“Manboobs” and the Failure to Achieve Heterosexuality

Within the contemporary Western social imaginary that figures male and female as stable, incommensurable sexes separated by distinct corporeal differences, the appearance of breasts on a body understood to be male undermines both bodily sex and sexuality. This paper is an exploration of how this threat is negotiated within gynecomastia.org, an online community of men with gynecomastia, more commonly known as “manboobs.” My analysis will focus on the ways in which gynecomastia is represented as a barrier to the achievement of manhood, which is associated primarily with heterosexuality. Exploring these issues within cyberspace is necessary given the extent to which online discursive sites have become a central frame through which bodies are materialised.

The presence of breasts on men undermines heterosexual masculinity because heterosexuality is understood to be grounded in the bodily difference between male and female. Thus, gynecomastia raises two anxieties: first, the breasts are associated with homosexuality and are a threat to the presumed heterosexuality of the male body; and, second, the gynecomastic body is represented as unable to achieve heterosexual masculinity because it is situated in such close proximity to the female body. The breasts are considered an “obstacle,” a physical barrier that prevents men from entering into sexual relations with women. Within this understanding, gynecomastia surgery, the removal of the breasts, becomes necessary in order to accomplish heterosexuality. I consider gynecomastia surgery as a case study for the argument that cosmetic surgery is largely about the materialisation of the “opposite” sexed body upon which heterosexuality is based.

Biography
Trish Garner is a PhD candidate in Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies at Simon Fraser University. Before this, Trish did a Bachelor and Master of Engineering at Cambridge University in England, worked briefly as an engineer, and then went back to school for a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and Gender Studies at Simon Fraser University. Trish’s research focuses on the construction of the (un)natural body through a comparison of gynecomastia surgery, transgender chest surgery and pregnancy. Hir research interests include gender and sexuality, health and pathology, reproduction, and body modification, and ze has co-authored an article within this area comparing the theoretical treatment of transsexual and cosmetic surgical modification. Trish teaches within Gender Studies and has most recently taught a course on queer masculinities.

Trish has also worked as a research assistant with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, primarily involved in writing A Poverty Reduction Plan for BC (2008). She volunteers with the anti-poverty group, Raise the Rates, and the Advisory Group for the Transgender Health Program. After graduating, Trish hopes to combine hir community activism with academic research and teaching.