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Shaved or Saved? Disciplining Women's Bodies

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Proponents of sexual liberation and abstinence-until-marriage advocates appear to be on opposing ends of the sociopolitical spectrum; however, both are invested in the regulation of women's vaginas. We argue that the rhetoric of both communities produces the same disciplinary configuration for the control of women's bodies. Both communities instruct women that the appearance of a prepubescent and pure vagina is essential to sexual appeal and self-care. Whether sex positive or sex negative, both communities articulate a model of sexual health that negates women's status as active, desiring subjects. Ultimately, we argue that public scrutiny of women's vaginas implicitly and overtly functions to police women's sexual agency.

Smoother, Tighter, and Whiter

The rhetoric of the U.S. beauty industry routinely conflates intimate cosmetic care with women's liberation and sexual health. Waxing and other vaginal cosmetic procedures are marketed as enactments of personal choice, sexual autonomy, and proper self-care. Contemporary beauty culture celebrates women's sexual agency by urging them to purchase products and engage in practices designed to prepare their vaginas for sexual activity with men. The number of genital cosmetic surgeries designed to decrease the size of the labia and clitoris, tighten the vagina, or reconstruct the hymen has risen markedly since 2002 (Liao & Creighton, 2007). Further, a variety of products promise to whiten women's "sensitive skin areas" and tighten their vaginal walls ("Dr. Pinks Review," 2014). Despite the

cosmetic industry's message of health and empowerment, it exploits bodily aesthetics that privilege male sexual pleasure and take a physical toll on women's bodies.¹

The cosmetic industry also routinely suggests that women can advance their sexual liberation by waxing or shaving their pubic hair. Since 2000, a variety of female celebrities, including Kim Kardashian, Gwyneth Paltrow, Victoria Beckham, and Eva Longoria, have recommended waxing, cultivating the idea that sexually empowered women should have no pubic hair. Kim Kardashian famously declared that women "shouldn't have hair anywhere but their heads" (Fetters, 2011). The hairless ideal has been perpetuated by the popularity of a cosmetic procedure known as the Brazilian wax, in which women's pubic hair is removed completely by applying heated wax to a woman's labia and then removing the wax and hair from the skin. In 2000, the postfeminist television series *Sex and the City* popularized the Brazilian wax when heroine Carrie Bradshaw had the procedure done and concluded, "I feel like I'm nothing but walking sex" (Ledgerwood, 2014). More recently, the E! Network series *Kourtney and Kim Take Miami* aired a scene in which Kourtney Kardashian gives her sister Khloe an at-home Brazilian wax treatment so that Khloe's boyfriend will not see her as "a hairy beast" ("Kourtney and Khloe's," 2010). The Kardashian franchise, along with other popular media programming, instructs young women to tame their vaginas once they reach puberty—if not before. Women's fashion magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* teach women how to discipline their "hairy beasts" by regularly offering shaving and waxing advice, including information about what to expect during your first Brazilian wax (Shapouri, 2009) and the latest in skin-numbing creams ("Get a Perfect Bikini Line," 2014). Visual discourses of advertising, fashion magazines, and pornography also provide implicit instruction about the appeal of pubic hair removal.

The cosmetics industry's putatively empowered female aesthetic aligns with the objectified pornographic body. Physicians specializing in vaginal reconstructive surgeries have reported patients who brought along images from advertisements or pornography to illustrate their desired appearance (Liao and Creighton, 2007, p. 1091). *Playboy* magazine has been a leader in the trend idealizing the hairless and small vagina. Starting in the new millennium, "minimal pubic hair, invisible labia minora, narrow hips, and a low BMI" were increasingly common among centerfold models (Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2001, p. 77). Schick and colleagues (2001) conclude that the appearance of women's genitals in the magazine increasingly emulates the incomplete sexual anatomy of the Barbie doll.

This pubic discourse may be persuasive. Almost 60% of 18- to 24-year-old women have completely removed their pubic hair at least once, and 20% do so regularly (Herbenick, Schick, Reece, Sanders, & Fortenberry, 2010). Despite promoting women's sexual empowerment, the cosmetic industry's idealization of a hairless, small vagina does not necessarily promote women's sexual agency (Labre, 2002). Moreover, such an ideal vagina resembles that of a prepubescent girl. The cosmetic industry's overweening attention to the proper aesthetics of women's vaginas promotes the appearance and feel of an ostensibly sexually inexperienced woman whose primary role is to fulfill men's desires.

