

PEOPLE

On Flatness and Shortness

A Journey into Body Image

By Judy Tso, MAA

I want to bring up the issue of body image, how we regard our bodies, what we like or don't like about them. Our health is comprised of both our mental and physical well being and body image involves both of these dimensions. As for body image, we consider not only the physical state of our bodies but also how we feel about and perceive it. When we are dissatisfied with our body, our self image, self confidence and esteem are affected.

Asian American women (Asian American here refers to all women who have decided to live permanently in the U.S.) are likely to adopt one of two positions regarding body image. If we accept an Asian standard of beauty we are likely to feel positive about ourselves. However, if we adopt a mainstream view of beauty, we are likely to be less satisfied. This is supported by the Social Issues Research Centre in Oxford: "Black and Asian women generally have a more positive body image than Caucasian women, although this depends on the degree to which they have accepted the beauty standards of the dominant culture."

What is the dominant culture's standard of beauty? We can look to Disney for some idea. According to Chyng Sun, one of the creators of a documentary on the representations of race, gender and class in Disney films, when it comes to a representation of females: "They all have stereotypical sexualized bodies with big breasts, very tiny waists and fluttering eyelashes." This is the mainstream standard.

If the Asian American woman accepts the dominant Caucasian model of beauty paraded across the television screen by Disney and others, it is likely she will wrestle more with body image.

I recently collaborated with artist Christina R. Chan to explore our own experiences with body image. Together we developed a performance art piece called "Bobby Pins Up Your Nose, Asian

ferent story about nose hating:

After I heard these stories, for the first moment, I felt conceited. My mother wasn't crazy. My mother didn't try to massage my nose. I don't have a problem with my nose. But then I thought again. It's true no one had ever touched my nose in an attempt to reshape its form, but I too faced a time of nose hating. I too was a nose hater.

But my nose hating was a little different. I didn't hate my nose 100%. I didn't hate the way it looked from the front. I just despised the way it looked from the side. You know, the profile shot. The school profile shot.

The first time I saw my profile, I just couldn't believe it. Shock! total and absolute shock. I couldn't believe it. My face looked fine in the mirror. What happened to the side. From the side, my nose looked it had been professionally pressed at the dry cleaner. Flattened by one of those big tar spreading steam rollers that pave the highway.

My nose in profile wasn't a nose, it was speed bump on a slow residential street, just enough to slow your wheels down but not enough to stop you.

After I saw the profile shot, I vowed to destroy every picture of me from the side. This was not going to get out. Sure everyone can see me from the side, but the important point is with all the pictures gone, I could not! You see I can't see myself from the side. Try as I might, no matter how I turn in the mirror, I cannot see myself. So in my young ten-year-old mind, if all the pictures were gone, so would be my profile.

So where am I today with my nose? I can say, I no longer destroy pictures of me in profile. Of course I can't remember the last time I invited someone to photograph me from the side. To be honest, I don't think that much about it. If I stop to think, I would say that I have reached a level of peace with it. I know when I see my profile that it is mine. I recognize it easily. While I might not regard it with great admiration or pleasure, I would also never consider changing it. It's my nose. It's me.

Boobs

Being short

When we started to craft a piece on being short, we tried to create a list of the positives of being short, but we had a really hard time. We found that our heads were so filled with the positives of being tall, that there wasn't any space for the positives of being short. There is work to be done to bring shortness equal to tallness or to discover the real blessings of being short.

I could not think of positives but it was much easier to think of negatives. I immediately thought of that Randy Newman song, "Short People" that was popular in the 1970's. It seems after all these years, there is still one line in that song that sticks in my head: "Short People Got No Reason to Live."

I decided to find the words and music and check if my memory had served me well. When I looked at the lyrics, that line was still there, and when I looked at the other lines, I remembered why this song has always bothered me. Even if this song is supposed to be satirical or a parody, it still seems very problematic because of all the suggestions it makes about short people. For example, it suggests that short people lie, that they aren't trustworthy etc. Even though this song is meant to be funny, I have always worried that people might take the words seriously, that they might use it against short people, and that perhaps it might reinforce all the negative perceptions of short people. I still feel torn about the song.

Here is an excerpt of the mediocre positives we could think of:

1. *The blessing of being short is that every ceiling is high enough*
2. *The blessing of being short is that you never get cobwebs in your hair, because you're not that high up*
3. *The blessing of being short is when the toilet seat is set low, it's the right height*

On plastic surgery

According to the National Clearinghouse of Plastic Surgery Statistics, plastic surgery continues to experi-

image. Together we developed a performance art piece called "Bobby Pins Up Your Nose, Asian American Women Speak Out about Body Image" (Bobby Pins). The inspiration to create this piece arose from a lecture at Brookline Adult and Community Education on the Myths and Realities of being Asian American and Female. The audience was filled with Asian American women and we had a lively discussion.

