Beauty Between Empires

Global Feminism, Plastic Surgery, and the Trouble with Self-Esteem

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Since 2012, when Korean rapper PSY's "Gangnam Style" dominated US airwaves, television, and computer screens, the popularity of K-pop has created renewed interest among American media outlets and netizens in the topic of South Korean (hereafter Korea or Korean) plastic surgery consumption. The *Atlantic* featured a story on "The K-Pop Plastic Surgery Connection," while *Bloomberg News* published on medical tourism in Korea: "Gangnam Style Nip and Tuck Draws Tourists to the Beauty Belt."[1] *Buzzfeed*'s story was more provocative, if strangely Eurocentric, asking "When Does Plastic Surgery Become Racial Transformation?"[2] And most recently the *New Yorker*'s piece asks, "Why Is Seoul the World's Plastic-Surgery Capital?"[3] Other much more sensationalized reporting has produced images such as the "Miss Korea gif," which went viral in less than forty-eight hours, appearing first on a Japanese blog, then Reddit, and then in national and international newspapers in April 2013. The gif, which compresses several still jpegs into moving images such that the beauty contestants' faces morph one into the next at rapid speed, was meant to illustrate visually what *Jezebel*'s headline summed up as "Plastic Surgery Means Many Beauty Queens but Only One Kind of Face."[4]

The gif—posted and reposted on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit and reported upon by countless outlets—signified "Korea's plastic surgery mayhem,"[5] as one Reddit user described it. Such characterizations pathologize Korean cosmetic surgery consumption as a push toward racialized uniformity defined by a singular national beauty aesthetic across diverse Korean women's faces.[6] For US feminists, however, the gif took on particular salience. Mainstream feminist sites such as *Jezebel* offered the gif as evidence of a bizarre form of racialized patriarchal oppression happening abroad, making it distinct from, and exotic in relation to, forms of heteropatriarchal violence in the United States. As such, *Jezebel* reported on the Miss Korea gif, and Korean plastic surgery consumption more generally, at least four times in the spring

and summer months of 2013, in articles such as "I Can't Stop Looking at These Korean Women Who've Had Plastic Surgery." As it turned out, however, the individual images making up the viral gif were photoshopped.[7] What was issued as objective visual evidence of Korean women's fanatic obsession with plastic surgery instead reveals a fanatic obsession on the part of Americans for producing and consuming Korean women as such.

Just a couple of months after the Miss Korea gif went viral in the United States, a Korean feminist nonprofit organization, *Yŏsŏng Minuhoe* (한국여성민우회), known in English as Korean Womenlink (hereafter Womenlink), widely publicized a forum called "*Apkujeong* Station Exit #4: Let's Talk about It." A follow-up to their 2003 nationwide "Love Your Body" campaign, which sought to curb dieting and plastic surgery consumption among women, the forum's title references the fact that nearly half of Seoul's plastic surgery clinics are located in the Gangnam district (made world famous in PSY's viral hit song), many of which can be accessed through the *Apkujeong* subway station and, more specifically, via the #4 exit from that stop.[8] The forum was held in Seoul's congressional building and sought public policy alternatives to curb a problem that the group asserts "has only gotten worse" since 2003.[9] Besides Womenlink activists, the event featured a panel including a doctor, professor, television director, and lawyer, with a congressional representative giving closing remarks.[10] The specialists provided insights into what they saw as the major factors fueling the cosmetic surgery industry as well as possible solutions to the problem. For Womenlink activists, it was a time to reflect on the ten years since their "Love Your Body" campaign.

That Korean plastic surgery consumption would occupy the minds of *Jezebel* writers, editors, and millions of readers as well as Womenlink's members, panelists, and forum attendees at roughly the same time—feminists from opposite ends of the world, so to speak—illuminates several key issues. First, such interest attests to the new visual economies arising via blogs and social media sites that have renewed fetishized interest in Korean bodies and fuel cosmetic surgery consumption in Korea itself. As attested to by PSY's YouTube phenomenon, "Gangnam Style," these visual economies have been part and parcel of Korea's global, and federally funded, projects of pop culture and plastic surgery—the former serving as global advertisements for the latter. Second, that both groups take a feminist interest in the topic deserves more attention. Both groups agree that Korean plastic surgery consumption is a feminist "problem." Given this, then, how do these women's differing geopolitical locations and political investments affect their articulation and understanding of this problem? What does feminism mean in these particular

contexts and in relation to this topic? How might we think about these two feminist groups relationally?

Using a transnational feminist practice, then, that privileges "an attention to the linkages and travels of forms of representation as they intersect with movements of labor and capital in a multinational world," this essay offers a consideration of feminist assumptions not only about the politics of beauty but about how it circulates and how to organize around it.[11] Using *Jezebel*'s coverage of Korean plastic surgery consumption and the Miss Korea gif as a starting point, I examine beauty at the intersection of social media, feminism, and geopolitics in order to illuminate the contours of a highly accessible global feminism that takes white Western women's experiences as the telos of modernity. As a counterpoint to *Jezebel*'s obsession with the Miss Korea gif, a fabricated cultural production about Korea, I then examine Womenlink's feminist organizing in Korea in order to show that beauty is mediated through variously structured fields of power specific to the geopolitical context. Finally, after providing a sketch of the contemporary landscape of Korean plastic surgery consumption today, I argue that these seemingly disparate feminisms are tied together in their valuation of the self as a locus of liberation. Ultimately, juxtaposing feminisms in these ways provides us with an understanding of how local and global feminist politics both intersect and diverge through transnational industries, in cybercultures, and as everyday politics.

"IT SCARES THE SHIT OUT OF ME": JEZEBEL AND THE SPREAD OF GLOBAL FEMINISM

While the interest in Korean bodies that the global popularity of K-pop has engendered and the issues the gif and other similar social media representations raise may seem new, these types of discourses have been circulating in US media since the 1990s, when Korea itself was making headlines as an "economic miracle." In November 1993, for instance, the *Wall Street Journal* ran an article titled "Cosmetic Surgery Goes Hand in Glove with the New Korea."[12] The subhead read: "What Would Confucius Say about the Westernization of Eye, Nose and Breast?"[13] Nearly a decade later Oprah Winfrey did a segment on Korean women and plastic surgery, likening it to Oprah having surgery "to not look black."[14] Occurring during what many characterized as Korea's "miraculous" emergence as an "industrial tiger," these discourses from the 1990s through the first decade of the 2000s, found in myriad national and international news outlets, are concerned with two things. First, and perhaps most obviously, these discourses characterize Korean plastic surgery as a desire to appear more "Western" or white. Much as the burqa has come to symbolize

Middle Eastern women's oppression in both popular and academic discourses, cosmetic surgery—and more specifically the double eyelid surgery, as it is colloquially known—has come to signify Korean (and in many instances, Korean and Asian American) women's acquiescence not only to patriarchal oppression but to racial oppression as well. Second, as the *Wall Street Journal* article clearly exemplifies, these discourses allude to anxieties around a "New Korea," the emergence of which is signified by the conspicuous consumption of its citizens. In other words, these older discourses indexed US anxieties concerning the possibility of a Korean competitive force in the Asiatic region alongside Japan, where the "bubble economy" was at its peak at the time and posed a threat to US economic dominance. Then, as now, US obsessions with Korean cosmetic surgery, as a primary avenue through which to contend with Korea's newfound affluence (and influence), came at a time when US economic global dominance appeared most threatened, which bespeaks an anxious Western gaze desiring to see itself in places where its hegemony is on the wane.

Today, however, Korea is no longer thought of as "new" but is regarded as an established economic and political actor on the global stage, as evidenced by the fact that Korean products are now household names—Hyundai, Kia, Samsung—and its cultural products are known worldwide—Girls' Generation, the Wonder Girls, Rain, and 2NE1, to name just a few. In fact, as literary scholar Jin-Kyung Lee has shown in *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in Korea*, Korea can no longer simply be considered a neocolony of the United States but has emerged as a capitalist subempire in its own right, evidenced in part by its exploitation of cheap labor from Southeast Asia and Mexico.[15] Pop culture has been part and parcel of Korea's newfound hegemony and soft power. Dubbed *Hallyu* or "the Korean Wave" by Chinese reporters in the late 1990s for its rippling popularity among Chinese teens (the first besides Japanese pop culture to gain such popularity in the region), Korea's "subempire" status and soft power rankings have been further solidified by its increasing pop cultural hegemony throughout Asia in particular but also to various degrees in the Middle East, Europe, Latin America, and among a diversity of communities within the United States.[16]

Moreover, both the Miss Korea gif and PSY's record-breaking viral music video, "Gangnam Style" are part of the new visual economy that popular social media sites have created, setting contemporary discourses on Korean plastic surgery apart from those of an earlier era. On the one hand, South Korea is the most wired nation globally, with the highest number of DSL connections per head worldwide, and these levels of connectivity are reflected in South Korean marketing, music, and business campaigns. Korean entertainment companies themselves leverage their stars' pop music on social media

sites as their main platform for launching and sustaining the popularity of their global pop stars. According to cultural studies scholar Stephen Epstein with James Turnbull, "Korean popular music is driven by the visual. . . . The savvy use of YouTube, literally and figuratively a key 'site' for the experience and distribution of music at a mass level, has now become a core component of Korean entertainment companies' promotion strategies, especially at the international level."[17] That is to say, visuality, both in the sense of pop music's tendency toward spectacle and in the emphasis on pop stars' aesthetic appeal, has become a key factor in K-pop's global production and distribution, if not *the* key factor. As such, K-pop stars' "looks" are micro-managed by entertainment companies and then commodified alongside their music and dance.[18] As a package, then, these are promoted abroad to international fans via YouTube and other visually driven sites.