Pure and Impure

From an opposing perspective, the abstinence-until-marriage movement also fetishizes the inexperienced girl. Abstinence advocates offer sexual ecstasy within marriage as the reward for remaining chaste, imploring young women to bequeath their virginity as a “gift” to their husbands. The abstinence movement has rendered chastity “sexy,” making it the subject of a contradictory series of messages that both admonishes adolescent girls for their sexual desires and valorizes their inexperience as “worth the wait” (Gardner, 2011). Bolstered by \$1.5 billion in federal assistance for abstinence-only curricula, the abstinence-until-marriage movement has grown to include hundreds of youth ministries, outreach organizations, and millions of young adherents (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the US, 2013). Premarital virginity is valorized as a personal and political ideal in best-selling Christian literature, at rock festivals, at school assemblies, and at purity balls—father-daughter dances that conclude with ritualistic virginity pledges (Manning, 2015). In addition to elected officials like President George W. Bush, movement advocates have included popular figures such as Miley Cyrus, Julianne Hough, Selena Gomez, Bristol Palin, Jessica Simpson, Jordin Sparks, Brittany Spears, the Jonas Brothers, and Tim Tebow.

Abstinence culture also offers instructions for the proper expression of women’s sexuality. In the discourse governing this culture, women’s sexuality is fundamentally male property. For instance, father-daughter purity balls are consummated with a daughter’s vow of chastity to her father until marriage. In exchange, the father pledges to “cover my daughter as her authority and protection in the area of purity” (Wilson, 2007). These commitments suggest that a father exercises sovereignty over his daughter’s vagina until ownership passes to her husband (Fahs, 2010). Ostensibly, young women’s sexual desirability hinges on remaining “daddy’s little girl” until marriage. The notion that chastity is sexy makes it imperative that women appear childlike to be attractive to their future husbands. Moreover, sexual-abstinence apparel articulates a pedophilic desire for inexperienced girls. In 2009, the Candie’s Foundation created a line of T-shirts advocating abstinence, bearing such phrases as “I’m sexy enough to keep you waiting” and “Be sexy: It doesn’t mean you have to have sex” (Collins, 2009). Paradoxically, virginity apparel cultivates hyperawareness of adolescent girls’ sexuality, if not arousal at the thought of their sexual potential. While sex is delayed until marriage, abstinence culture offers immediate voyeuristic pleasures for male spectators.

While abstinence discourse constructs the untouched female body as pure, the movement considers sexually active young women to be immoral, used, and dirty (Bernau, 2007). Several student exercises in abstinence-only curricula teach the virtues of remaining pristine and untouched. With a special emphasis on preserving adolescent women’s purity, these exercises imply that sexually mature and autonomous women have finite value. For example, during the “peppermint patty” exercise, the instructor passes an unwrapped chocolate candy around the room then asks for a volunteer to eat it. The instructor then declares, “No one wants food that has been passed around. Neither would you want your future husband or wife to have been passed around” (Hess, 2014). Other exercises ask students to chew used gum, drink another student’s saliva, or use someone else’s toothbrush. As one advocate argues, “Just like a used car, your value goes down with every mile you

add to your sexometer" (DiMarco, 2006, n.p.). The nonrenewability of female virginity renders sexually active women depleted and ultimately disposable. The overarching lesson of abstinence discourse is that adult women who seek sexual autonomy are revolting, while young girls who remain in a state of preadolescent innocence are desirable.

Infantile Politics

What ultimately unites sexual liberation and abstinence-until-marriage discourses is anxiety regarding women's sexual and political agency. The fetishization of infantile female bodies is an extension of reactionary social forces that counteract contemporary feminism. Postfeminist media culture relies on positive, carefree, and sexualized images of feminine youthfulness to construct a portrait of feminism as archaic and antiquated (Projansky, 2007). Tasker and Negra (2007) argue that the "aggressive mainstreaming" of women's health and beauty regimes is sutured to the postfeminist imperative to supplant enthusiasm for women's political empowerment with guilt-free consumerism (p. 3). The valorization of girlhood in postfeminist culture helps dispense with the voices of women who demand political and sexual autonomy. Ostensibly, women with adult desires and political interests are mean-spirited, shrill, and unattractive. Despite their ideological differences, discourse extolling the virtues of waxing and imploring girls to preserve their purity suggest that the ideal form of feminine subjectivity is docile and lacking in sexual experience.

These opposing discourses construct a model of sexual health premised on sustaining the primacy of male pleasure. Any discussion of women's pleasure and sexual health is conspicuously absent. Postfeminist discourses about sexuality elide alternative models of sexual empowerment that emphasize women's multifaceted fulfillment, which can take the form of "a desire for intimacy, love, curiosity, fantasy, mutuality, respect, adventure, and joy" (Bakare-Yusuf, 2013, p. 30). An alternative conception of sex positivity would affirm a range of expressions of sexual desires instead of circumscribing bodily discipline as the only means to acceptable pleasure. Indeed, women need not be shaved or saved to be empowered.

Note

1. According to the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (2007), negative health effects of vaginal rejuvenation procedures and products include hemorrhaging, scarring, infection, altered sensation, and dyspareunia.

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