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# The Color(s) of Perfection: The Feminine Body, Beauty Ideals, and Identity in Postwar America, 1945-1970

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE COLOR(S) OF PERFECTION:  
THE FEMININE BODY, BEAUTY IDEALS, AND IDENTITY  
IN POSTWAR AMERICA, 1945-1970

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HISTORY

BY

ELIZABETH M. MATELSKI

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2011

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To my grandmother,  
Rosemary

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## INTRODUCTION

In the film *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* (1957), Rock Hunter's fiancé, Jenny Wells (Betsy Drake), realizes that attending college to just develop her mind was a serious mistake. Fearing that Rock will leave her for the buxom and vapid Hollywood star, Rita Marlowe (Jayne Mansfield), Jenny initiates an exercise regime designed to develop her modest bust line. Upon visiting her apartment after work, Rock discovers his fiancé comatose on the ground and frozen in a perpetual push-up. When Rock informs her doctor that the malady was caused by too much exercise – specifically push-ups – the doctor nods knowingly. “Push-ups are a waste of time,” the physician tells the advertising executive. “It's really better for women to just go to a store, if you know what I mean.” When Rock Hunter returns to his own apartment that night and checks in on his teenage daughter, he finds her sleeping in bed, her arms above the covers in a frozen push-up.

Prescriptive literature, Hollywood films, and popular culture in general created and perpetuated the postwar feminine ideal of the “Sweater Girl” – a busty, curvaceous figure more sexual than maternal. Yet, this ideal gave way in little more than a decade. One of my earliest childhood and most lasting memories of my mother is watching her inspect herself in the full-length mirror of our family bathroom. She would stand, twisting and turning, her eyes intensely scrutinizing the curves of her body. Then she would turn to me and simply sigh, “We were born in the wrong decade.” Those same

eyes that had just previously scrutinized her own shape would gaze on me as if to say that I was destined (doomed?) to follow in her footsteps. I would file away her beauty tips and hints and embarrassingly chant, “I must, I must, I must increase my bust” with my middle-school friends, thanks to the influence of young-adult author, Judy Blume, a woman who experienced her own teen years in the 1950s.

My mother, neither unattractive nor “overweight” was born in 1960. Like many women of her generation, she clung to the urban legend that the Hollywood sex symbol of the 1950s, Marilyn Monroe, wore a size 12 dress. She came of age during an era where youth culture placed a cult-like status on Twiggy, a model with a 31-inch bust and 32-inch hips. How had the ideal female body type changed so quickly and so drastically? How did we go from a society that worshiped full, buxom blondes to child-like waifs in just over a decade? Previous scholars have not recognized how malleable these ideals were and how susceptible the female figure is when seemingly disparate factors like consumerism, fashion trends, foreign policy, medical opinion, and mortality collide.

While many women conformed to the Hollywood “sweater” model and then later looked to Twiggy as the fashionable ideal, most did not exhaust themselves in efforts to remold their bodies to replicate these unique body types. This dissertation explores and analyzed how women of different ages, races, and sexual orientations imagined and actively altered their own bodies in their efforts to mimic or reject this body ideal from 1945 to 1970. At least once scholar has argued that women face more pressure to conform to an ideal standard of beauty than men because women learn early on that their future – economic, social, and reproductive opportunities – hinges on their personal

appearance.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, as historian Kathy Peiss notes, “Beauty signifies difference... making distinctions between high and low, normal and abnormal, virtue and vice. In so doing, beauty helps to define morality, social status, class, gender, race, and ethnicity.”<sup>2</sup> Women’s bodies are constantly under surveillance.<sup>3</sup> Borrowing Foucauldian language, Dina Giovanelli and Stephan Ostertag refer to the media as a “cosmetic panopticon” which dictates women’s clothing, hairstyle, body size, and shape. By “violating expectations” such as being fat and female, women are subjected to discrimination.<sup>4</sup> And even though we are mostly cognitive of the images and messages thrown at us in the mass media today, some are harder to resist than others.

