At the end of March, when I should have been on my last legs writing this essay, tweets went viral in which a young woman—let's call her Pamela—shared the vulva plaster casts of artist Lydia Reeves,¹ and circled in red all those vulvas that, in her opinion, did not depict *normal*, i.e. cis female, vulvas.² When people expressed their concerns about her endeavor, she doubled down and circled the ones she, a self-proclaimed expert, identified as "OBVIOUSLY FEMALE."

Pamela wrote that she had asked the artist if all the vulvas were "intact" because some "looked mutilated," to which the artist replied that some vulvas were "post trans op surgery," i.e. neo-vulvae that are the result of gender affirming surgery. Pamela then got into a terfy rant about how vulvas created by surgery had no business being in a "vulva diversity video" because that was not "normal."

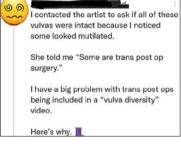
When she was called out online and people with vulvas drew her attention to the fact that vulvas "occur in nature" in all shapes, sizes, and configurations, Pamela went so far as to demand photographic evidence. That's right: she wanted clit-pics. Out of her original efforts to educate others about the fact that there is indeed a huge gap in terms of medical knowledge about vulvas, she has become a woman who claims to be able to decide what is normal and what is not. Or rather, who is normal and who is not. After all, in this case, is it not about the vulva, but about the person who is attached to it? Who owns it? The person who has the vulva between their legs? Pamela may have her own trauma-related reasons for this, which I can neither judge nor do I want to, but more than anything this example shows: Normal does not exist.³ Normal is always a social construct, a combat zone, and an instrument of power to divide people into camps. But where does it actually come from? This powerful sense of supposed normality that follows us around, plagues us, and makes us despairing either of ourselves or of the rest of humanity?

Normal is a social power: if we have the privilege to be considered *normal*, we hardly ever have to think about it. Therein lies the never-questioned secret of its magic. I am normal = I am not wrong = I am right. I have the right body, the right mind, the right skin colour, the right gender, the right sexuality, the right religion, the right education, the right money. The list goes on. But behind these framings, there is a whole series of measurements that got us into this predicament.

For the longest time, normality was neither a term nor a concept for people in Europe. Religion, class, and money regulated affiliations. When someone stood out too much and was out of line, they were simply declared insane and cast out. *Normal* was thus, if anything, more a feeling than a science. This changed in the mid-19th century when a young Belgian astronomer named Adolphe Quetelet became the first person to apply the skills he had learned in celestial body analysis to human body analysis and society.⁴ The first recorded human average was the chest circumference of 5,738 Scottish soldiers in 1846. The median result: 100,97 cm. Fascinating, isn't it?

At least that's what Quetelet thought. And because Belgium felt it had been left behind by neighbouring countries in terms of enlightenment, there was a national interest in contributing scientific findings Fabriqué en Belgique (Made in Belgium). Quetelet changed course from stars to people and looked for more data sets to average society. He had big plans, wanting to average things such as courage and cowardice. Unfortunately for him, at the time, there were no data sets available for this. What he was able to put his hands on were government demographic statistics. In a sense, this was the beginning of quantitative sociology, or de la Sociophysique (of the sociophysics).





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30	1075	1867	0,9164	10,5	10,5	0,5466	1858
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45	370	645	0,4706	50	29,5	0,4690	500
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2) Her name is not Pamela, and although I normally have no problem calling bigots and terfs by their names, in this case, I am unsure as

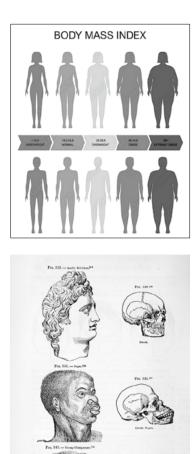
far as mental health is concerned. I had already come across Pamela while researching my first book in 2019. I had briefly considered interviewing her based on her personal experiences and activism; after all, she had also been featured in the New York Times. But back then I

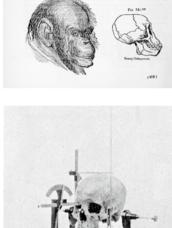
had noticed some statements that seemed so problematic and aberrant that I decided I didn't want to open this can of worms.

