situated, culturally and historically, were the ideas about the value of the bodies, about healthcare administration, about the contentiousness of transgender as a type of condition for which surgery is a motivated response, that those are so different around the world. This idea that we have about what the transgender body is, we know as anthropologists there is not only one answer to that question. I appreciate seeing work that tries to think about that in very specific times and places. We have a piece about trans women trying to access public health services in Brazil, we have a piece about a gender clinic in Australia, we have historical pieces about the United States. There has been works, since publishing the TSQ issue about Iran, and different religious and spiritual traditions, that have influenced surgical practices, so I think there is a lot more to be said about the topic.

CVR: Anthropology has always been involved in discussions about the limits and relations between nature and culture to explain human life, and we even question the very construction of these spheres as categories. This discussion gained relevance when studies were done on trans-lives because of issues involving the centrality of the body. On the other hand, there is a lot of avoidance, from researchers, to raise research topics that consider this materiality. What are the main problems that the study of the body and the current imaginary on biological explanations pose to anthropology?

EP: Yeah. As a medical anthropologist this is one of the most interesting things to watch: what is the status of the body over time? How can we talk about it? What kind of a thing is it? And also, what kind of a thing is biology? And we have those questions as ourselves, for ourselves, as conceptual categories, and as a methodical problem. But the people that we talk to, think about them in very different ways, and sometimes very contradictory ways, and that is a difficult thing, as a writer and a thinker, to know what to do with it. In the 1990s, we had the so-called turn to discourse, right, where we moved away from biological explanations of behavior, identity, embodiment, and instead favored discursive forms. So, we think about performativity and that identity is a thing that we make, and that it has to do with history. We are trying to move away from the idea that there is determination – so the cancelation of the essential. But I think, for me, one of the downfalls or problems with this really hard turn toward the discursive is that the material fell out. There

was not an easy way to talk about it and I am certainly not the only person who is grappling with this problem. And so, you see in the last 8 to 10 years the emergence of new materialist thought across a number of different fields. Feminist materialism is one of those, and the basic questions that the feminists and materialists are asking is how do we deal with the body after Butler (1990)? Right? What kind of body can we talk about and how can we talk about it? For me, I had to talk about it because there is nothing quite so material as watching someone's face get sawn apart. Right? You cannot think about, or you cannot only think about the body as a discursive production when you are watching it be operated on. And, when you understand that, to arrive at that place, is the long-held desire of a person who is spending their whole life fortune basically hanging their sense of well-being on the effect of these interventions. So, I think that you have to think about the body, and you have to think about its material properties and its material limits. In the same way that disability theorists say, "yes, sure, the social theory of disability says, I'm made disabled by the curb that won't allow me to roll my wheelchair. So, my disability is a social product rather than a product of mine." At that same moment, you still cannot get up to the curb. So, you can have that critique and you are not wrong, but at that moment the materiality of the situation still provides a limit, and that limit is the condition of your life at that moment. So, it does no good for us to discount that or to move past it, or to make a claim that diminishes the value of that moment when you cannot get up the curb and the real limitations of the body. What I wanted to think about in this book is the real limitation that the trans-women I spoke to said their bodies pose for them and that real limitation was, when people look at my face, they call me a man. That is that, right. At the same time, I do not want to be an essentialist either. Even though many of my interlocutors were very essentialist in the things that they said. The writerly challenge is how to take seriously what they are saying without discounting it and saying they are wrong, because that is not my job as an anthropologist, to make that assessment, but to think about what the implications are of that statement. That there is something about the testosterone of my body that made a face like this, that now, will not let people see me. So, what we know from performativity or from that theory, in general, is that in order to be counted in a category you have to perform or somehow otherwise manifest what people are expecting of you and then you find yourself in that category. That is the same requirement to be counted in a different category, as well. The most certain way to be placed in the category that you wish to inhabit is to exhibit the thing people expect you to. I do not need to be an essentialist about the body in order to say that. I can still talk about histories and discourses and cultures and investments and politics, and what testosterone does to faces. Those things are not contradictory. It is instead the ability to say that the trans-woman

who finds herself as a patient understands herself very well. She might not be able to articulate the theory that we might trade in our explanations of it. But she understands it fundamentally, which is why she is there in the first place. So, I think sitting with people's experiences of the material limits of their bodies is a good thing, it is a good scholarly practice, but I do not think they are contradictory. They do not need to be made contradictory. I do not think you have to be an essentialist in order to make the argument to take the material of the body seriously because our interlocutors take their bodies seriously, and so we must do that too.

CVR: Brazilian anthropology has a very close relationship with social minorities, in the sense that it has always been interested in the study of these groups, such as the poor, immigrants, deviants, homosexuals, women and indigenous people. Much of the processes of citizenship and the visibility of the problems of these groups had the participation of the engagement of anthropological intellectuals, whether studying or engaging directly. This ended up characterizing much of the Brazilian discipline. How does this relationship occur here in the United States, and what are the main issues you see that this relationship raises to anthropological practice?

