
Sharing Surgical Scars: Social Networks and the Many Gendered Meanings of Mastectomy

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In most Western cultural contexts, the surgical modification of the female breast is usually presumed to take place in the context of cosmetic surgery primarily aimed at breast enhancement for the cis-gendered female. The cultural obsession with sexualizing breasts as a signifier of both heterosexuality and femininity has meant gender trouble for breast cancer patients (and BRCA “previvors”) seeking flat mastectomies, as well as transmasculine, genderqueer, and FTM individuals electing top surgeries. Whereas trans studies critiques have traced the emergence of (and subsequent resistance to) a prescriptive medical narrative authorizing gender affirming top surgeries, only recently have some in the breast cancer community begun to form identity groups around non-reconstructive surgical choices and an embrace of “flatness” on social media. This presentation is a comparative study of the reported experiences and rhetorical choices of social networks of two flat mastectomy groups: those pursuing mastectomy for reasons of gender affirmation, and those for whom mastectomy is primarily a treatment for cancer or cancer risk. The emergence of the Flattopper Pride movement within the breast cancer community represents a queering of conventional (female) breast reconstruction, offering feminist rhetoric that resists presumptions about the “natural” embodiment of femininity while occupying a position that is at once informed by transgender surgical narratives (and counter-narratives) yet articulates a distinctly different relationship to surgical modification of the female body. The circulation of mastectomy images through trans, queer fashion (Cat Walk & Play Out underwear models), and e-patient breast cancer communities represents three distinct yet overlapping discursive contexts in which mastectomy derives cultural meaning. Through an exploration of how mastectomy

images are circulated, censored, and shared in a variety of social media networks and support groups, feminist and queer critiques of surgical mastectomy options can be seen to emerge and create cross-influence between breast cancer, transgender, and genderqueer communities.

Bibliography

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