The Bittersweet Successes of ‘Cutting Culture,’ Las Vegas

After several weeks of preparation, and following my work in the United Kingdom, I am pleased to report the successes and misfortunes of Cutting Culture: A Closer Look at Male Circumcision. This event fulfilled the final requirement for my internship program as well as concluded the national Cut Tour, with film producer and director Eliyahu Ungar-Sargon.

The five days leading up to the event were intense. We attempted to secure the logistical requirements for the conference in a timely manner, and succeeded with various mishaps. After spending a grueling seven hours editing, finalizing, and printing of the “Program and Syllabus of Abstracts” at the Jean Nidetch Women’s Center (JNWC), I expedited their final printing and binding for the following day. Upon collecting the programs, I was devastated to find various typos, grammatical errors, and a duplication of a sub-title on two pages. Mais, c’est la vie!

We are pleased to have had seventeen event co-sponsors – a notable success, especially for a largely student-run event. In terms of a breakdown, only five were intactivist organizations, including the UK-based charity Genital Autonomy. The Australian feminist publication, The Whole Woman also co-sponsored, leaving eleven others, the vast majority of which were feminist, reproductive rights advocacies, and anti-rape and sexual violence organizations.

Aya Louisa McDonald, Ph.D., Department Chair of Art and Art History, invited me to speak at the department meeting to discuss this event and how to offer it to their students. While Danielle Roth-Johnson, Ph.D., Professor of Women’s Studies, could not attend the event, she invited me to speak to each of her classes about the conference. Dr. Roth-Johnson had this to say about circumcision: “Throughout history, feminist thinkers and activists have been vitally concerned with ensuring inalienable and fundamental rights, not simply for women alone, but for all sentient beings. In this light, a man’s right to bodily integrity and freedom from physical harm should also be a major concern for all feminists and activists concerned with social justice.”
We were also pleased and grateful for the amount of donated items we received to help compile the attendee information packets. NOCIRC provided three pamphlets and an instructional DVD for each packet and the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) Women’s Center offered complimentary printing, nametags, folders, and other office supplies. Amy Callan of Intact America expedited writing pens, Lauren Jenks of The Whole Network donated informational postcards, and The Whole Woman offered a discount for subscriptions to the magazine for those who attended. Kathya Delaguila of Kathya’s Midwifery extended additional support of this event by printing a variety of information for each attendee packet.

Cutting Culture was held at the Marjorie Barrick Museum, UNLV on Saturday, November 12. On the morning of the event, the organizing team, friends, and family arrived between 7:45-8:00 AM to begin the preparation of the conference, which was to commence three-quarters past the hour. Unfortunately, we were unable to enter the museum until fifty minutes past the hour. This caused a great delay in our program and the duration of the events planned. However, all who arrived helped empathetically to prepare the lecture hall and auditorium as quickly as possible – remarkably, in less than fifteen minutes. After a variety of additional technical problems, the conference finally began by 10:00 AM. Of the 50 people who had confirmed their attendance (excluding the party faithful and family members), and after three weeks of diligent advertising within the Las Vegas communities, hospitals, and academies, less than eight people attended. There were various unexpected arrivals, softening the disheartenment of such low attendance.

I provided the opening statement and later, Karoline Khamis welcomed the attendees. Khamis is the Program Coordinator of the UNLV Campus Advocacy and Resource Empowerment (CARE) Line, a twenty-four hour hotline for “information and resources around the crimes of sexual assault, domestic or dating violence, and stalking.” Khamis and Christina Hernandez chaired the morning sessions. Hernandez is the Outreach and Awareness Coordinator of the JNWC at UNLV who also established a peer advocacy and education program regarding sexual and domestic violence prevention.

The program was broken into six sessions. The first three were “Basic Issues:” Marilyn Fayre Milos, RN of NOCIRC, John V. Geisheker, JD, LLM of DOC, and Gillian E. Longley, RN, BSN, MSS of Colorado NOCIRC all provided insightful and compelling presentations about the history and medicalization of circumcision, the
functions of the foreskin, the effects of circumcision on the body, the AIDS crisis of Africa, medical ethics, and informed consent. While surveying the audience during these presentations, I noticed unanimous attention to each speaker. Following each presentation was compelling dialogue that offered deeper analyses of circumcision and the ways in which this practice affects everyone, transcending social locations (e.g. race, class, gender, etc.).

Geisheker and Dolores Sangiuliano, RN, BSN of Colorado NOCIRC chaired the afternoon panel. Unfortunately, one of the panelists was unable to attend, offering a discussion of two women and only one male. However, the discussion was well received. Many of the attendees enjoyed listening to “The Impacts of Circumcision” because it offered a powerful analysis of the complexities of circumcision.

The session on “Genital Autonomy, Human Rights, and Empowerment” allowed for a discussion of social justice and activism. After a mishap of losing a speaker, Dr. Anita Tijerina Revilla, Director of the UNLV Women’s Studies program, gave a short, unexpected discussion of Women’s Studies and its role in the conference. Dr. Revilla was complimentary and supportive, and helped attendees draw parallels between social justice and the Cutting Culture event. Jorina Hortizuela, an undergraduate student of Women’s Studies, presented on “Intactivism 101.” She discussed activism and what constitutes social justice activism, and provided examples for audience members.

Justin Ponkow, a UNLV alumna of the department of Political Science, welcomed and introduced Eliyahu Ungar-Sargon for the film screening of “Cut: Slicing through the Myths of Circumcision.” Sargon has traveled to thirty US cities for a viewing of his documentary that examines medical, cultural, and religious inquiries about circumcision. Las Vegas was the final screening in the tour, sponsored by The Whole Network. Sargon offered commentary and dialogue with attendees after the film.

While few in numbers, the value of the discussion and dialogue, as well as the complete filming of the event alleviated any sentiments of discouragement. Dennis Morgan of Morgan Photography also donated his time and skills to photograph the event and speakers.

I could not have successfully executed this conference without my team of organizers: Karoline Khamis, Dolores Sangiuliano, and Marilyn Fayre Milos all tirelessly helped in the planning and finalizing
of this event and made it possible. It was also equally pleasing to have such a large support system among my family and friends. My aunt and uncle made a special long-distance trip for the event and promise to have an in-person discussion with their adult male children, one of whom was recently married.

My father, mother, and sister all have expressed gratitude for attending. Prior to this event, I had received support for my work and academic successes – however, after family members attended the conference and viewed the film screening, their support evolved from familial admiration to a complete and sound understanding of the ramifications of male circumcision, medical ethics, and human rights.

It was my pleasure to offer the Las Vegas communities Cutting Culture. I look forward to helping with the organizing and execution of the 12th Symposium on Circumcision, Genital Integrity, and Human Rights, which will be held at Keele University, UK.

The complete audio recordings of Cutting Culture can be retrieved by visiting the Cut Tour podcast website at: http://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/the-cut-podcast/id452165277

Travis Wisdom
Conference Chair
Department of Women’s Studies
NOCIRC of Las Vegas