EP: Yeah. It is interesting. Here, our professional practice has a couple of paths. Applied anthropology is probably most like what you are describing. So, we would say that is applied anthropology. Those are anthropologists who are working directly with groups to advocate for them, to help write a policy that is relevant to them, to intervene on their behalf when there is a question about governance. In our own Native American populations, there is a lot of need because of the terrible history of treatment from our federal government to Native American groups. There are many anthropologists who work with those groups to help preserve their history and advocate for their rights, property, and things like that. There are applied anthropologists who work in hospitals or with poor groups or with migrants or these kinds of things. Many of those people are working in universities and you will see online or if you look at descriptions of programs, they are people who do applied anthropology. Then, there are other groups. They do not have a special name; they are just anthropologists whose work may be largely philosophical. Their fieldwork may not be necessarily with an underserved population; they may not advocate necessarily. If I work with the police, for example, I can be an anthropologist of policing. I am not advocating for the police, you know, I do not do anything for them. I work with surgeons; they are one of my interlocutor groups. I do not have to do advocacy for them, they advocate for themselves just fine. Whereas when I work with trans folks then I do try to do some advocacy in my own way, which is that I work with administrators in hospitals, I help coauthors with papers about changing surgical practice and policy, that sort of thing, but it

is very different in that sense. So, you have this sort of anthropologists who are not necessarily advocating or otherwise working to help any particular group but are engaged in questions of philosophy, concept work, history, discourse, who are trying to think about these big things without necessarily doing certain direct service to the group that they work with. There is positive and negatives to that. But that is the history of how our discipline in the US has split over time.

CVR: That is so interesting how national traditions can change because in Brazil one is very compelled to address in a minimum stage the political features that everybody is entangled in (Rego, 2020). So, it is more about that. I am not saying that everyone advocates for every group that they study. But that there is this very compelling spirit we are talking about, that we should address political features of everything. Another thing is that groups look for us. So, we are studying this or that, and then they are looking for how we can make help them to be more visible. It is not like they need us to be visible, they articulate their visibility work by themselves just fine, we are this other tool. Currently, the Brazilian anthropological community is remarkably diverse, of course. As in the U.S., we study a variety of topics and groups. It is not common sense in Brazil to make this difference between applied and non-applied anthropology as it is done in the U.S. There are almost no jobs in Brazil for anthropologists to work outside universities, as in hospitals or the industry, besides the few vacancies on the Brazilian federal public agency for indigenous issues, “The Indigenous National Foundation” (FUNAI, in Brazilian Portuguese). Mostly, we think now that all anthropology is applied anthropology as it is as the work we mainly do, making research and writing about it to advance anthropological knowledge on human lives. The advocating work is very appreciated in Brazil, of course, as well as in the U.S., but this part of our work is generally seen as a moral plus, a piece of what we do. So, I think we do not use this distinction also because of our labor market scenario, which is mainly held in the university.

EP: Yeah, there are certainly lots of anthropologists who work outside of the academy in the U.S., whether they are working for cultural resource management groups, or work directly for the industry. There are companies now across different types of industries that hire anthropologists because they want us to help them understand their customers, or they want us to help them understand their workplace. They value ethnographic observation and methods. I do think that of those people whose work is more theoretical or more conceptual, most people are focused on marginalized populations because anthropologists are always concerned with power and how it works. Now, whether or not these people are writing about these marginalized groups or have long-term devotion to them, or maybe it’s a project-specific thing, it varies quite considerably. I do think that this “applied” distinction is an important one in terms of saying what kind of anthropologist are you in the academy.

There is a very big difference between saying I am an applied anthropologist versus a non-applied anthropologist. I might say, for example, that I am an anthropologist I work mostly on Heidegger. And I might try to apply these theoretical philosophical concepts to the study of groups that I work on, for example.

CVR: You have written on the conservative Trump Administration, regarding its restrictive policies for transgender people in the military, and matters associated with health care (PLEMONS, 2017a). In Brazil, the new Bolsonaro Administration had also erased affirmative LGBT policies. Here, and in Brazil, there is a negative position against minorities, largely blamed by some people as the enemies of the nation. What do you think of the rise of this far right-oriented politics and its social base posits to the anthropological practice? How does this affect our profession?

EP: That is a really good question. I do not really know what I think about that. Increasingly, and I can really only speak to the United States, but on one hand, we have the professional protection of tenure, if you have it, at a university whose main aim is to provide for academic freedom, you are allowed to write whatever you want without the threat of being fired for doing your job. At the same time, we are seeing over the last several years, an attack on the tenure system. Some state legislatures characterize what they think professors do, which is to sit around and smoke pipes and play chess and listen to Mozart all day. I do not know what they think we do, but it is not what we do. The effort is to say, “we taxpayers pay these people way too much for doing nothing. These people do nothing. Tenure is not fair; we shouldn’t have it.” This is one way you see some states making efforts towards chipping away at the tenure system. Without that protection, we become much more vulnerable to our university administration getting some calls from somebody who does not like us and then getting us fired. The other way of chipping away at the tenure system is having fewer and fewer jobs for people on the tenure track at all. So, we hire more and more adjunct laborers, who are precariously employed, who do not get paid well, who teach semester to semester, and that means fewer and fewer faculty members are protected by tenure. But then, fewer, and fewer faculty members actively have a research program, because you cannot do both those things well for a long period. Some people certainly try to hold it together for as long as they can, but it is not a sustainable career. So, when people do not have the protection to write and say what they want, then everybody suffers as a society. I think that, as you say, when there is a rise on the Right or a sense that we have a rise on the Right, fewer and fewer people will care about what happens to trans folks, for example, because they do not think trans folks should exist at all. And they ask, “why are my tax dollars being paid for this professor to go study this group of deviant perverted misfit people?” The sorts of negative social characterization