On the other hand, Korean entertainment companies' emphasis on the visual is buttressed by the work of netizens who manipulate and mash, post, and collect visual images, creating a synergistic relationship between the two. As digital studies scholar Lisa Nakamura points out in *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, social media's visual economy and its emphasis on sharing, tweeting, and tumbling exemplifies the interactivity and blurring of the line between producer and consumer that sets new media apart from old media.[19] In other words, netizens are not merely passive recipients of K-pop stars' self-promotion but rather themselves become producers, depending on what they do with such images (or others like them). As such, Internet users' dual roles as producers and consumers have renewed fetishized interest in Koreans' cosmetically enhanced bodies, creating a cyber stage for the spectacle of the com/modified body, and at the same time making these bodies—as symbols of an emerging subempire—widely available for mass consumption. Interest manifests both as fans who seek to emulate the Korean aesthetic through fashion, style, and plastic surgery and also as voyeurs who seek to analyze, critique, and display Korean aesthetics as exemplified by the Miss Korea gif.

One zone for such scrutiny has been US mainstream feminist blogs, since headlines like "I Can't Stop Looking at These South Korean Women Who've Had Plastic Surgery" and their accompanying visuals are surefire ways to encourage blog traffic. In recent years we have witnessed a marked increase in reporting on the topic in feminist blogs such as *Jezebel*—reports that then get shared over and again, making the consumer herself a producer and disseminator of knowledge through the acts of retweeting, reposting, and resharing. Critical analyses of outlets like *Jezebel*, its authors, and readership are especially crucial because *Jezebel* is considered a mainstream feminist news source,

and as such it operates and sees itself as a form of highly accessible feminism that puts forth its own set of racialized and politicized ideologies. Founding editor Anna Holmes, who worked at women's magazines such as *Glamour* and *InStyle* before being tapped by executives to start a "girly *Gawker*," intentionally set out to make *Jezebel* the anti-women's magazine.[20] As *Jezebel*'s manifesto outlines, the blog refuses the usual tactics of women's magazines encompassed by "The Five Great Lies of Women's Magazines," which include airbrushing, must-have product promotion, profiling of the celebrity-sartorial complex, and the heightening of women's insecurities vis-à-vis their weight, sexual prowess, self-confidence, and more.[21]

Notably, the manifesto never mentions "feminism" or self-describes as "feminist." As media studies scholar Susan Douglas has argued, since the 1990s feminism has become an "f-word" of a different sort, heard mostly in the declaration: "I'm not a feminist, but . . ."[22] The ambivalence in the statement illuminates how women in the United States understand it as a philosophy from which they have benefited and might continue to benefit but with which they desire not the consequences of affiliating. As Douglas explains, the statement also "identifies the speaker as someone who both acquiesces to and resists media representations of women and of feminism."[23] That is to say, while young women today are perhaps conscious that they enjoy the legislative and social gains made by second wave feminists, images of feminists themselves have been reduced to angry, man-hating women such that these same women steer clear of such identifications. It is precisely such ambivalent readership that *Jezebel* seeks to attract. The blog began its tenure using a method that has been described as "a sort of stealth feminism," which Holmes explains involves writing "about celebrities, fashion, lifestyle and popular culture, but through a feminist lens" with "a healthy dash of social justice too."[24] Although Holmes left the blog in 2010, according to the *Guardian* in 2013, "there's little argument today that *Jezebel* fits on the list of mainstream, popular feminist blogs," while National Public Radio (NPR) has characterized it as "jolly feminist commentary."[25] If blogs such as *Jezebel* are considered the mainstays of Internet feminism, as attested to by the *Guardian* and NPR's characterizations of it, then it is critical to analyze the kind of feminist thinking that is being promoted on the site. In other words, mainstream feminist blogs act as one-stop shops for feminist viewpoints that are easily accessed and have an interface promoting easy consumption. Given the multiplicity of feminisms and feminists, when Holmes explains that *Jezebel* covers a variety of topics "through a feminist lens," through what lens are *Jezebel* readers indoctrinated? And what kinds of feminists compose *Jezebel*'s readership?

These questions become even more crucial when one considers the

blog's traffic. During a one-month period between July and August 2014, *Jezebel* reached 8,601,906 people, from 25,706,148 visits to the site spread over 54,901,656 page views.[26] As these numbers attest, like K-pop, mainstream feminism is reaching an unprecedented number of people, not only through site visits but also through social media sharing.[27] While it would be difficult to generalize about *Jezebel*'s writers since there are many and they are varied, mainstream outlets such as the *New Yorker* have characterized at least some of the blog's contributors as the voices of "young feminism."[28] In the instances mentioned in the following discussion and in nearly all the articles on the blog relating to Korean plastic surgery, however, *Jezebel* promotes a brand of easily consumable global feminism. As transnational feminist scholar Mimi Nguyen asserts, global feminism, "in its claim to universal applicability, comprises a set of discourses and practices that elide the structuring violences of geopolitics and transnational capital in favor of a liberal ideal of women's freedom that celebrates individuality and modernity."[29] In so doing, global feminism equates oppression with poor self-image, offering self-esteem and empowerment as individualized solutions and Western women as exemplars of such right living. As Nguyen goes on to note, it is precisely this "politics of comparison" that constructs Western women as "ethical and free and as saviors of oppressed women around the world."[30] To be sure, global feminism is not new and not solely the domain of *Jezebel* or its writers. Yet what is significant about blogs like *Jezebel* is how the medium of the Internet facilitates the quick and accessible dissemination and consumption of global feminism. That is to say, if *Jezebel*, as an interface, "compels particular sorts of identifications, investments, ideological seductions, and conscious as well as unconscious exercises of power," as Nakamura has argued, then these identifications coalesce around a feminist lens informed by global feminism as a political and racial project that takes white liberal American women as its subjects.[31]

While Korean plastic surgery consumption no doubt raises many questions in regard to how neoliberal self-management of the body is coded as necessity yet signified as choice, and more specifically, ethical questions regarding medical interventions in the realm of the aesthetic, these discursive formations reveal more about a US empire in relative decline than they do about Korean women. More specifically still, these discourses reveal more about mainstream American feminism than they do about Korean women. For example, in "Plastic Surgery Means Many Beauty Queens but Only One Kind of Face," deputy editor Dodai Stewart, in an attempt at balanced reporting, suggests that the Korean beauty queens' uniformity of looks is no different than the way that US pop culture celebrities such as Britney Spears and Taylor Swift are similarly coiffed. To further the point, Stewart includes pictures of

the entertainers side by side. In the comments section, commenter Carlotta79, who identifies herself as white, disagrees:

> I still see a lot of variation in the latter group of women [US pop stars]. I wouldn't confuse them for each other—each woman is still very *individual* with distinctive features when you compare them. I can't say the same of the sampling of Korean women shown here. I find it very Brave New World. It scares the shit out of me (emphasis mine).[32]

Indeed, Carlotta79's comments expose key assumptions about the positioned differences between white American women and Korean women, particularly since we know that the gif was visually contrived. Carlotta79's declaration that she sees "a lot of variation" among the white women because they are "still very individual" in comparison to the fabricated production of Korean women's uniformity of looks reveals how white women are often bestowed the privilege of being individuals such that their experiences stand in as universal, while women of color are not. As transnational feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty has argued, the discursive self-representation of "other" women as unenlightened, ignorant, and victimized helps construct white women as "educated, as modern, as having control over their bodies and sexualities and [exercising] the freedom to make their own decisions."[33] In the digital realm, such self-representations are solidified by the fact that "the woman of color in the integrated circuit of information technology production is framed as an object rather than a subject of interactivity."[34] That is, *Jezebel*'s article and Carlotta79's reactions to it exemplify how the Internet facilitates the deployment of women of color as objects in the self-construction of white personhood.