Because women’s bodies mirror cultural values, the treatment of fashion, body types, and beauty ideals offer a key lens for interpretations of American culture. The study of the female body and beauty culture has received serious and prolific attention within the past three decades.<sup>5</sup> Works focusing on nineteenth-century women reaffirm

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<sup>1</sup> E. O. Smith, *When Culture and Biology Collide: Why We Are Stressed, Depressed, and Self-Obsessed* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Kathy Peiss, “On Beauty – and the History of Business,” in *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America*, ed. Philip Scranton (London: Routledge, 2001), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Susan J. Douglas, *Where The Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Dina Giovanelli and Stephen Ostertag, “Controlling the Body: Media Representations, Body Size, and Self-Discipline,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds Esther Rothblum and Sandra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 289-290.

<sup>5</sup> For works addressing women’s bodies and beauty ideals in nineteenth-century America, see Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Knopf, 1983); Joan Jacob Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Frances B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: the Ideal of Real Womanhood in mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989); Alison Piepmeier, *Out in Public: Configurations of Women's Bodies in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century*

and challenge existing scholarship on larger issues such as middle-class gender roles and the ideology of separate spheres. While scholarship on female body image in the nineteenth century exists, a void remains regarding the twentieth century, particularly in the decades immediately after World War II. Historians writing about beauty and cosmetic culture in the postwar era focus on the beauty industry rather than specifically women's bodies. Monographs that discuss and examine cosmetics and fashion shape our understanding of the distant past, but more work is needed in the area of body image and feminine ideals. Moreover, scholarship that examines plastic surgery focuses on the history of technological advances and the biographies of those doctors responsible for the procedures.<sup>6</sup> While this is important, little of the literature examines or explains why women sought such body-altering, invasive surgery. This dissertation uncovers and analyzes the motives behind and the types of cosmetic procedures women pursued.

The debate as to whether beauty culture is democratic is central to the study of ideal female forms. Do model body types oppress women? Is body image created by men and dictated to women? Feminist authors like Naomi Wolf criticize beauty culture

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*America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996); and Jan Todd, *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women, 1800-1870* (Macon, GA.: Mercer University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> The scholarship on the history of cosmetic and plastic surgery is impressive and meticulous, however it tends to focus on the dates when certain procedures were invented or perfected and the men and women responsible for these new techniques, rather than the social and cultural reasons as to why they became popular when they did. For works that look at the developmental history of cosmetic and plastic surgery see Virginia L. Blum, *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Sander Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Debra Gimlin, *Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Teresa Riordan, *Inventing Beauty: A History of the Innovations that Have Made Us Beautiful* (New York: Broadway, 2004); and Edward Tenner, *Our Own Devices: The Past and Future of Body Technology* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

for these reasons.<sup>7</sup> Wolf argues that Americans' perception of beauty is imposed by a patriarchal society to keep women in their place. She traces the modern beauty myth to the social upheaval following industrialization, around 1830, when a new class of literate, idle women suddenly came into a position where it became possible to challenge male dominance. Drawing on extensive research, Wolf also discusses anorexia, bulimia, and the increasing numbers of plastic surgeries within a contemporary context. She argues that the beauty myth not only works against women, but also encourages them to sabotage themselves by trying to achieve impossible standards. Moreover, she ascribes all of modern women's social ills to the beauty myth, including mental illness and the rise in rape during the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> In labeling the beauty myth as a political tool that oppresses women, however, Wolf ignores how beauty industries, such as cosmetics, fashion, and even health-related enterprises, thrive on capitalism. The beauty industry is driven by the bottom line, not politics, as this dissertation reveals. Although fashion designers set clothing trends, most of cosmetic culture is reactionary rather than inventive.

