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Labiaplasty and the Construction of the “Normal”

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Neslihan has recently become an ABD in Anthropology at UIC. She is mainly interested in a sexual disorder, vaginismus, which is commonly experienced by women in Turkey. Through the lens of vaginismus, she is analyzing the relationships among the state, biomedicine and construction of women's bodies.

Neslihan Sen and Elizabeth T. Abrams

Labiaplasty and the construction of the “normal”

Introduction

A *Playboy* magazine writer, Heather Caldwell is amazed at the images that she sees in the office of a Beverly Hills plastic surgeon, Dr. David Matlock. She is truly surprised at the numerous before-after photos of perfected ‘problematic’ vaginas. Vaginas with protruding labia minoras are sliced to down size; asymmetrical labia majoras are perfectly made to measure; clitoral hoods are trimmed; and many mons are slimmed down. She confesses to her readers that before she has been to this office she has never thought her own vagina in comparison with others and she has not realized the fact that hers does not look anything like the ones in ‘after’ photos. It has never occurred to her before she has looked at the catalogue that her vagina is flawed (Caldwell 2006).

Later in her article, Caldwell gives the details of her interview with Dr. Matlock, the founder of Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Institute of Los Angeles. Caldwell explains that he makes \$12 million through this institution. He is the pioneering figure behind the booming vaginal surgery market and he claims that he can create ‘perfect’ vaginas. Like many aesthetic surgeons Virginia Blum encountered while writing her book, *Flesh Wounds* (2003), Matlock sounds like he thinks of himself as a magician. He knows what women want, he claims. When asked if there is something like a perfect vagina, Dr. Matlock claims that the perfect vaginas do exist and he swears that he has even seen a few. However, he also admits, most women's labia minora naturally projects beyond

their labia majora. At this point, Caldwell thinks about “pharmaceutical industry’s knack for inventing diagnostic names for diseases that do not exist” (84). Obviously a market has been created for perfecting / normalizing vaginas, even though deviance and variation are actually ‘normal’.

Even though, Matlock has only seen a few perfect vaginas so far, his enthusiasm about meeting the need in the market which he ‘discovered’, not created, is bewildering. The image of the perfect is out there and women want to undergo an operation to look like the ‘ideal’. In this paper, we are looking for answers to understand the ways in which women learn what the ideal or in this sense ‘normal’ is. In our research we are concerned about how vaginas represented in medical literature, in text books, pornographic materials, and in sex shops. To our surprise, there seems to be a consensus about all of these sources about the homogeneity of the color and shape of the vaginas. None of these sources seems to take variation into account. This paper is an initial step of a significant bigger project which will include interviews with the experts who perform labiaplasty and the women who decide to undergo the operation. This initial project is going to reveal how a perfect image created for women’s bodies even when they are not exposed to the public gaze.

The Body as a Site to Improve

From various forms of tattooing to piercing; from extreme dieting to circumcision; body has been the place which has been the cultural focus: sometimes a status symbol, sometimes a site to show class differences and propriety. Archeological evidence shows we have been modifying our bodies for 90.000 -100.000 years now. The earliest adornment, a necklace / bracelet, recently found in archeological excavations, is thought to have been used for some symbolic purposes rather than for decoration, only (2006, BBC NEWS). Even this very early evidence supports Mauss’ claim that the body is “the first and most natural tool of man” (qtd. in Martin 1992:121). The body is a text of culture; it is a symbolic form upon which the norms and practices of society are inscribed (Lee 1998). Turner, for instance, in his article “The Social Skin”, talks about the indigenous people of the Brazilian Amazon, the Kayapo. He focuses on the individual

bodies, specifically the adornments that the Kayapo wear. He concludes that the Kayapo are trying to detach themselves from nature and they are trying to socialize through the adornments they wear. So, Turner states, the external surface of the body becomes the “common frontier of society” (1980: 113). In other words, every Kayapo “becomes a microcosm of the Kayapo body politic” (1980:121). Here, Turner talks about how people get rid of the body as a ‘natural’ entity and adorn it to represent a status, a rite of passage. With their lip plates and different tattoos, these bodies become Kayapo.

Before the second half of the 16th century in France, a person’s body was considered distinct from the core essence of his humanity. It is only through enough education and appropriation that the gap between the self and the body could be closed and the body could start to represent the self. (Elias 1978). This concept of a close relationship between appearance and morality was used extensively during the colonial era. These ideals, with the aid of science, helped the white west to construct themselves as superior over the ‘others’. The era was not only about teaching the others European ideals, but it was also about creating European-ness and imposing them on different cultures (Stoler 1995). The color of the colonized people, the shape of their genitals, the way they looked, the size of their heads were all signs of how primitive and ‘close to nature’ these people were.