Far from being a space free from the constraints of race, gender, or sexuality, then, the Internet allows for this dynamic through an arrangement organized around what Nakamura cogently points out is nothing short of digital capitalism. Following this logic, raced and gendered bodies are organized such that the user need only "click on a box or link . . . to acquire it, to choose it, to replace one set of images with another in a friction-free transaction that seems to cost nothing yet generates capital in the form of digitally racialized images."[35] As mentioned earlier, the visual currency of Korean bodies and their accompanying headlines help generate traffic to *Jezebel*'s site, because they are sensationalized and thus easily consumable. Lured by the visual, Internet users simply click on the highly racialized, gendered, and sexualized images and in the case of the gif, the capital accrued is a feminist sensibility of which Nguyen's "politics of comparison" is central. *Jezebel* readers thereby bolster their own sense of feminist empowerment knowing that they, like Brit-

ney Spears, Taylor Swift, or Carlotta79, are *not* these Korean women. Whether or not they have had plastic surgery themselves becomes moot since, as Carlotta79's comments suggest, they would have done so for more individual reasons and more individual outcomes. Whether articulated in the digital realm or vis-à-vis the power relations of the quotidian, such thinking is part and parcel of global feminism, which positions white Western women's experiences as the telos of feminist modernity.

Accordingly, fashion and beauty stand in as signifiers for the "choices" offered by liberal democracy and consumer culture. Nowhere, perhaps, has this been more visible in recent years than in US discourse surrounding Middle Eastern women's veiling practices. Since the George W. Bush administration launched a military campaign after September 11, 2001, using the language of global feminism to justify war, Middle Eastern women's oppression (and their seeming liberation from it) is measured in popular US discourses by their ability to make choices about their style and dress, namely in ways that mirror Western fashions. Ostensibly, the journey from burqa to Barney's parallels the journey from tradition to American-style modernity and from oppression to freedom. In her insightful essay, "The Biopower of Beauty: Humanitarian Imperialisms and Global Feminisms in an Age of Terror," Nguyen cogently explains how beauty is mobilized in national and transnational contests of meaning and power:

> Beauty bears the weight of what Minoo Mallem calls "civilizational thinking," a "powerful modern discourse influenced by the Enlightenment and the idea of progress dividing the civility of the 'West' from the barbarism of the "Rest." In the familiar oppositions that organize such thinking, the burqa operates as anticivilizational, a life-negating deindividuation that renders the Afghan woman passive and unwhole, while beauty acts as a life-affirming pathway to modern, even liberated, personhood.

One can see traces of such "civilizational thinking" in the Korean War as well, when the double eyelid procedure was made available to the masses as its own "life-affirming pathway" to liberated personhood through the US military's efforts to build public relations between Koreans and Americans. Akin to the chocolate and soda the soldiers regularly passed out to ameliorate bonds, the double eyelid procedure was made available to the masses when US military doctors performed the cosmetic procedure along with the free reconstructive surgery they offered Korean War victims.[36] Medical services as humanitarian efforts not only helped public relations but did the work of empire building through a regime of morality that cemented the liberated-liberator, colonized-colonizer relationship as well as setting into motion a hi-

erarchy of racialized looks. Indeed, plastic surgery in Korea is an afterlife of the Korean War and in many respects we can say that the plastic surgery consumer—as alluded to over and again on social media sites—was born in and of the Korean War and US involvement there.[37] Much as Nguyen argues about the imperialist attachments to beauty as it intersects with humanitarianism in Afghanistan, beauty at the end of the Korean War, too, was also deployed as a "war by other means."[38]

While possessing its refractory imprint, cosmetic surgery in Korea has taken on new meanings since its (neo)colonial origins. In the sixty years since the armistice was signed and as a result of Korea's neoliberal reforms, plastic surgery has been produced as economically necessary in Korean culture. In this way, cosmetic surgery is a form of "body work" that encapsulates both work performed on the body through surgeries and the work the altered body is readied to perform, or perform better, in a national market economy.[39] Given its ubiquity—Koreans consume plastic surgery at the highest rates per capita globally—and that Korea is home to one of the leading plastic surgery industries as well as its own medical tourism program, we see the "civilizational thinking" outlined in this discussion at play in contemporary discourses on Korean cosmetic surgery, only in reverse. The proliferation of Korean products globally, and Korean cultural products in particular, indexes Korea's current position in the global order. As such, contrary to discourses on Middle Eastern women's fashion and style, which measure their freedom based on their proximity to the choices of Western women, discourses on Korean beauty practices can be understood as disciplinary discourses that chastise Korean women for having gone too far past the limits of morality and modernity embodied by and embedded in Western fashion and beauty.

Given this, we might better understand Carlotta79's reference to *Brave New World* as a techno-orientalist critique of Korean women's beauty practices. Using the genre of science fiction, *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley's 1931 dystopian novel, takes place in the future but contends with the contemporary issues of the early twentieth century, including the industrial revolution and the subsequent mass production and availability of technologies such as cars, telephones, and radios. Most notably, *Brave New World* expresses Huxley's own views on the United States from the standpoint of the English, who were then worried about the Americanization of Europe. In Carlotta79's formulation, however, Korean women's seemingly excessive consumption of plastic surgery and their resulting uniformity of looks embody the dystopian future outlined in Huxley's novel. As cultural studies scholar Jane Chi-Hyun Park has outlined in *Yellow Future: Oriental Style in Hollywood Film*, since the 1980s East Asian peoples and places have become intimately linked with technology to pro-

duce a collective fantasy in which East Asia signifies the future. Such techno-orientalist imaginings are a manifestation of the West's resentment of the East for its ability to appropriate and improve on Western technology and started with stereotypes of the Japanese as an economic and technological yellow peril but have since extended to other East Asian groups.[40] Much as the United States signified the potential erosion of traditional values at the hands of technological advancement in Huxley's day, in this instance Korea signifies technology's anticivilizational potential when developed and consumed incorrectly. While global feminist discourses often operate along a North-South axis, depicting the global South as "backward," Korea's history as a former colony of Japan and current status as a burgeoning subempire under the tutelage of the United States eschews simple classification within such categories. Accordingly, Korea—as with East Asia more generally—is depicted as a place where technology has run amuck, which often gets recoded as perverted excess. Carlotta79's position on the matter is more than clear when she says, "It scares the shit out of me." That this particular form of visuality offers Korean women as a spectacle through which to work out anxieties about the future of white life, as opposed to holding any journalistic integrity, can be illustrated by the fact that very few news outlets, including *Jezebel*, corrected their reports retroactively once the gif was found to contain photoshopped images.

In contrast to the way that Middle Eastern women are framed as having limited choices, then, Korean women are framed as choosing in excess, exemplifying the mismanagement not only of technology but of liberal democracy and its attendant capitalist freedoms. That is, Koreans have mishandled the gift of freedom already bestowed upon them by the United States. Stewart's article "I Can't Stop Looking at These Korean Women Who've Had Plastic Surgery" instantiates such logics. In one portion of the article, Stewart writes:

> If you have a limited ability to see beauty in someone who is not big-eyed and small-faced and straight-nosed, do you also have a limited ability to understand, empathize, sympathize and relate to that person, as well? Do you become intolerant of those who don't meet your lookist standards? It wasn't that long ago that Western society practiced *Physiognomy*, making correlations between physical features and character traits, making things like large jaws and hooked noses—common among certain races—shorthand for evil or deceitful. It was racism and xenophobia disguised as science, and persists when it comes to Disney villains. In fact, we still use phrases like "baby-faced killer," as if one thing has anything to do with the other. Is the penchant for surgery in Korea a simple matter of self-improvement, or is something more cultish going on here?[41]

Ironically, Korean feminists identify "lookism" as one of the central causes for plastic surgery consumption, which I expand upon in the following section. Yet rather than interrogate or even gesture toward how lookism might be institutionally structured, thus catalyzing the discourses and logics of "self-improvement," Stewart's formulation employs a politics of comparison to paint instead a picture of the United States as again, *not* Korea. As such, Korean beauty practices themselves are not only oppressive but a system of oppression, one that, despite a heightened surveillance security state premised on racial profiling, a more enlightened United States has now surpassed. While Stewart herself may not intend it as such, her article reads as if xenophobia is no longer an issue in the United States save its persistence among cartoon villains, and presumably Stewart's own positionality as a black woman, though she never mentions it in her article, gives her the authority from which to discuss such matters and to deem them a thing of the past. Accordingly, what is unquestioned is the Western episteme shaping Stewart's gaze as well as her ability to presume to be the ultimate arbiter of whether Korea is truly free and, more specifically, whether Korean women are liberated feminist subjects. Ultimately, Stewart characterizes Korean plastic surgery consumption as "cultish" and "herd behavior," which we might construe as "a life-negating deindividuation" that, like the burqa for Afghan women, also renders Korean women "passive and unwhole."[42] That is to say, despite the excesses characterizing techno-orientalist thinking, Korean women and Middle Eastern women's beauty practices are similarly constructed as affronts to the liberal personhood exemplified by white American women.