At one point in the discussion, audience members related stories of their mothers massaging their noses in the hopes they could reshape the bridge and make the nose more pointy, more Caucasian. Other women related childhood instances where they would use bobby pins or sometimes clothespins to squeeze and, hopefully, reshape their noses. After I heard these comments, I was shocked that so many women could relate to these stories. It seems this nose thing was not an isolated phenomenon.

The nose story reverberated in my mind for several weeks. From the talk, it seemed clear that the flat noses we Asian Americans have do not conform to the bigger Western bridges we see on Caucasians. So Christina and I embarked on an exploration of nose flatness and other issues.

We have presented "Bobby Pins" three times. We performed it twice on May 9, first at Newton North High School for their Asian American students retreat, then at the "CreaAsian, the Pan Asian Arts Festival" hosted by the Boston Center for the Arts and Asian American Resource Workshop. We gave the third presentation at Day Middle School for their Asian Club on June 11.

What follows is an outline of specific instances where Asian American bodies do not fit the mainstream standard of beauty, and I give examples from "Bobby Pins" of the stories we tell to depict how we have dealt with these circumstances.

What is it about the nose?

For Asian Americans, we struggle with noses that don't seem to project forward or stick out enough. Our noses cannot match up to these big western noses we see all around us. Yet, while we agonize about the small protrusions on our faces, other people agonize about how their noses are too big. Noses are either too big or too small, too flat or stick out too much. It seems few women are content with their noses no matter their ethnicity. Noses are a global issue.

We ended up writing three pieces on the nose. Christina focused on her real experiences putting bobby pins on her nose and later considering and then rejecting the idea of plastic surgery. (For those of you at the performance who wondered if she had gotten surgery, the answer again is a big NO!)

Here is an excerpt of one of the nose pieces, a dif-

Boobs

The other area of flatness we explored was chest flatness. The common stereotype for Asian American women is that we are flat-chested. This stereotype isn't true. Many Asian women have decent-sized breasts. They just aren't oversized and overblown like Pamela Anderson Lee's. Asian American women also have a smaller bone structure and height. In relation to body size and height, our breasts possess the right proportions to match our body structure but few people think about it in this way.

For "Bobby Pins," I focused on the advantages small breasts because I actually do have small breasts. There is such an overabundance of messages in the media and wider culture that big breasts are better, so I had to attempt to rebalance it by presenting the advantages of having small breasts.

These advantages include no back pain, being able to go braless and the most important one to me, that when people talk to me, they look at my face instead of my chest. Have you ever noticed a person's gaze move down to your chest? It is nice to be looked in the face like I am a person instead of a body part, that I am more than a pair of boobs with an extra head attached.

Long, blonde, luscious hair

It is impossible to avoid noticing that the ideal hair is long blonde hair. It used to be curly blonde hair but these days straight blonde hair is in. Either way, it is still blonde and long and Asian American Women don't have blonde hair.

Asian hair is also difficult to curl, and during the days when curls were in, we had the hardest time perming our hair. The hair didn't want to curl and you had to basically chemically burn the hair before you could get it to curl. Do you remember leaving the perming solution in far longer than the instructions indicated, one hour, or ninety minutes?

In "Bobby Pins," we described what it is like to desire this long, blonde, curly hair and the disappointments that arise when you discover you can't have it, and then the acceptance when you begin to appreciate the qualities of black short hair.

Here is an excerpt from Christina's piece "A Hairy Journey": *Flash 1996. I went to China. There I saw Chinese women with the most gorgeous hair. Long straight hair. Medium length. Short. Hair with bangs, no bangs. I marveled at the bright sheen on these women's hair that was black or different gradations of brown. No highlights or colored hair. Hair that was put in ponytails, put up in all different kinds of clips and barrettes. Hair that fluttered and was shiny like finely woven silk. Wow. I never saw any of this in the fashion magazines back in the US.*

According to the Plastic Surgery Statistics, plastic surgery continues to experience a nine-year increase. The number of cosmetic surgery patients has nearly tripled since 1992. In 2000, more than 1.3 million people had plastic surgery procedures. The three most popular procedures are liposuction, breast augmentation and eyelid surgery to correct poofy eyelids or bags under the eyes. Plastic surgery continues to gain acceptance in this country. It seems that our natural appearance isn't good enough. We need to get a tuck here, a reconstruction there. There is a certain violence being done to the body when you cut. And there is no going back. If you still don't like the way you look, you can get some more plastic surgery but you won't go back to your natural look.

The article also mentioned that doctors are positioning aging as a disease and plastic surgery as a cure to that disease. Aging a disease? I thought that was a natural process of life. Now we can't even age with dignity.

So how do you feel about your body? What would it be like to accept it? What does it feel like to cherish it? If you would like to contribute your stories around body image, we are looking to expand the piece. We are also eager to add stories from the male perspective, since our piece currently lacks that perspective. Email your stories to us: judytso@ahasolutions.org. We will give you credit as the author or you can also choose to remain anonymous.

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