

Enacting and Resisting Gendered and Colonial Constructions of the Surgically Enhanced Breast

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Abstract:

Representations of surgically enhanced breasts in the western media are usually connected with beauty, glamour and sexuality, providing titillation for viewers. But this construction is rejected by patients undergoing breast enlargement surgery, who claim 'enhancement' makes them feel 'more like a woman'. Whilst genitals are considered to be 'primary sex characteristics', present at birth, breasts are 'secondary sex characteristics', developed during puberty. But this also affords them a hierarchy. Disciplines like psychoanalysis have foregrounded the penis/ phallus, and its lack, as the 'primary signifier' of gender. But perhaps 'primary' and 'secondary' are misnomers given that genitals are covered at a young age, whilst women's fashions make breasts a highly visible marker of gender. In addition, far fewer trans people requested genital surgery once it was dropped as a legal requirement for gender recognition. Whilst women wanting breast augmentation are pathologized as vain and silly, men's desire for breast reduction is regarded as understandable and legitimate. Women who attempt to refuse reconstruction or request double mastectomy after breast cancer are told they will feel 'unfeminine'. Drawing on our research on cosmetic surgery tourism, an intersexed person in Belgium was offered pectoral not breast implants, because their passport recorded them as male, and in a Thai clinic traditional 'orchidectomy' (testicle removal) for Kathoey (lady boys) had been banned following pressure from western medicine. In this paper I use examples from our study to illustrate the gendered and colonial nature of western cosmetic medicine, and question the hierarchy of genitals and breasts and the binarism of 'sex'.

Biography:

Ruth Holliday is Professor of Gender and Culture in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds and is widely published in the areas of work and organization, sexuality and identity, cosmetic surgery studies and low fertility cultures, and has received funding from the ESRC, AHRC and FSHI. She is primarily a sociologist of the body, focussed on the entanglements of gender, class, sexuality and nation, which converge in her work on cosmetic surgery. Her earlier work focussed on cosmetic surgery and popular culture, men's cosmetic surgery and cosmetic surgery in South Korea, challenging approaches based on internalized sexism and racism, by gendering cosmetic surgery and situating Korean surgeries in the context of the 'glocal'. In 2019, her co-written book (with Meredith Jones and David Bell) *Beautyscapes*, based on a large ESRC-funded study on

patients travelling from the UK, Australia and China to countries in Europe, East Asia and North Africa, as well as the surgeons, agents, medical travel facilitators and other workers in the medical tourism industry in those countries, won the FSHI Book Prize. She is currently working on a new book on the social and cultural history of the penis. Ruth has given evidence to the Nuffield Council for Bioethics, The Parliamentary Health Select Committee and Gender and Equalities Committee, and was part of the Keogh Review of Cosmetic surgery sitting on the patient information subgroup. She is currently working with the PIP Action campaign, seeking justice for people with PIP and other harmful silicone implants.