Kathy Peiss attacks beauty culture critics like Wolf, arguing, "they have overlooked the web of intimate rituals, social relationships, and female institutions that gave form to American beauty culture."<sup>9</sup> Her *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's*

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<sup>7</sup> For a critique of contemporary beauty culture and body image, see also Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004); and Joan Jacob Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used against Women* (New York: Morrow, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 7.

*Beauty Culture* challenges the feminist notion that a male dominated industry and the mass media represent the leading cause of women's historical oppression. While not denying the power of the corporation, mass media, and advertisements in creating an American beauty myth, Peiss's investigation of beauty culture exposes how the cosmetics industry, a consumer-dependent economy, was largely built by women. Additionally, many of the most successful of these entrepreneurs originated from immigrant or African American working-class backgrounds and contributed to a reinterpretation of conventional standards of twentieth-century beauty and femininity.<sup>10</sup> Although many might expect female authors to be highly sympathetic to critics of beauty culture, the majority of historians who study this topic are instead celebratory, like Peiss, about its role in the creation of a united female community.<sup>11</sup> But by expanding cosmetic culture beyond make-up and hair dye and studying the body through the lens of diets, exercise, and plastic surgery, this dissertation demonstrates that not all beauty culture is democratic or unifying.

Also celebratory of cosmetic culture, Lois Banner's *American Beauty* sees changing beauty ideals as central to American values. She believes the pursuit of beauty, more than any other factor, is responsible for connecting women of different classes,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>11</sup> For other works on the historical impact of beauty culture in America see Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); E. Mary Lisa Gavenas, *Color Stories: Behind the Scenes of America's Billion-Dollar Beauty Industry* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007); Dorothy Hoobler and Thomas Hoobler, *Vanity Rules: a History of American Fashion and Beauty* (Brookfield, CT: Twenty-First Century Books, 2000); Kerry Segrave, *Suntanning in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Company, Inc., 2005); and Rachel C. Weingarten, *Hello Gorgeous!: Beauty Products in America, '40s-60s* (Collector's Press: Tigard, OR, 2006).



regions, and ethnic groups. Banner asserts that working-class women and even feminists endorsed new styles, proving that fashion came not just from the wealthy elite or from men. Conversely though, she interprets the varying standards of beauty as important factors that differentiated classes and ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, she argues that “the rigid standardization of physical appearance” was broken in the 1960s with Barbara Streisand’s refusal to change her nose and with the first Asian and African American women to make it to the finals of the Miss America pageant.<sup>13</sup> What Banner fails to take into consideration is that while this might be an expansion of what is “beautiful,” beauty was still considered as youthfulness and slenderness. While mainstream (white) culture began to embrace the possibility of racial and ethnic “beauty” in the 1960s, ideas about the perfect feminine *body* became more monolith and unattainable.

Even more problematic, historian Joanna Pittman argues that the development of more effective home hair dyes in the mid-decades of the twentieth century created greater possibilities for women from non-northern European backgrounds to assimilate into American culture. She claims, “Now anyone could begin to acquire the trappings of the established affluent class, which still included a head of blonde hair.”<sup>14</sup> This interpretation falls short as it avoids and diminishes the complex realities of assimilation for women of color. Although many works have attempted to demonstrate the democratic and inclusive potential cosmetic culture provided American women throughout the past

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<sup>12</sup> Banner, *American Beauty*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>14</sup> Joanna Pitman, *On Blondes* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 234.

two centuries, this scholarship fails to incorporate the historical realities for women outside the dominant heterosexual, white culture. While having the “choice” to look one way or not does appear egalitarian, parameters of preferability still exist and are, generally, Caucasian.

Historians of African American women have also explored the impact of the beauty industry on black women throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this way, these women’s historians question the concept of a universal womanhood. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham observes that African American women historically lived in communities whose behavior resulted not only from learned African American traditions, but also from the values and behaviors of the dominant white society.<sup>15</sup> Black studies focusing on beauty culture highlight the unique relationship of cosmetics and hair care in African American women’s culture.<sup>16</sup> Other authors focus on the racial and political meanings behind the American beauty industry, especially attaching it to Black Power and Black Nationalism.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Beyond the Sound of Silence: Afro-American Women’s History,” *Gender and History* 1 (1989): 50-67.

