

# Review

## Berkowitz, Dana. 2017. *Botox Nation: Changing the Face of America*. New York: New York University Press.

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Botulinum toxin is one of the most lethal substances in the world. Yet over 11 million people—most of them women—have willingly injected it into their faces, with the explicit goal of erasing expression.

In *Botox Nation*, sociologist Dana Berkowitz explores the phenomenon of people in their twenties and thirties using Botox to prevent the appearance of aging. As she explains in the Introduction, “Botox is the star of this book; those who produce it, sell it, use it, and market it are the supporting characters.” (22) Berkowitz’s final product is a fascinating book based on over 60 interviews with Botox users and providers. She combines both individual narratives and institutional discourses to explain how Botox has been marketed and commodified, and how those processes manifest in people’s bodies. Berkowitz herself tries Botox to see what the experience is like (spoiler alert: it is not bad, but it is expensive).

In many ways, Botox is about erasure—erasing wrinkles and expression, and hence age. But Berkowitz argues that while at the individual level the goal is a blank, or at least smooth, face, at the institutional level Botox seeks to fill that blank slate with meaning. It, “makes visible the ways that cultural norms and social inequalities are mapped onto bodies, how gender is significant in the production of bodies, and how bodies become the object and subject of consumption” (7).

It was an ophthalmologist who saw the cosmetic potential of Botox (a medicine that has many useful purposes beyond beautifying) in 1987, which is not entirely surprising, given the expressiveness of eyes and the knowledge an eye doctor has about facial musculature. It took pharmaceutical company Allergan many years to convince people that the toxin could be used for good, or at least to freeze the muscles that make you

frown. But they soon identified their target group: people bothered by the sight of their aging faces and bodies, who did not shy away from investing money in their personal body projects. This largely meant white women who happily bought Groupons to improve their appearance.

One of Berkowitz's most interesting findings is that many of these women identify as feminist. She found that "adherence to feminist ideologies does not buffer women from participating in beauty culture" (122). Additionally, many of the women explain that their motivation to use Botox is less romantic and more professional. This is not just a concern about ageing, but also about the traditional feminine quality of "cheerfulness." Several women report wanting to rid themselves of "resting bitch face," so that they appear friendlier. Of particular interest to the readership of this journal is that one professor's teaching evaluations soared after she got Botox (which, of course, the students could not know, so either she looked different and they responded better, or she acted differently with the same positive result, or a combination of the two).

Most Botox users do not stop with Botox. In many ways it is quite literally a gateway drug. Once you see how Botox enhances appearance and hence some professional opportunities, the next step is fillers—though these add to a face, rather than mute it.

One weakness of *Botox Nation* is that it does not connect the strong sociological lens to other disciplinary work on Botox. For example, a recent line of work in psychology and psychiatry argues that Botox, in making it impossible to frown, can help treat depression. As Eric Finzi explains in *The Face of Emotion: How Botox Affects Our Moods and Relationships* (2014), Botox produces not just a blank face, but potentially a happier one.

Another weakness, which Berkowitz does not adequately address, is that only 3-5% of the US population uses Botox, and she only interviews those who do. What of the millions who could afford it, but chose not to; or who wish to do it? Are all of their reasons similar? Similarly, while some men are included, more of them identify as gay men, so what does that mean in terms of gender, institutions, and power structures? We know that much of the beauty industry tries to sell a "standard" of beauty, so those on the margins are always working and investing to achieve that "ideal."

*Botox Nation* in general is organized in a very clear way, with each chapter building on the previous, but also able to stand alone. That said, especially for undergraduate readers, it would have been useful to use section breaks within the chapters.

Finally, at times the writing is a bit thick (i.e.: "In this book, I consider how women's agency is constructed throughout the process of objectification and the ways that women

can experience subjecthood and pleasure while concomitantly encountering bodily objectification.” [18]). At others it is clear and powerful, even just a page later (i.e. “To put it bluntly, in our postfeminist era, being hot is what women’s liberation looks like.” [19]). If the prose or organization gets overwhelming at times, know that it will become clear and powerful again very soon.

To most of those Berkowitz interviewed, the use of Botox is not about blankness. It is about (continued) possibility. It may lessen expression of the face, but it is ultimately about expression of the self. While this process is complicated by notions of class and gender, it is a process that shows us that we still read a lot into all faces, especially our own.

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