3) Pamela underwent a cosmetic surgery of her labia as an 18-year-old because she, according to her own statement, was persuaded that her labia were too big. The surgery was a disaster; the doctor made serious mistakes and removed nerves to and on her clitoris. This has led to her having little to no sensation in this area. This experience has made her an activist against cosmetic surgery on labias and for education about *anatomically correct* vulvas.
4) Astronomical observations were more meaningful the more measurements were made, because one could then average the measurements.

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¹⁾ Lydia Reeves, Vulva Casting, https://www.lydiareeves.com/vulva-casting, last accessed May 17, 2024.





Quetelet was the first to calculate average birth, death, and divorce rates, as well as suicide rates. The latter was especially scandalous; whereas before, individual will power was the sole explanation for suicide, behavioural patterns in societies could now be ascertained by miraculous averaging. Is free will only a figment of society's imagination? And does society function according to similar scientific rules as nature?

At the time, the so-called Quetelet Index, an average of height and weight that still haunts and often violates us today in the form of the Body Mass Index (BMI), was nothing more than a footnote in history, and by no means something to which Ouetelet himself attached great value:⁵ Against Ouetelet's intentions, the index turned from a purely descriptive unit of measurement into an instrument from which individuals began to deduce inner truths about what is normal.⁶ A number, an average of many individual data calculated on the basis of European soldiers, i.e. white males legally labelled as cis-gendered, became an ideal. Suddenly, there was a value attached to BMI, and striving for the average was considered virtuous. To this day, however, the BMI is still used as a tool to discriminate against people for no rhyme or reason at all.

Suddenly there seemed to be a greater truth in the average than in the individual data points, which for Quetelet were all deviations, or small errors of nature. Nevertheless, it was not Quetelet himself, but the next generation of scientists, namely Sir Francis Galton and his cronies, who spread theories of the alleged superiority of the white race and who through the measurement of man and the calculation of the average and the new normal, discovered a powerful tool to assert white supremacy. While Quetelet understood the normal as healthy and desirable, Galton and company equated normalcy with the mediocre. The average was seen as something to be overcome on the way to perfection, to the *Übermensch* (superhuman).

Eugenics and dysgenics were the pseudoscience du jour and provided fascism, which was on the rise around the turn of the century in Europe and the USA, with bullshit arguments for their hierarchies of human existences, spearheaded by the idea of the *Herrenmensch* (member of the master race).⁷ Justifications for genocides of all people who did not correspond with fascist ideas because of faith, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, physical or mental disability, as well as political convictions, were derived from these ideologies. In Nazi Germany and its annexed neighbouring countries, this new *normal* was to be achieved through the brutal murder of 17 million people. But in other places, as well, the idea of a human-directed selec*tion*, as it could be achieved through forced sterilization, spread. For example, in the United States between the 1920s and the mid-1970s, state institutions operated on Black people, autistic people, people with mental disabilities, and sex workers to prevent them from having children. And even in post-war Germany, until 2011, transgender people who opted for gender affirming surgery were forcibly sterilized in the process; about 10,000 people.

Other utensils in this new normal toolbox of the 19th century: Craniology, the measurement of skulls, as well as phrenology, the measurement of the soul. Both

were born out of this zeal to measure everything and calculate averages, and both were quite popular among elites. After all, white men were in desperate need of arguments to assure themselves of their own superiority over Black people and over women. Both groups began to rebel separately in the mid-19th century and were seen as potentially dangerous to the *natural order*. Therefore, often under dubious circumstances, preserved heads were measured and categorized, brains were weighed and mapped out. But much data was falsified, because obviously the basic assumption that white men's brains were more potent, and housed in bigger skulls, was completely bogus from beginning to end.

And because the *white* men's brains were not heavier due to their supposed all-knowing capacities, again a new pseudoscience was needed to maintain the existing social hierarchy. Enter the so-called intelligence quotient (IQ).

IQ is a simple number that seeks to quantify potential by determining who is above or below or right on average brain capacity. After the eugenicist Francis Galton failed in his own efforts to bring human potential into a handy formula, it was twenty years later, in 1905, that a team of three psychologists developed a standardized test that would become the IQ-test that we are familiar with today.