that gets attached to trans folk also diminish the value of our research and diminish the value of us being able to intervene on behalf of people who are marginalized and vilified. So, it makes that work more difficult. At the same time, for those of us who have tenure, it's all the more important to do challenging work. We have to use our secure positions in institutions to absolutely advocate or to remain visible and to continue doing research on populations that are otherwise marginalized. One of our main contributions can be to push back against these kinds of politics. It is good to use the skills that we have and the institutional resources that we have to put out texts, to be online, to get interviewed, to go on the news, to do all the things we can do. Because if we are not doing it, no one will. And we cannot leave that job only to the people who are most suffering, which often happens. When marginalized groups have to advocate for themselves, that's a question of life or death, and they can't be the only ones who are doing it. They have to have support from those of us in institutions who have money and who have jobs and who have the ability to speak out as well.

CVR: You are now co-chair of the Trans Studies Research Cluster at the Institute for LGBT Studies. Tell us a bit about this work at the University of Arizona.

EP: Yeah! It is exciting that we are the first-ever institutionally supported research group on transgender studies. We here at the University of Arizona have the largest concentration of faculty working on trans topics anywhere in the world, and we all are trans. So, that is really big and important. We are really diverse groups in terms of the scholarship that we do. I am positioned here in anthropology. We have faculty members in Gender and Women studies, Education, Religious Studies, and Family Studies. It is a big group. Some of us were hired directly as part of the initiative to start up this cluster, and others were already at the university or have been hired under different auspices. So far, the major efforts that we have made are, back in September 2016, we hosted the first International Trans Studies Conference. I was the program chair for that conference and we thought we might end up having something like a hundred people come. We had something more like 400 people come! We had far more panels than we had anticipated. The conference included art exhibits and community engagements here in town. We showed films, and there was everything from young adult literature panels, to high theory, to film talks. It was a little bit of everything. So that was exciting. We host a reading group that is meant to bring together undergraduates, grad students, post-docs, faculty, staff, and community members to talk about relevant books of interest. That has been a great community-building tool. But we do not yet have a curriculum as a group, because we do not offer a degree or academic program. I say to students who are interested in coming here that they have the opportunity to and meet and engage with faculty from the research cluster in

any way that they like and to be able to seek mentorship from these people. I serve on committees with many of my faculty colleagues in trans studies for students in Anthropology and Gender and Women Studies. Those are the two departments I am serving on committees for right now, but students make their way between all of us to get the resources that they want, to help develop their research.

CVR: Finally, tell us a little about the research work you are currently involved with.

EP: I have two significant projects right now. In the first one, I am looking at the way that U.S. institutions are responding to a growing demand for trans healthcare. So, that is looking at how insurance and healthcare administrators and hospitals and clinicians are trying to grow their capacity really quickly. This follows decades, in the United States, when there was no health insurance coverage for trans-related procedures. Now that there is a growing set of insurance coverages, there is a whole group of people who are trying to access medical procedures and you have decades of inadequate institutional capacities. So, I am looking at that exchange. The other project is a book on genital injury and rehabilitation. Right now, I am working on a chapter on uterus and penis transplantation. I will be in Sweden in a couple of weeks where I will talk with some of the team over there that is trying to develop a procedure to transplant penises for transmen. They have begun working on a cadaver study and that is how far it has gotten so it is a very intriguing possibility. It is super fascinating.

CVR: Professor Eric, I wish to thank you once more for this interview. It was very fascinating to hear you and to register all these kinds of issues we have discussed today, so a Brazilian audience can learn and get to know more about the U.S. scholar world and your work.

WORKS CITED

- BUTLER, Judith. *gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- PLEMONS, Eric. *The look of a woman: facial feminization surgery and the aims of trans-medicine*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
- PLEMONS, Eric. The future of trans-medicine under Trump. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, Jan. 23, 2017a. Available at: <<http://medanthroquarterly.org/2017/01/23/the-future-of-trans-medicine-under-trump/>>. Accessed on: dec. 20th 2018.
- PLEMONS, Eric; CURRAH, Paisley. Introduction: reframing the surgical. *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Duke, v. 5, n. 2, p. 164-173, 2018.
- PRENTICE, Rachel. *Bodies in formation: an ethnography of anatomy and surgery education*. Duke: Duke University Press, 2013.

REGO, Francisco Cleiton Vieira Silva do. *A segurança biológica na transição de gênero: uma etnografia das políticas da vida no campo social da saúde trans*. 400f. Tese (Doutorado em Antropologia Social) – Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, 2020.

SUBMETIDO EM: 17/01/2021

APROVADO EM: 27/06/2021