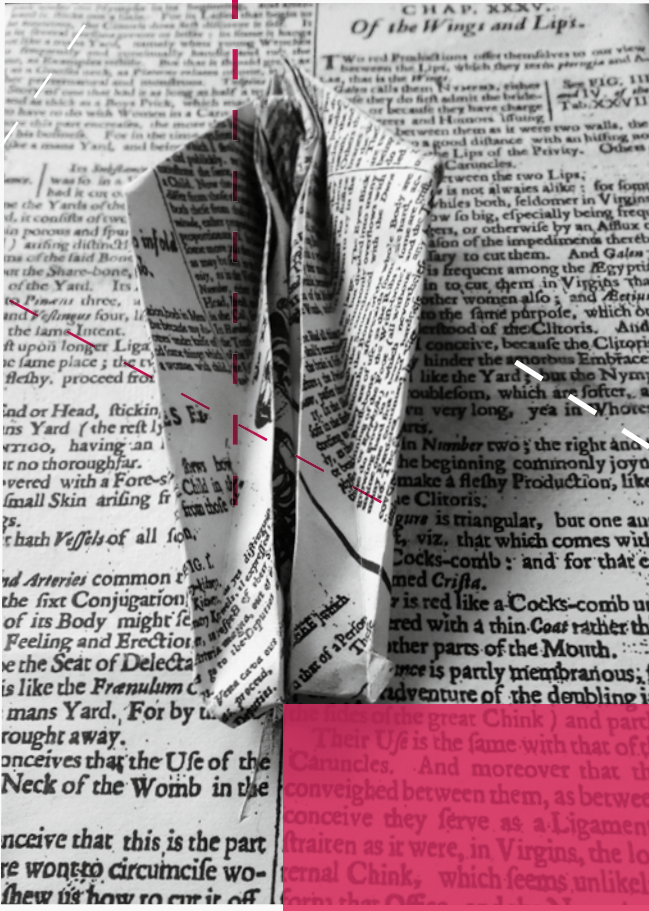


CAMILLE NURKA



# FEMALE GENITAL COSMETIC SURGERY

*deviance, desire and  
the pursuit of perfection*



# Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery

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Deviance, Desire and the Pursuit of Perfection

palgrave  
macmillan

Camille Nurka  
Mount Waverley  
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*For Alison Jones and Joan Jones*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction: Perfectible Sex

In 2015, I came across an online education resource for Australian youth called Somazone. Created by the Australian Drug Foundation, it was set up as a safe space for young people to ask questions about mental health, depression, sex, sexuality, relationships, bullying, abuse, drugs and alcohol. Sadly, this education resource no longer exists.<sup>1</sup> I had discovered this site in the course of my research on cosmetic labiaplasty. What caught my attention was an anxious question posed by a young woman about her labia minora:

OK, so 16 is the age to experiment, hey. And it's natural to fool around with your boyfriend if you're both ready to let yourselves explore each other's bodies. Well there lies my problem.

I haven't told anybody. I am a reasonably popular girl who attracts lots of guys's attention. So I don't have a problem with guys, or with my body, so everyone thinks.

I am slim and petite but yet I don't want to let anyone near me for fear of humiliation that my lower region isn't attractive or appealing. I am ready to have some fun experimenting but I am very ashamed because my labia sticks out and I do not want to be hurt or teased.

I hope someone out there understands what I mean. I want to get a labiaplasty but I don't want my parents to find out and don't know wether I have to be over 18. I feel guilty not loving my whole body.<sup>2</sup>

There are two kinds of painful emotion being expressed here: one is shame and the other is guilt over feeling ashamed. While she worries that a potential sexual partner might find her vagina ugly, she also worries that her body shame is unwarranted or illegitimate. The post prompted a litany of comments by respondents relieved to have the opportunity to express similar feelings of embarrassment, dislike, discomfort, disgust, paranoia, abnormality and unhappiness. But it also generated many body-positive responses from both women and men who reassured her that she was normal and that labia were sexy. These responses, in a safe and moderated online environment, led one commenter to say: ‘I feel so much better reading about this ... I have large ones too and didn’t like them but now i’m startin to feel better about them and now i know i’m normal=].’<sup>3</sup>

Somazone was a public health initiative, but not all sex education sites are responsible or ethical. For instance, RealSelf is an online forum that provides information for prospective clients about cosmetic surgery, where surgeons respond to women’s queries about their bodies as a way to generate business. One query-poster from Florida asks: ‘Is it normal for it to lol [look] this way. I’ve been scared to have any sexual relationships because I’m think guys will find it unattractive and I was wondering if I should get surgery?’<sup>4</sup> While one surgeon responds by reassuring her that her labia are normal, he nonetheless suggests that ‘there is a trend to have less prominent labia’ and that for women who are troubled by their labia, ‘a certain surgical procedure exists to help to correct this problem and restore their femininity’.<sup>5</sup>

What is salient here is the prevalence of a shared sense of sexual shame and fears of abnormality in the anxious and unhappy stories posted by contemporary women about their genitals. The anxiety of inhabiting an abnormal femininity and the fear of heterosexual inadequacy are strikingly present in the accounts of genital shame given by women enquiring about labiaplasty in online forums such as Somazone and RealSelf. These women are likely to find their fears confirmed in the diagnosis of a spurious gynaecological condition known as ‘hypertrophy of the labia minora’, which simply means that the labia are large in size. I call this ‘diagnosis’ spurious because labia minora that bear no signs of malignant organic disorder other than that they are long are not diseased. ‘Hypertrophy’ is a denotative description of a structure and not a clinical pathology, even though it is often presented as a medical diagnosis.