APKUJEONG STATION EXIT #4: LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

On July 11, 2013, just a couple of months after the Miss Korea gif went viral, Womenlink, the largest and most active feminist organization in Korea with more than nine thousand members, held a public forum in Seoul's congressional building to discuss plastic surgery consumption as a social issue. According to the event's program booklet, despite the fact that women's beauty practices seem voluntary, there are "cultural, social and economic issues within Korean society that are creating body dysmorphia and standards of beauty."[43] As such, the forum sought to raise these issues as a first step toward the eventual goal of lobbying for a law provisionally titled the "Body Diversity Guarantee" that would regulate the media and medical market in order to encourage a diversity of appearances and bodies.[44] Rather than solely focusing on and thus pathologizing Korean women as individual patients—which as Victoria Pitts-Taylor has written "decenters other actors: the surgeons, the

psychiatrists, the technologies, the media, the ideologies, the structure of medicine"—Womenlink's feminist organizing highlights "cultural, social and economic issues within Korean society." As such, in the following section I offer an analysis of these issues in order to start to entangle the "structuring violences of geopolitics and transnational capital" of the local context and to serve as a counterpoint to *Jezebel* writers' and readers' global feminist narratives that pathologize Korean women as individual patients.[45]

The 2013 forum was not Womenlink's first foray into organizing around the issue. In 2003 Womenlink initiated what was formally known as the "Women's Bodies Are Beautiful as They Are: The Lookism Perception Reform Project"—a yearlong series of educational events and programming that reached out to women and sought institutional reform. It was known for short as the "I Am the Owner of My Body" campaign and most commonly as "Love Your Body." Womenlink identified lookism as the major social problem driving plastic surgery consumption and attempted to curb it, as the formal title suggests. Although a full accounting and analysis of Womenlink's campaign is beyond the scope of this article, the "Love Your Body" campaign was composed of a wide array of activities and actions both to stymie the multiple industries sustaining and benefiting from lookism and to educate women, the latter a topic to which I return at the end of the essay.[46] These programs included public rallies, petitions, and performances, a mother-daughter overnight camp, media monitoring that yielded published statistics on gendered representations on television programming, legal action against plastic surgery clinics violating medical law by using before and after advertising, and producing and publicly airing an educational satire that approaches the plastic surgery industry through the mockumentary genre. Indeed, Womenlink cast a wide net in 2003 in order to address what they viewed as a primary obstacle to gender equality.

As already noted, Stewart also mentions lookism in her article. Although in the preceding paragraphs Stewart points out that photographs required on university and job applications are a major impetus for surgery, but her focus shifts from the structures that institutionalize lookism to the individuals who must contend with it. Stewart asks, "What would the average South Korean teen think about some so-called 'unconventional beauties' such as Frida Kahlo, Rossy De Palma and Grace Jones?"[47] She follows this question with: "If you have a limited ability to see beauty in someone who is not big-eyed and small-faced and straight-nosed, do you also have a limited ability to understand, empathize, sympathize and relate to that person, as well? Do you become intolerant of those who don't meet your lookist standards?" Though subtle, it is critical to highlight how the positioning of Stewart's series of questions makes South Korean teens the key actors motivating and perpetuating

lookism despite her mention of both university admissions and career concerns as major reasons for surgery. In other words, Stewart's modification of "lookist standards" with the possessive second person pronoun "your" shifts the responsibility for the standards onto South Korean teens as well as the South Korean women of whom she writes. This sleight of hand pathologizes Korean women in a way that paints them as conformist and intolerant dupes rather than providing a deep analysis for their beauty practices, something Womenlink's organizing around lookism as a social problem seeks to do.

By centralizing the concept of lookism, Womenlink's campaign attempts to address the material consequences of women's everyday concerns as well as the capitalist practices (and the profits they engender) that produce them. Although Womenlink attributes the term *lookism* to the *New York Times Magazine* columnist William Safire and his column "On Language: Lookism" on August 27, 2000, Safire actually traces the word to a *Washington Post Magazine* article in 1978, when it was used by the Fat Acceptance Movement to describe both what their members experience and what they oppose.[48] Today in the United States, lookism is associated with Nancy Etcoff, a psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital and faculty member at Harvard Medical School, whose book *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* argues that human propensity to favor beauty is biological and a product of human evolution.[49] Her book brings together numerous scientific studies including one she conducted in conjunction with other researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard Medical School, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) technology to analyze men's brain activity as they viewed photos of beautiful women. The researchers found that the images triggered the same parts of the brain that alcohol triggers for alcoholics, food triggers for hungry people, and money triggers for gamblers. In other words, beauty elicits the same chemical reactions in the brain as addiction. Because humans are hardwired toward beauty, Etcoff reasons, insistence that beauty is socially constructed is counterproductive and actually serves to entrench the beauty hierarchy further. Many critics understand her book as a direct response to feminists such as Naomi Wolf who argue that beauty is not only socially constructed but also premised on misogyny.[50]

Womenlink's use of the concept lookism derives from the US context but also significantly departs from it as they identify it as "one of the causes of unequal relations in human history along with race, religion, sex and ideology."[51] While Etcoff would certainly agree with this definition, Womenlink's similarities with Etcoff in their use of the term end there. Although none of their materials indicate whether Womenlink members believe the propensity toward beauty is biologically driven, this seems to fall outside their major concern. In

addition to a patriarchal analysis, Womenlink understands beauty through a capitalist framework that interrogates the material consequences of lookism and also who benefits from it. In other words, Womenlink asserts that Korean women are increasingly seeking body work, because lookism affects their job and marriage prospects, as Stewart briefly mentions. Womenlink further asserts that the beauty industry sustains these social circumstances to its benefit.

While lookism creates a society stratified by a hierarchy of looks, it operates on the level of the day-to-day through the internalization of neoliberal mandates for self-management—neoliberal governmentalities—that have become imperative to economic success since the Asian Debt Crisis, also known as the IMF Crisis. Korea became the subject of IMF bailout in 1997 because it lacked the American dollars necessary to pay back loans from foreign financial institutions. Under the neoliberal regime of Kim Dae Jung, Korea's first civilian president, who took office but a month after the crisis began, Korea restructured its economy, and unemployment rates went from as low as 3 percent to as high as 20 percent. At the same time the government also decreased spending in the areas of social services, leaving many people to fend for themselves in a fiercely competitive economic environment.[52] Such competition has fostered neoliberal mandates for self-management that operate in such a way that individuals are controlled through their freedom and the myriad choices they make toward their personal success, which are coded as the results of their self-entrepreneurship. According to feminist scholar Cho Joo-Hyun, in Korea's neoliberal regime "the most successful self-entrepreneurs . . . will be those who faithfully internalize the neoliberal logic, subjugating themselves to the techniques of biopower with no intention of activating their own critiques or initiating their own forms of subjection."[53] Thus body work and the success it represents encompasses the neoliberal logics of competitiveness, self-management, and entrepreneurship to the exclusion of all else. Such changes are the consequences of new gender norms and shifting social realities in post-IMF, neoliberal Korean society. While marriage has been considered most important to women's success, in the last decade job security has begun to displace marriage in its salience, with marriage becoming optional. At the same time divorce rates have increased and on average, women stay unmarried for far longer than in the past. Moreover, rapidly decreasing birthrates have caused a crisis of the middle class, leading the Korean government to enact numerous policies such as improving maternity leave, as incentives for childbearing. These social changes signal significant ruptures in a culture where motherhood has traditionally been the only ideal role of women. While neoliberal imperatives push women towards methods of self-care, these rationalities dovetail with traditional notions of motherhood.

Notably, Womenlink put neoliberal imperatives for self-management at the forefront of their 2003 campaign by contextualizing it within these shifting identifications with the body. Their "Love Your Body" campaign proposal describes the situation as such:

> As women's participation in society has increased, women's bodies have increasingly been seen as objects. In the past, women's bodies were focused on a mother's role of having, then raising children. Now, however, the body is a site for raising one's self-value and is a symbol of one's position or lifestyle. As such, a well-maintained appearance is not only a marker of her self-satisfaction but is an avenue to attaining social status. Thus, many women are aggressively managing their bodies.[54]

While identification with motherhood has changed, the body has become a site for "raising one's self-value and has become a symbol of one's position or lifestyle." As a result, the neoliberal rationale of investing in one's own body becomes all the more imperative since one's body is an "avenue to attaining social success." That is to say, because of the body's increasing social importance and visibility, women's choices to manage their bodies are all the more constrained even as they are narrated as liberatory. Significantly, Womenlink's 2013 interviews, published in the forum's program booklet, confirm that the pressures of the labor market continue to be major factors in Korean women's beauty choices. For example, one interviewee who works as a flight attendant states explicitly the connection between work and self-management: "Ten years ago appearance helped a little in getting a job. English language, physical fitness and academic achievement were the most important qualities and appearance was secondary but these days, almost everyone gets plastic surgery before their job interview."[55] Womenlink organizers thus conclude: "Neoliberalism justifies the acceleration of competition and women's deepening worries about employment make their bodies a site for the evaluation of their self-management, indoctrinating them into the idea that self-management of their bodies is inevitable."[56] As these quotes indicate, ten years after the "Love Your Body" campaign, women continue to internalize neoliberal mandates for self-management as imperative to their economic success and understand lookism to be a part of everyday work life.

