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In the summer of 1945, a very average couple, who would come to embody the ideals of American society, emerged into the public eye. Brought to life by Abram Belskie and Robert Latou Dickinson, the Cleveland Health Museum debuted the sculptures of Norma and Normman as “A Portrait of the American People.” Strong and curvy, Norma was modeled on the measurements of 15,000 women across the country between the ages of eighteen and twenty [1, 2]. Muscular and well endowed, the male, Normman, gave shape to the statistical average of several million soldiers and students in the Ivy League. Together, they exemplified a statistically normal couple. Both were conspicuously white.

What is considered “normal” is constantly changing based on social and political forces. However, we can trace the idea of a statistically normal body like Norma or Normman’s to the nineteenth century, when in 1835 the Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet developed his conception of *l’homme moyen* [3]. This “average man” was based on the mean measurements of features that Quetelet had calculated according to his new science of anthropometry—the measurement of human variation. For Quetelet, the average man represented an ideal towards which every citizen should strive.

Half a century later, the British eugenicist Francis Galton reimagined Quetelet’s average man as a statistically mediocre specimen. Galton created *composite portraits* by “layering a number of individual portraits onto a single photographic plate” [1]. These “pictorial averages” were meant to exaggerate characteristics of specific groups, such as criminals, whose genetics could be improved upon through selective breeding [2]. Since Galton’s composite portraits were meant to depict certain “types” of people, the separation of different races was key to ensuring statistically normal results. The creation of Norma and Normman was no different.

Following the success of Norma and Normman’s début, the Cleveland Health Museum sponsored a “Search for Norma,” to find an Ohio woman whose measurements most closely resembled those of the female statue. Although the prize eventually went to a 23-year old theatre cashier, the consensus was that a statistically normal woman did not exist [1, 2]. Far from realistic, Norma and Normman were composite portraits of what every American could only strive to be: white, heterosexual, and statistically impossible.

What can we learn from Norma and Normman today? How have our ideas concerning what constitutes a normal body changed over the past two centuries? Lennard Davis argues that our

fixation on normality is gradually being replaced by a new norm of diversity. However, while this shift may appear more democratic, Davis warns that diversity is not as innocent as it seems, since it is “well suited to the core beliefs of neoliberalism, [which] reconfigures the citizen into the consumer.”[4] In other words, diversity is acceptable so long as one can afford to be different.

While the “normal” bodies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were statistically white, heteronormative, and able-bodied, the new “normal” wants to diversify its appearance. Diversity is only desirable within reason, though, and socioeconomic circumstances inform the degree to which a person can exercise consumer choice. In recent years, there has been increased public awareness regarding the fetishization of racialized and sexualized body parts. However, in many cases, the appropriation of physical features still coincides with an ignorance about the marginalized people whose bodies provide the templates for this beauty industry. Cue the Kardashian-Jenner Empire.

In 2014, Kim Kardashian “broke the internet” with her naked spread in *Paper Magazine*. Posing like a modern-day Norma, Kim appears glossy and perfect, an exhibit on display. And like Norma, Kim’s proportions are equally calculated. Showcasing a narrow waist, full breasts, and her famously large butt, Kim personifies white privilege with a twist. While the reality TV star denies modifying her derriere, she and her sisters have long been appropriating Black features and fashions: from lip injections to cornrows, Kim even announced wanting a flesh-toned stroller to complement the skin color of her first baby with Kanye West [5]. Of course, Kim and her sisters are raising Black children. However, they are not Black, and as women with white privilege benefiting from surgically enhanced Black features, they are setting double standards on beauty norms, while bypassing the everyday discrimination that many Black people face. A connection, albeit different in nature, can be drawn here to the subset of transgender people who have access to plastic surgery, which allows them to more “successfully” pass as their gender.

Several months after Kim broke the internet, her stepfather and former Olympian, Caitlyn Jenner, came out as a trans woman. While Caitlyn’s transition has prompted important conversations about trans rights, her surgically enhanced appearance—including facial feminization surgery (FFS) and breast implants—is in many ways symptomatic of a larger climate of transphobia. Trans people are expected to look a certain way, and while some trans individuals may not feel the need to adhere to the normative aesthetics of their gender, others simply cannot afford to do so.[6] Although trans people like Caitlyn still face an enormous amount of discrimination, racialized individuals who do not as convincingly *fit* into their genders are at even higher risk of violence. According to recent statistics, more than one in four trans people has been assaulted based on their identities, with even higher rates of assault against trans women and trans people of color.[7]

Both Caitlyn’s seamless surgical transition and Kim’s selective Black features reflect a shift in the norms that dictate what is “normal:” the new Norma is customizable—if you have the cash. In 2019, the “normal” woman is no longer a statistical composite of thousands of women, and she is no longer conspicuously white. She can be diverse, and she can diversify her appearance. However, this ability to change one’s physicality is contingent upon class, and if we are entering an era of

diversity, we still have a long way to go in disentangling class from racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ageism. The old normal was statistically impossible, and the new normal appears to be physically impossible too.

Works Cited

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