10

5) The BMI is used up to this day as unit of measurement to indicate at which weight a person is normal. It ranges from categories like underweight, and/ or overweight, Adipositas 1 and Adipositas 2. The fact that the data sets used to determine BMI are biased in favor of white, cis males, and even though there is no scientific reasoning behind the use of these values, does not prevent health insurance companies, medical doctors, dieticians, fitness consultants, and so on from using the BMI as a measuring tool, 6) Quetelet himself is reported to have said, "This is a tool for the population level. Do not try to use it on individuals. It's not going to work. It doesn't make sense." 7) In this fascist pseudoscience, humans are basically seen as livestock. Some people are seen as superior to others, and if you want to breed the master race to make the human population better over time, you have to encourage procreation among the good ones and prevent procreation among the bad ones.

What was originally intended as an index to determine special needs in young students' education became a means for discrimination to seem scientifically evidence-based.⁸ These tests, depending on the ideology of the test creators, have only ever ensured the superiority of their own group. In short, the history of IQ tests has always been biased against Black and Indigenous people, migrants, and for a long time women, too. And even if these tests were suitable to determine differences according to neutral criteria (which they are not), justifying hierarchies amongst those differences would still be an over-interpretation of the results. Today, as far as I know, no one in the Western world is forcibly sterilized based on IQ, yet the results of such tests still influence many educational and professional careers or medical diagnoses.

The BMI and IQ are mere examples, but everywhere the average rules, every instance in which a value is attached to a number that allows people to be divided into categories and which are used to justify exclusions, in all of these places the ghosts of Norma and Normman haunt us. Norma and Normman are naked, their skin is alabaster, their bodies are sculpted based on a mathematical average that only a cross-section of the American white population between the ages of 21 and 25, in the 1930s, could produce.

Norma and Normman, statues in the Cleveland Health Museum, are the work of artist Abram Belskie and gynaecologist Robert Latou Dickinson, who modelled them in the 1940s based precisely on the above stated statistical data set. BIPOC people were deliberately eliminated from the data sets because the two men were eugenicists and they wanted to show with their sculptures the *well-bred status quo* of the average white American woman and man. The models were borne out of a deeply ideological endeavour, but one detail about these sculptures is particularly odd: Norma's vulva. It is more to be guessed than to be seen; a perfectly symmetrical, smooth peach. Her outer labia are closed, nothing hangs over, or out, and nothing of the clitoris is visible either. Hard to believe that this should correspond to the average vulva, especially since Normman not only has a more detailed penis, but hair on his balls.

The vulva obscura runs through the history of art, culture, and medicine and because this is so, it is also not surprising that there are entire industries that want to offer us solutions for allegedly abnormal vulvas. From harmless depilatories to labia reconstruction via cosmetic surgery-everything can be found and bought, because if we are not lesbian, or bi, if we're not regularly going for a swim in a public pool or into the sauna (where everyone avoids staring), or if we don't happen to have a profession that has us seeing naked bodies, the number of vulvas that we get to witness as women is not particularly high. The level of insecurity, on the other hand, is potentially very high.⁹ Medically, vulva diversity was first examined in 2018 in the Lucerne Vulva Study. The study involved 657 Swiss, white, cis women and girls between 15 and 84 years. The inner and outer labia were measured, and it was determined that there issurprise—a huge range of vulvas, variable in shape and size. Nobody tried to calculate an average value out of it, because it was absolutely clear that it would have had no significance at all. Liberation and true normality lie not in statistically normalising but in diversifying. The liberation of the vulva from its obscure corner where all patriarchal power is hidden is also the concern of the artist Lydia Reeves, which is why it is important to her to show a variety of ALL vulvas.

archalization of our norms.

11

8) And as such was said to have worked quite well. 9) Sure, there is porn, but even here the comparison with one's own vulva is usually unfavorable, because in order to meet beauty conventions, the actors often have surgically altered genitalia. 10) Kady Ruth Ashcraft, Why Is a Racist Corpse-Fingering TERF Soliciting a Porn Star's Nudes Online? Well..., Jezebel, March 29, 2023, https://www.jezebel.com/jessica-pin-vulva-anti-trans-1850279424, last accessed May 17, 2024.

Haunted by Norma & Normman is part of "Mit den Gespenstern Leben (haunting|heritage)," published by Burg Hülshoff-Center for Literature, www.burg-huelshoff.de, www.digitale-Burg.de, Havixbeck (Germany)

Which brings me back to Pamela and her disdain for vulvas that do not conform to her own conception of what they must look like. Because, as journalist Kady Ruth Ashcraft correctly described in an article in Jezebel, Pamela's claimed interpretive authority over what is and what is not a vulva is nothing more than "pussy phrenol-