These structures of lookism and the neoliberal governmentalities bolstering them signal a shift in the way gendered power disciplines women's bodies in Korean society.[57] Womenlink's "Love Your Body" campaign proposal's reference to the ways in which Korean women identified with their bodies, as mothers, does not celebrate or romanticize the past but rather points out that new gendered mechanisms for control are in place. According to Kim

Sang-hŭi, executive director of Womenlink, in a self-written editorial for *JoongAng Ilbo*, "In traditional society, a woman's body was completely controlled by male-centered society, especially because of the ideology of staying a virgin, which was a strict controlling tool of women's bodies. But now, lookism has replaced that ideology."[58] Kim points out that lookism is a mechanism of control that, like chaste ideologies in centuries prior, discipline women's behaviors and relationships to their own bodies. Moreover, lookism is powerful precisely because there are negative consequences for *not* participating in addition to perceived benefits for doing so: "In a lookist society, it is not just about self-maintenance, it's that unbeautiful women are seen as lazy and as incapable. Lookism discrimination is pervasive in job hunting and marriage and such discrimination based on 'looks' is deemed ok by this society."[59] In other words, women who choose not to invest in themselves are seen as not fulfilling their potential. As such, beauty ads for cosmetic surgery, dieting, skin and body care literally use the neoliberal language of "self-management" (자기 관리), "self-development" (자기 개발) and "self-investment" (자기 투자) to describe their products, goods, and services.

Although Womenlink asserts that the body has not only displaced motherhood as women's primary vehicle for social success but is the central locus of neoliberal identification, I would argue that motherhood is not outside neoliberal rationale, creating a situation in which both types of neoliberal identifications are happening simultaneously. Accordingly, mothers must act upon their own bodies as self-entrepreneurs as well as those of their children as extensions of themselves. That is to say, traditional emphases on mothers to sacrifice everything for the success of their children have combined with neoliberal rationalities urging parents to the consumer market to purchase advantages for their children in a highly competitive post-IMF society. In addition to plastic surgery for their children, typically given as high school or college graduation presents, Korean children notoriously attend academies or *hagwon* (학원) to improve their skills in English, math, and science. The *Washington Post* reports that Korean parents spent 15.6 billion dollars in 2006 on English language tutors alone and at least 24,000 children in the first to twelfth grades left the country to study English abroad.[60] In 2011 nearly 72 percent of all elementary, junior, and high school students attended private academies, costing their parents a total of US$17.8 billion.[61] Since *Hallyu*'s global popularity, these academies are no longer entirely academic or artistic in the classical sense. As sociologist Swee-Lin Ho has shown, K-pop academies have emerged to provide alternative forms of mobility to children who are not academically inclined. These professional training programs, which provide training not only in singing and dancing but also in personality, appearance,

and even manners, cost up to US$20,000 to complete just three years.[62] To be sure, Korea's highly competitive society engenders conformity to trends and neoliberal (and highly costly) solutions that interpellate mothers as self-entrepreneurs who act not only for the benefit of their children but for themselves in the hopes that through their children's success they might affirm their own "self-worth" and gain "recognition by the wider Korean society that they are 'good parents.'"[63]

As the growing popularity of K-pop academies today suggests, major developments occurred in the ten years between the "Love Your Body" campaign and the 2013 forum that dramatically changed the landscape and scope of plastic surgery in Korea. First, *Hallyu* became a global phenomenon, and second, Korea launched its medical tourism industry with cosmetic surgery as its largest market in 2007. As transnational industries, the two work hand in hand. *Hallyu* in its various genres—film, dramas, and K-pop—enacts aspirational desires on the part of viewers in other locations such as Japan, China, and Southeast Asia as well as in the diaspora through its glossy depictions of Koreans' capitalist consumption mediated through traditional tenets of Confucianism. In the particular realm of bodily aesthetics, these cultural productions proliferate a standard of beauty deemed particularly Korean and associated with Korea's seemingly successful forms of consumerist modernity. As sociologist Kimberly Hoang has shown in *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendency, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work*, Vietnamese sex workers catering to elite Vietnamese businessmen construct themselves as pan-Asian modern subjects whose "looks" conform to regional standards of beauty, taking K-pop stars as a sought after beauty ideal.[64] In addition to wearing make-up and clothing styled after the stars, these women also modify their bodies through rhinoplasties, double eyelid surgeries, breast augmentation, and liposuction surgeries.[65] Anthropologist Dredge Kang has illuminated similar dynamics in Thailand in his examination of transgender performance in K-pop cover dance and calls this privileging of light-skinned Asians from developed countries such as Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan a desire for and to be like "white Asians."[66] In other words, *Hallyu*'s regional popularity in Asia is not merely about pleasure and pop but rather points to new formations of modernity in Asia that defy east-west binaries and are creating regionally specific cultural and social meanings through tangible practices of consumption and embodiment.

According to my interview with a representative of South Korea's tourism board, this connection between popular culture, beauty, and marketing is not lost on South Korean governmental agencies. In fact, Korea's medical tourism industry spends very little, she told me, on advertising for its biggest

market, cosmetic surgery—*Hallyu* is their global advertising.[67] As a result, *Hallyu* fans travel across the world to Seoul in order to look just like their favorite Korean actors or pop stars while embarking on *Hallyu* tours during recovery. Such global advertisements have been so successful that 30 percent of all cosmetic patients in Korea are Chinese, and of medical tourists, Japanese patients are the second largest group with Singaporean and Indonesian numbers not far behind.[68]

The opening remarks at Womenlink's 2013 forum addressed these changes since 2003 by acknowledging that the relationship between media and the medical market shape beauty practices as self-management.[69] Given that the panel featured several speakers in addition to Womenlink representatives, including a doctor, professor, television director, and lawyer, the panel had a hard time reaching any unified conclusions. Womenlink's Media Division did have a concrete position, however, that the "problem is not surgery" but rather "the media broadcasting and promoting what surgeries celebrities have had"—promotion both on television and on the portal sites.[70] In other words, Womenlink, understanding the connection outlined in the previous section between K-pop, plastic surgery, and digital media, contends that media reform is key to distancing women from the pressures of beauty ideals. To these ends, the group presented five proposals: first, that celebrity plastic surgery no longer be the subject of programming or television reporting of any kind; second, that the media no longer produce programs that foster lookism, such as the "Baby Face Contest," which rewards people for the most youthful appearance; third, that a variety of actors and especially actresses are cast to show a diversity of body types; fourth, that media programming not make light of plastic surgery; and lastly, that new plastic surgery techniques are not introduced as part of programming.[71] The forum concluded with the remarks of a congressional representative who proposed the ambiguous concept of "health" as the most critical component to the discussion.

That a congressional representative would end the day's events points to a central contradiction: namely, that the very government that provided Womenlink with three-quarters of their funds for their "Love Your Body" campaign is the same government that promotes both *Hallyu* and medical tourism.[72] After the 1997 IMF Crisis, when Korea was in need of new industries, President Kim Dae-jung allotted US$50 million to create the Cultural Content Office. Today the office has a budget of US$500 million for its four divisions: video games, television, cultural industry policy, and cultural technology, and it expects to double the size of Korea's cultural industry exports to US$10 billion by 2019.[73] That the government considers its cultural products a lucrative

investment is evidenced by the fact that current president Park Geun-hye created a US$1 billion for-profit investment fund aimed at making high returns.[74]

Medical tourism, on the other hand, has a more recent beginning. The bureau of Korean Tourism established medical tourism as one of its main areas for growth and as one of the country's strategic products in 2007.[75] After Korea recovered from the 1997 IMF Crisis, plastic surgery as an industry experienced a boom since improved looks were seen as providing an advantage in South Korea's highly competitive society. By 2009, however, patient visits went down as much as 40 percent with a number of clinics closing their doors.[76] In addition, South Korea's currency depreciated enough for procedures to be cheaper than in other currencies, at the same time that medical tourism was identified as one way to bring demand to South Korea's oversupply of clinics. According to Samuel Koo, president and CEO of Korea's Tourism Board in 2010, 7.8 million tourists visited South Korea in 2009, of whom 60,000 were medical tourists seeking mostly cosmetic and dental procedures.[77] This is a staggering increase from the less than 20,000 foreign patients South Korea saw in 2007. Just five years later, Korea welcomed 150,000 medical tourists, and in 2014 the medical tourism industry generated US$349 million in revenue.[78]