The obsession with the body shapes and morality led some of the people to be classified and pathologized as immoral, criminal, prostitute and of sub-normal intelligence. Bodies became the markers of class distinctions, race, and ethnicity; especially women’s bodies are constructed based upon dominant ideologies. As Stoler argues, the world, [especially from an Orientalist perspective] is seen from a male perspective, in a male-power fantasy (Stoler 1997). The first Europeans who went to Africa did not hesitate to bring some women back to Europe to satisfy their fellow Europeans’ curiosity and scientific interest. The Hottentot Venus, an African woman from Khoi Khoi tribe, was brought to London to be displayed in a museum because she was believed to be different from the British women of the era given her large buttocks. Sara Baartman, as she was later called, became *the* representation of all African women and her supposedly different genitalia was thought to be an indication of the sexual ‘looseness’ of her race (Qureshi 2004).

Later on all African American women and lesbians were thought to have large clitorises and deformed labia, signifying their lack of moral values (Gilman 1985, Somerville 1997). Later on, most of the European immigrants in the United States underwent a series of “aesthetic” surgeries to fit into the American beauty norms. ‘Correcting’ the Jewish noses, breast augmentation and liposuction are just a few examples to show how women suited themselves into the established beauty norms (Gilman 1999).

Aesthetic Surgery

In his book, *Making the Body Beautiful: a Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (1999), Sander Gilman explores aesthetic surgery and the ways in which the idea of ‘beauty’ is historically constructed. He analyzes how body image is racialized and he examines the obsession with getting rid of ‘Oriental, Jewish, and Black’ characteristics of the body. According to Gilman people undergo an aesthetic operation because they want to seem ‘normal’ and to “pass” within the group which they wish to be identified. Even though today, aesthetic surgery is a booming market and it affects both men and women, it still remains a gendered area and more women than men demand to change how they look (Blum 2003; Bordo 1993). We are surrounded by the illustrations showing what is acceptable and appropriate in the society and what is not. And we internalize what is shown us as ‘ideal’. That the Barbie doll has been the most popular toy among American girls since 1959 indicates a lot about the socialization of American women. Barbie still remains as a visual and tactile model of femininity in the United States (Urla and Swedlund 1995). American women seem to have internalized the ideal feminine figure in their era. Barbie’s ‘fantasized’ body crystallizes the tendencies toward beauty and femininity in North America.

Today, aesthetic surgery has gone far beyond the ‘visible’ features. Labiaplasty, the ‘modification’, ‘correction’ and ‘beautification’ of vaginas, is becoming more popular today amongst American and British women (Likes et al 2008). Women who seek labiaplasty complain that they do not have ‘normal’ vaginas (Bramwell et al 2008). While articles that focus on genital variation recognize that vaginal morphology is highly variable (Gilman 1985), most medical texts portray the vagina as having a fixed form.

Like the fantasized image of the Barbie doll, a fantasized image of perfect vaginas is created through the representations in the medical texts. Most of the images in those texts are just evenly pink hairless vaginas that do not acknowledge any kind of variation. The images that show variation can be found online, on the web pages of aesthetic surgeons. The variety somehow represents pathology and the images show the women before they are corrected. Even the very well know feminist health book *Our Bodies Ourselves* only has one image of a vulva which is not different from the ones in every other text book. On the contrary, it has various images for hymen.

The research conducted with women who have got labiaplasty indicates that women mostly have aesthetic concerns while undergoing the operation. Some surgeons talk about some problems that women experience because of their protruding labia minoras. However, most of the doctors admit that it is mainly aesthetic, just a concern for appearance. Dr. Douglas McGeorge explains that the procedure is nothing like female genital mutilation and he states: “Essentially this is just about removing a bit of loose flesh, leaving behind elegant-looking labia with minimum scarring. The procedure won't interfere with sexual function” (2009, BBC NEWS).

The women that Caldwell interviewed for *Playboy* show that the operation is actually more than cutting off a piece of lagging skin. It is about self-confidence, about feeling more beautiful, the desire to have a perfect body to be competitive among the women their age.

Labiaplasty has become another market to create homogenized, standard bodies through a claim on perfect pre-pubescent vaginas for all women disregarding racial and natural differences in shape and color. The booming market indicates women who can afford the procedure are alienated from their own bodies and somewhat are convinced that their bodies deviate from the standard in area where deviance is the standard.

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