<sup>16</sup> For works concerning African American women’s beauty culture, especially in the post-World War II period, see Laila Haidarali, “Polishing Brown Diamonds: African American Women, Popular Magazines, and the Advent of Modeling in Early Postwar America.” *Journal of Women's History* 17 (2005): 10-37; Noliwe M. Rooks, *Ladies’ Pages: African American Women’s Magazines and the Culture That Made Them* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); and Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920- 1975* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007). Scholars have paid particular attention to attitudes about African American women’s hair. See Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Styling Jim Crow: African American Beauty Training During Segregation* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2003); Ayana Byrd, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001); and Noliwe M. Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Korey Bowers Brown, “Ideals, Images, Identity: *Ebony* Magazine in an Age of Black Power, 1965-1970.” MA thesis. Vanderbilt University, 2000; Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?: Black*

Even by the middle of the twentieth century, beauty ideals depicted in advertisements and magazine articles in black periodicals continued to favor lighter complexions and hairstyles similar to those that were fashionable among white women. Dorothea Towles, one of the most successful African American models of the 1950s and 1960s, was light skinned and eventually dyed her hair blonde. Important black actresses such as Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge were similarly light complexioned. Straightening one's hair was so common in the twentieth century that the procedure was treated as a coming-of-age ritual for young women. Straight hair was not just a beauty standard, moreover, but also a marker of one's economic and social standing. Despite the attention given to African American women's historical connections to and relationship with cosmetics, hair, and skin color, ideas regarding black women's body image remain unstudied. This dissertation vaults itself into unexplored territory by identifying and analyzing the breadth of body types celebrated by both men and women in the African American community.

Another demographic to be addressed in this project is the postwar lesbian community. Historians have done much work in recent years to prove the presence of a dynamic queer community prior to the Stonewall rebellions of 1969.<sup>18</sup> Works addressing

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*Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Monika N. Gosin, "The Politics of African-American Women's Beauty in *Ebony* Magazine: the 1960s and 1970s." MA thesis, University of California-San Diego, 2004; Sue K. Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Megan E. Williams, "The Crisis Cover Girl: Lena Horne, The NAACP, and Representations of African American Femininity, 1941-1945," *American Periodicals* 16 (2006): 200-218.

<sup>18</sup> For works on twentieth-century lesbianism in America prior to the Stonewall Rebellion, see Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), Vern Bullough, *Before Stonewall: Activists in Lesbian and Gay Rights in Historical Context* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2002), Susan K. Cahn, *Coming On Strong: Gender*

class reveal the widely different experiences of middle-class and working-class lesbians. With more at risk financially, middle-class professionals remained far more closeted than their working-class equivalents. A distinct bar culture emerged among the working-class population where butch and femme lesbians intermingled. Lillian Faderman argues that lesbians identified in this way simply because they had no other models, and that 1950s gender roles proved so pervasive that they permeated even lesbian relationship dynamics.<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis disagree with Faderman's explanation. Rather than viewing butch-femme culture as aping heterosexual paradigms, they argue that butches defied convention by overturning male privilege while femmes challenged hetero-normative society by creating a sexual relationship within which women were not under male control.<sup>20</sup>

Kennedy and Davis' work examines butch-femme culture during the 1950s through the lens of committed relationships. However, the two authors give more attention to butch lesbians because they argue that it is their visibility that played a critical factor in the creation of a working-class lesbian community. Because femmes could more easily "pass" as heterosexual than their butch lovers, Kennedy and Davis privilege butch dress and mannerisms. This dissertation differs from previous queer scholarship in a number of ways. First, I look beyond clothing and hairstyles in favor of

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*and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sports* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1992), Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin, 1994), and Patricia Juliana Smith, *The Queer Sixties* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*.