As these numbers suggest, the Korean government has invested in the three projects of *Hallyu*, medical tourism, and Womenlink without contradiction. As such, Womenlink is one of the many feminist activist nonprofits today that are tasked with managing women as a population. As states increasingly enact neoliberal policies that privatize or disregard welfare concerns, feminist nonprofits and NGOs have become central to such management as they are "understood as less corrupt, more efficient, and more closely attuned to needs on the ground than states are" and "claim an organic connection to the populations who are the objects of their welfare and feminist work."[79] But this connection is far from natural, and in neoliberal Korea, Womenlink provides services the government itself has outsourced to mitigate circumstances its industries have created and to produce certain kinds of self-governing subjects. We see this fluidity between feminist activism and state government in Congresswoman Nam Yoon In Sook's comments published in the forum's program booklet, when she calls the event a "meaningful next step" in her collaboration with Womenlink against "distorted body images and enforced beauty standards" that "threaten the health of the Korean public and require at least minimal measures and regulations."[80] She goes onto acknowledge that "federal and local governments use plastic surgery and enhancing appearance as the main products of medical tourism to stimulate the economy" and that this contributes to the "diffusion of distorted body images."[81] Kim concludes: "We must stop discrimination . . . based on appearance and begin discussions

about the problems of the plastic surgery industry . . . to correct distorted views of the body."[82] As her comments illustrate, the government does not eliminate opposition to its federally funded projects but rather works through it by representing the counter-narrative in a way that works on behalf of hegemonic norms. That is to say, although Kim cursorily acknowledges the government's role, the government is not framed within these discussions as either generating or benefiting from the twin industries of medical tourism and *Hallyu.* Instead the state primarily stands in as part of the solution through her participation and collaboration with Womenlink to what critics frame as Korea's plastic surgery epidemic. In this way, we see at work what Nguyen, engaging the work of Sonia Alvarez, describes as the troubling relationship into which "feminist organizations are increasingly drawn . . . with state powers: as gender experts, providing knowledge about the biopolitical category of 'women' . . . and as service subcontractors, advising and executing government or independent women's programs."[83]

Although the specific ways in which Womenlink's 2003 campaign interacted with or acted upon women has been outside the scope of this article, which focuses instead on the social, economic, and cultural issues the organization lays out as the landscape for Korean women's surgery consumption, I return to it here as a way of tying together *Jezebel* and Womenlink's seemingly disparate feminisms to argue that perhaps they are not so disparate after all. Toward the end of her article, "I Can't Stop Looking at These Korean Women Who've Had Plastic Surgery," Stewart offers this piece of wisdom to young people considering body modification: "True beauty is on the inside!"[84] While *Jezebel* writers, editors, and millions of readers as well as Womenlink's members, panelists, and forum attendees can perhaps be characterized as feminists from opposite ends of the world, so to speak, and as I have shown, they understand, articulate, and analyze Korea's plastic surgery consumption in vastly different ways, it is critical to identify the unifying logic that undergirds both the idea that "True beauty is on the inside!" and the command to "Love Your Body." As mottos and maxims, these posit self-love or self-esteem as alternatives to surgeries and as antidotes to social problems. In so doing, both feminisms are complicit in the logics of the self-esteem movement that began in the 1980s and that has taken on global dimensions today, feminist politics notwithstanding.[85] By 1992 self-esteem became enmeshed with mainstream global feminist politics when Gloria Steinem published *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem*, which calls for an internal revolution to address external barriers to gender equality, going so far as to say that self-esteem is a prerequisite for democracy and equality. As political scientist Barbara Cruikshank cogently argues, Steinem's book and the self-esteem

movement it represents "does not so much avoid 'real' political problems as transform the level on which it is possible to address those problems."[86] As such, the self-esteem movement seeks to wage "a social revolution not against capitalism, racism, and inequality, but against the order of the self and the way we govern ourselves."[87] In other words, while our inner selves are painted as paths to liberation waiting to be unlocked within us, such self-making is itself a way of becoming a self-governing subject, able to govern where the state cannot.

Moreover, these slogans implicitly assert that loving your body or cultivating your inner beauty is the individual agency necessary to eschew cosmetic surgery or to counter the seductive practices of the industry when paradoxically, plastic surgery as a field has historically used the acquisition of self-esteem to justify its existence as a medical science. Borrowing from psychoanalysis and psychology, the importance of appearance was first tied to the "inferiority complex," which then gave way to the larger and more flexible notion of self-esteem, which anthropologist Alexander Edmonds notes "is important for cosmetic surgery because it enables surgeons to argue they are healing a psychological complaint. In the notion of low self-esteem one might say aesthetic surgery found a treatable condition."[88] Thus self-esteem is packaged by the cosmetic surgery industry as its main product and by feminist movements as an antidote against that industry. Similarly, the campaign's other slogan, "I Am the Owner of My Body," also relies on neoliberal logics of self-possession that are not unlike the neoliberal governmentalities that push Korean women to the marketplace for forms of self-management and entrepreneurship as outlined earlier.[89] In this way the logics undergirding Womenlink's feminist activities are perhaps not so different from those informing *Jezebel*'s writers, readers, and commenters in their emphasis of the self as a locus of liberation. That is to say, despite the fact that the two frame the problem quite differently, the global neoliberal discourses of self-esteem, empowerment, and ownership constitute powerful economic and social relations that bring their solutions into much closer proximity.

CONCLUSION

Social media have created new visual economies that have both increased the popularity of Korean popular culture and spawned fetishized interest in Korean bodies. On the one hand, the Miss Korea gif exemplifies the ways in which global feminist logics that celebrate individuality and privilege white and/or US women's experiences as universalisms undergird US discourses on the topic. Far from journalistic reporting, these stories are animated by US

anxieties of an increasingly powerful Korea and use hollow appeals to morality to discipline Korean women in proper modes of consumption and beauty. While the gif was circulated and taken at face value, literally, as visual evidence of Korean modernity run amuck, I have offered Womenlink's activism as a counterpoint in order to outline the broader social, economic, and cultural issues that compose the landscape of plastic surgery consumption in Korea. Since 2003 Womenlink has identified lookism as an oppressive system that has material consequences vis-à-vis the marriage and job markets. In contrast to *Jezebel*'s global feminist politics, which pathologizes Korean women, Womenlink's activism takes Korean women's plastic surgery consumption as a result of a systemic problem that operates on the level of the everyday through neoliberal governmentalities that buttress myriad beauty industries.

Yet, as Womenlink's relationship to the Korean state and their reliance on discourses of self-possession and esteem suggest, in an age of neoliberalism, such forms of governance and personhood constitute the linkages that underwrite both groups' assumption that at least part of the solution to the "problem" of plastic surgery is self-love. Self-love, however, is itself a form of self-governance that parallels and thus cannot undo those forms espoused by the beauty industries feminists seek to stymie. Ultimately, the juxtaposition of the feminisms levied by *Jezebel* and Womenlink instantiates the ways in which neoliberal sentiments of self-possession, self-esteem, and empowerment have become part and parcel of feminist forms of resistance.

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NOTES

1. Zara Stone, "The K-Pop Plastic Surgery Connection," *Atlantic*, May 24, 2013, http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/05/the-k-pop-plastic-surgery

-obsession/276215/ (accessed May 25, 2013). Heesu Lee, "Gangnam Style Nip and Tuck Draws Tourists to the Beauty Belt," *Bloomberg News*, September 29, 2013, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013–09–29/gangnam-style-nip-and-tuck-draws-tourists-to-seoul-s-beauty-belt.html (accessed January 8, 2014).

2. Chris Stokel-Walker, "When Does Plastic Surgery Become Racial Transformation?" *BuzzFeed News*, May 16, 2013, http://www.buzzfeed.com/chrisstokelwalker/when-does-plastic-surgery-become-racial-transformation#2rs964z (accessed May 17, 2013).

3. Patricia Marx, "About Face: Why Is Seoul the World's Plastic-Surgery Capital?" *New Yorker*, March 23, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/23/about-face.

4. Marx, "About Face."

5. http://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/1d0784/koreas_plastic_surgery_mayhem_is_finally/ (accessed January 8, 2014).

6. Dodai Stewart, "Plastic Surgery Means Many Beauty Queens but Only One Kind of Face," *Jezebel*, April 25, 2013, http://jezebel.com/plastic-surgery-means-many-beauty-queens-but-only-one-480929886 (accessed April 25, 2013).

7. David Ashcroft, "Blame Photoshop for Korea's Beauty Queen Clones," *Kotaku*, April 26, 2013, http://kotaku.com/blame-photoshop-for-koreas-beauty-queen-clones-482285894 (accessed January 8, 2014). It was also later found that the women in the gif were not Miss Korea contestants but contestants for Miss Daegu, a province of Korea.

8. While the official McCune-Reischauer transliteration should be "Kangnam," I utilize "Gangnam" throughout to provide consistency with PSY's spelling in the title of his song "Gangnam Style," to make clear that the same district is being referred to in various instances throughout the article.

9. "Opening Remarks," in Korean Womenlink, "*Apkujeong* Station Exit #4, Let's Talk About It: A Forum Seeking Alternatives to the State of Korean Plastic Surgery," Seoul, Korea, July 11, 2013 (hereafter cited as Womenlink, "*Apkujeong* Exit #4").

10. Congresswoman Nam Yoon In Soon, in Korean Womenlink, "*Apkujeong* Exit #4." The panelists included Kim Hee Young, Womenlink's Women's Health Division chair; Yoon Jung Joo, Womenlink's Media Division chair; Kim Jong Mi, professor of Media and Culture at Coventry University; Lee Sang Yoon, researcher for Health and Alternatives; Park Sang Wook, SBS director; and Lee Han Bon, lawyer from Lawyers for a Democratic Society.

11. Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal, "Transnational Feminist Cultural Studies: Beyond the Marxism/Poststructuralism/Feminism Divide," in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalism, Transnational Feminisms, and the State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 357.

12. Steve Glain, "Cosmetic Surgery Goes Hand in Glove with the New Korea," *Wall Street Journal*, November 23, 1993.

13. Glain, "Cosmetic Surgery."

14. "The Oprah Winfrey Show," *Around the World with Oprah* (syndicated, October 6, 2004). For my article on this episode of "The Oprah Winfrey Show," see Sharon Heijin Lee. "Lessons from Around the World with Oprah: Race, Neoliberalism and the (Geo)Politics of Beauty," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 18 (2008): 25–41.

15. Jin-Kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in Korea* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

16. For more in-depth analysis on K-pop's diversity of fans, see Crystal Anderson's blog *High Yellow:* "Of Misconceptions about Cultural Appropriation in K-pop," January 12, 2013; "How Does It Feel to Be a Question? That (Black) Girl and K-Pop," September 22, 2013; "Who Can Speak for K-Pop?" October 23, 2013; all at http://highyellow.me/2013.

17. Stephen Epstein with James Turnbull, *Girls' Generation? Gender (Dis)Empowerment, and K-Pop*, ed. Kyung Hyun Kim, 316–17 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

18. Such micro-managing of looks is exemplified in the documentary, *9 Muses of Star Empire*, directed by Hark Joon Lee (Seoul, Korea, 2012), a year-long chronicle of an all-girl K-pop group training before their debut. Several scenes instantiate the way in which body management and looks are just as important as talent, as several scenes show the stars and their management team dissecting their physical flaws and discussing ways to improve them.

19. In "The Popular Economy," John Fiske, writing against the idea that people are merely passive recipients of popular culture, argues that consumers of old media (he is mainly theorizing about television) are also producers in that they make meanings that cannot be controlled by the producers of pop culture: "The power of audiences-as-producers in the cultural economy is considerable. . . . This power derives from the fact that meanings do not circulate in the cultural economy in the same way that wealth does in the financial"; John Fiske, "The Popular Economy," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009), 540, 564–80. Since Fiske was writing in the 1980s before the development of the Internet, I see Nakamura and other digital humanities scholars as building upon his theorizations about how consumers interact with popular culture products in unexpected ways. As Nakamura points out, although early predictions of such lines blurring to the extent that everyone has a homepage have not proven true, platforms such as blogs and vlogs and social networks such as Facebook have manifested this somewhat; Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 18.

20. Jill Fillipovic, "Jezebel: From Blog to Book," *Guardian*, October 28, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/oct/28/jezebel-blog-book-anna-holmes-feminist-sites (accessed August 5, 2014).

21. "*Jezebel* Manifesto: The Five Great Lies of Women's Magazines," http://jezebel.com/262130/the-five-great-lies-of-womens-magazines (accessed August 5, 2014).

22. Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with Mass Media* (New York: Crown Publishing) 270.

23. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are.*

24. Fillipovic, "Jezebel: From Blog to Book."

25. Maureen Corrigan, "If You're Looking to Read Lady Things Choose Jezebel over Jones," *NPR Book Reviews*, October 21, 2013, http://www.npr.org/2013/10/21/235414762/if-youre-looking-to-read-lady-things-choose-jezebel-over-jones (accessed August 5, 2014).

26. https://www.quantcast.com/jezebel.com (accessed August 5, 2014).

27. *Jezebel* is also reaching readership in book form. In 2013 Anna Holmes published *The Book of Jezebel*, an anthology of the most popular articles on the site during her tenure there.

28. "The Rebirth of the Feminist Manifesto," *New York Magazine*, http://nymag.com/news/features/feminist-blogs-2011–11/index1.html (accessed August 5, 2014).

29. Mimi Thi Nguyen, "The Biopower of Beauty: Humanitarianism, Imperialism and Global Feminisms in an Age of Terror," *Signs* 36 (Winter 2011): 370.

30. Nguyen, "The Biopower of Beauty."

31. Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 17.

32. Stewart, "Plastic Surgery."

33. Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes Revisited," in *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 227.

34. Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 20.

35. Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 20.

36. David Palumbo-Liu, "Written on the Face: Race, Nation, Migrancy, and Sex," in *Asian/America: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 81–115; Eugenia Kaw, "Medicalization of Racial Features: Asian American Women and Cosmetic Surgery," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 7, no. 1 (1993): 82; Nadia Kim, *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to LA* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 53.

37. In my larger work I argue that the plastic surgery consumer and the *yanggongju* (military sex worker) emerge out of the Korean War and are distinct instantiations of the ways that capitalism has mobilized gendered bodies; Sharon Heijin Lee, "The (Geo)Politics of Beauty: Race, Transnationalism and Neoliberalism in Korean Beauty Culture," PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2012.

38. Nguyen, "The Biopower of Beauty," 364. As Nguyen outlines, beauty's involvement with war is not merely discursive but intimately tied to humanitarian imperialisms and global feminisms. For example, the nongovernmental organization (NGO)

Beauty without Borders, consisting of North American and European fashion industry and nonprofit professionals, opened the Kabul Beauty School in Afghanistan in 2003 to teach Afghan women, as their website describes it, "to do hair." As Nguyen explains, the women who started the NGO acted "on the hope that beauty can engender a new world order" (360). That is to say, these women—*Vogue*'s Anna Wintour among them—imagined not only that an education in hair and cosmetics would bring Afghan women into modernity by giving them new skills but also that these skills and the Western (read: modern) styles they engendered would bring Afghan women a new sense of self and self-esteem and bring them closer to the promises of liberal democracy that are signified by the promises of beauty.

39. According to sociologist Debra Gimlin, "body work" is "work on the self. By engaging in body work, women are able to negotiate normative identities by diminishing their personal responsibility for a body that fails to meet cultural mandates"; Debra Gimlin, *Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 6. Gimlin's "body work" is a method for reconciling the separation between "the body" and "the self" and takes place in aerobics classes, weight control organizations, and beauty salons in addition to plastic surgery clinics. While my use of the term *body work* builds on Gimlin's, I depart significantly from her definition because I use the term to suggest both the work that women do *to* their bodies and the labor performed *by* their bodies.

40. Jane Chi-Hyun Park, *Yellow Future: Oriental Style in Hollywood Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 8.

41. Dodai Stewart, "I Can't Stop Looking at These Korean Women Who've Had Plastic Surgery," *Jezebel*, January 16, 2013, http://jezebel.com/5976202/i-cant-stop-looking-at-these-south-korean-women-whove-had-plastic-surgery (accessed January 8, 2014).

42. Stewart, "Plastic Surgery."

43. Korean Womenlink, "단체소개서-한국여성민우회," 2003, Korean Womenlink, Seoul, South Korea; quote at Korean Womenlink, "*Apkujeong* Exit #4."

44. Korean Womenlink, "*Apkujeong* Exit #4."

45. Victoria Pitts-Taylor, *Surgery Junkies: Wellness and Pathology in Cosmetic Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 184.

46. For a fuller accounting and analysis of Womenlink's 2003 programs, events, and actions see Lee, "The (Geo)Politics of Beauty."

47. Stewart, "I Can't Stop Looking at These Korean Women."

48. Korean Womenlink, "여성건강[여성의 몸, 그대로가 아름답다(가칭)회의," March 11, 2003; William Safire, "The Way We Live Now, On Language: Lookism," *New York Times,* August 27, 2000. That William Safire coined *lookism* seems to be a widely held belief in Korea, appearing on multiple blogs and Internet videos on the topic. Whether this can be attributed to Womenlink's educational campaigns cannot be as-

certained, although they alone seem to have raised awareness around the idea. Safire's weekly column "On Language," where "On Language: Lookism" appeared, focused on linguistics and grammar in playful and insightful ways. Thus his column on lookism actually traces the origins of the word and its usage while satirizing the concept by likening it to other "politically correct" terminology. Womenlink's citation of Safire's article may well point to the politics of (mis)translation and their need to ground their concept in a Western "-ism" akin to racism and sexism. Another possibility, however, is that Womenlink aligns with Safire precisely because of his satiric use of the term. As briefly mentioned, Womenlink produced a mockumentary called *Knifestyle*, satirically critiquing the cosmetic surgery industry.

49. Nancy Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000).

50. While lookism in and of itself is not a major concern for feminists in the United States, it was a topic of concern within the mainstream media around the time that Etcoff published her book and Safire published his column. *ABC News,* for example, conducted experiments for which they hired actors, "some great looking, some not," and compared them in various situations such as applying for jobs, soliciting for charitable donations, and asking for help alongside the road. In all these situations, the better looking actors were treated more favorably compared to their average looking counterparts—they got the job, made more in donations, and got more help. The report ends with the suggestion: "We should add the bias of 'lookism' to sexism and racism. It's just as bad but we don't need a federal program." John Stossel, "The Ugly Truth about Beauty—ABC News," *ABC News*, http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=123853&page=1#.T17lhsxitVc; Karen Lehrman, "The Beautiful People," *New York Times*, March 21, 1999, sec. Books, http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/03/21/reviews/990321.21lehrmat.html?_r=2; Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (London: Vintage Press, 1991).

51. Korean Womenlink, "여성건강[여성의 몸, 그대로가 아름답다(가칭)회의," March 11, 2003. Although Womenlink uses the Korean term for lookism, *oemochisangjuŭi* (외모지상주의), interchangeably with the English word, in most of their campaign materials, they use the term *lookism*.

52. Jesook Song, "Family Breakdown and Invisible Homeless Women: Neoliberal Governance during the Asian Debt Crisis in South Korea, 1997–2001," *Positions* 14, no. 1 (2006): 40–42.

53. Cho Joo-Hyun, "Neoliberal Governmentality at Work: Post-IMF Korean Society and the Construction of Neoliberal Women," *Korea Journal* 49, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 37.

54. Korean Womenlink, "여성건강[여성의 몸, 그대로가 아름답다(가칭)회의," March 4, 2003. In writing about the increase in breast augmentation surgeries and consumption of enhancement products and treatments, Laura Miller has noted this same shift in Japan: "the body has become central to capitalist expansion, and women are

urged to seek surfaces through which to frame their now more assertive personalities. In earlier decades, clothes and hairstyles were sufficient to announce one's modernity, but today it is breasts and other parts of the body around which calculations about gender and identity are fashioned." Laura Miller, *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 295.

55. Korean Womenlink. "*Apkujeong* Exit #4."

56. Korean Womenlink. "*Apkujeong* Exit #4."

57. Not only are Korean men increasingly seeking plastic surgery, also citing employment as a major motivator, but Korea is now the largest market for men's skincare in the world. Korean men's cosmetics consumption illustrates how neoliberal mandates for self-management are not limited to women but interpellate men as well, albeit in a distinct way that deserves its own attention. Nadine DeNinno, "The Korean Men Makeup Fad: South Korea Is Largest Market for Men's Skincare In the World," *International Business Times*, September 18, 2012, http://www.ibtimes.com/korean-men-makeup-fad-south-korea-largest-market-mens-skincare-world-790100 (accessed July 18, 2015).

58. Kim Sang-hŭi, "Society Incites Cosmetic Surgery," *JoongAng Ilbo* (Seoul, Korea, n.d.), sec. Minority Voices.

59. Sang-hŭi, "Society Incites Cosmetic Surgery."

60. Johee Cho, "English Is the Golden Tongue for S. Koreans," July 2, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/01/AR2007070101259.html.

61. As cited in Swee-Lin Ho, "Fuel for Korea's Global Dreams Factory: The Desires of Parents Whose Children Dream of Becoming K-Pop Stars," *Korea Observer* 43 (Autumn 2012): 486.

62. Ho, "Fuel for Korea's Global Dreams Factory."

63. Ho, "Fuel for Korea's Global Dreams Factory."

64. Kimberly Hoang, *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendency, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 130–31.

65. Hoang, *Dealing in Desire*, 135.

66. Dredge Kang, "Idols of Development: Transnational Transgender Performance in Thai K-Pop Cover Dance," Theme issue: "Trans* Cultural Production," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 559–71.

67. Eun Mi Kim, personal interview, March 10, 2010.

68. Bae Ji-sook, "Cosmetic Surgery Emerges as Export Product," *KoreaToday*, January 27, 2010.

69. Opening Remarks, Korean Womenlink, "*Apkujeong* Exit #4."

70. Korean Womenlink, "*Apkujeong* Exit #4."

71. Korean Womenlink, "*Apkujeong* Exit #4." Womenlink has successfully orga-

nized around media in the past. In 2009 Womenlink's Media Division requested that telecom corporation KT pull its "*Olleh!*" campaign because it featured women in supporting roles only that reproduced gendered stereotypes. When KT refused, Womenlink went on national television to announce a boycott of KT until the campaign was stopped. Not only were the ads withdrawn but in its next campaign series, KT featured an ad that promoted women's equality by ridiculing patriarchal norms. Olga Federenko, "South Korean Advertising as Popular Culture," in *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, ed. Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 347–48.

72. Korean Womenlink, "국비보조금 교부신청서," February 11, 2003.

73. Euny Hong, *The Birth of Korean Cool: How One Nation Is Conquering the World through Pop Culture* (New York: Picador, 2014), 101.

74. Hong, *Birth of Korean Cool,* 101–A102.

75. Yoon Hyung Ho, (윤형호), 서울시 의료관광 현황과 방, 서울시정개발연구원 (Seoul, Korea: Seoul Development Research Institute, 2010), 25.

76. Martin Fackler, "Economy Blunts South Korea's Appetite for Plastic Surgery," *New York Times*, January1, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/02/business/worldbusiness/02plastic.html?_r=1&pagewanted= all (accessed October 1, 2010).

77. Samuel Koo, "Korea in the Global Village and the Effort to Strengthen Its Brand Power," lecture presented at Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea, May 20, 2010.

78. Peng Qian, "Feature: South Korea's Medical Tourism Revenue Slips Amid Growing Malpractice," www.xinhuanet.com Asia&Pacific Edition, February 10, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015–02/10/c_133984026.htm (accessed April 29, 2015); "South Korea: Korea Increases Number of International Patients," *International Medical Travel Journal: News*, June 4, 2014, http://www.imtj.com/news/?entryid82=442510 (accessed April 29, 2015).

79. Nguyen, "The Biopower of Beauty," 373.

80. Nam Yoon's comments also mention her previous collaboration with Womenlink in October 2012 co-hosting a debate titled "Planning the Future of Korean Society through Gender Equality and Welfare," which included a discussion on a "Society That Allows Various Bodies and Considers Lifelong Health." Korean Womenlink, "*Apkujeong* Exit #4."

81. Korean Womenlink, "*Apkujeong* Exit #4."

82. Korean Womenlink, "*Apkujeong* Exit #4."

83. Korean Womenlink, "*Apkujeong* Exit #4."

84. Stewart, "Plastic Surgery."

85. As Cruikshank notes, the self-esteem movement began in 1983 with the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, who promised to deliver programs that would solve social problems such as crime, poverty,

and gender inequality. Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 88.

86. Cruikshank, *Will to Empower*, 88.

87. Cruikshank, *Will to Empower*, 88.

88. Alexander Edmonds, *Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex and Plastic Surgery in Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 78. The "Love Your Body" campaign did not end in 2003 but was relaunched in 2006. The project, officially called "Seeing Lookism through the Eyes of Teens," sought to empower teenage girls by giving them the opportunity to use media on their own terms. The result was a DVD featuring four short films that interrogate the issue of lookism from the girls' perspectives. Having already produced *Knifestyle*, their educational satire, and screened it in women's education health classes throughout South Korea as well as on the national television network KBS, Womenlink took a different approach to media organizing that continued to prioritize women's everyday lives but this time from the perspective of the consumers most targeted for self-management through the economic necessity of plastic surgery as well as those most targeted by the effect of pop culture generally and pop music in particular. Korean Womenlink, "10 대들의 눈으로 보는 외모지상주의 영상제작" (Seoul, Korea: Korean Womenlink, 2006).

89. The campaign also had a third slogan, "No Diet, No Plastic Surgery." The campaign was called either of these slogans for short, depending on the event and the emphasis of the message, but "Love Your Body" was the most popular and seems to be the most remembered of the slogans.