<sup>20</sup> Kennedy and Davis. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*.

studying lesbian body image. Secondly, I give attention to femme culture, which has been overlooked in the past. Moreover, I contend that the butch/femme dichotomy was not as rigid as what previous authors have argued. Instead, masculinity and femininity were fluid traits, giving postwar lesbians the ability to alter their gendered identity over time.

This study of postwar beauty culture in the history of the “Long Fifties” reveals that postwar America was less conformist and robotic than consensus historians previously argued. American popular history nostalgically remembers the immediate postwar period as an era of traditional family values, hula-hoops, and poodle skirts. Family television programs from the period rebroadcast today serve to cement images of a misremembered past. As the seemingly placid years between the end of World War II and the radical social changes of the late 1960s and 1970s, the “Long Fifties” have become associated with mass conformity and consumerism. A closer examination, however, reveals a more complicated reality. Recent works have begun to debate this “Age of Consensus.” The contested attitudes toward network television, the rise of a rebellious youth culture, and the beginnings of a sexual explosion serve as just a few examples of the cultural complexity that existed in this period.<sup>21</sup> The variety of female

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<sup>21</sup> Works like Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975) and Marty Jezer *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States, 1945-1960* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1982) find nothing redeeming about the “Long Fifties.” For a more balanced overview of the period see David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993) and William H. Young and Nancy Young, *The 1950s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004). For monographs that consider the importance of gender and race in challenging the hegemony of the immediate postwar period see Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1992); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*; Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983); Joanne Meyerowitz, ed. *Not June Cleaver: Women*

forms revealed in this study will continue to complicate our understanding of the immediate postwar years.

Exploring the transition from a curvy to a streamlined figure, along with the often-desperate strategies women sought to obtain these body ideals, highlights the persuasive power of cosmetic culture. This dissertation inserts alternative populations outside of the dominant white, heterosexual norm to challenge the belief that the pursuit of beauty ideals has the democratic potential to unite all American women. The inclusion of both African Americans and lesbians suggests that while women may have exposure to cosmetic culture and mass media pressure, the response to these beauty myths was not monolithic.

The primary sources for reconstructing these multicultural beauty models comes largely from print media, diet and exercise literature, and printed medical sources. Medical archives, which contain unique and unexplored information on postwar diet fads, food faddists, quack plastic surgeons, and miracle cure-alls for ailments as diverse as obesity to small breasts, moves this study beyond prescriptive literature. I also explore the genre of lesbian pulp fiction, which has not yet been used to examine body image. In magazines, I examine the content of articles, photographs, advertisements, and letters to the editors. Marjorie Ferguson notes that women's periodicals act as a "syllabus" and provide "step-by-step instructions" that help socialize their target audience from

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*and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994); Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Routledge, 1992), and Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).

adolescence to adulthood.<sup>22</sup> Nowlie M. Rooks agrees that women's periodicals have historically served the same purpose for African American women as well.<sup>23</sup> Although the primary market target for most of the magazines chosen was largely a white, female, and middle-class demographic, other periodicals selected had a diverse reading audience based on age, race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Although popular Hollywood actresses like Marilyn Monroe stand as the microcosm for a certain ideal body type in the postwar period, this project uses vignettes from movies sparingly. Beyond the example presented at the beginning of this introduction, few Hollywood movies starring "Sweater Girls" explored the realm of female exercise, diet, or plastic surgery. However, even this exclusion is telling. Without their movie personas talking about diets or exercising, Hollywood actresses helped create the false impression that their perfect measurements were the result of good genes and luck rather than self-discipline and self-denial.

Women are created in different shapes and sizes. No matter how much a woman naturally or artificially manipulates her body in order to obtain a specific ideal shape, there are some body types that will remain forever beyond her reach. The popularization and dissemination of model body ideals is dangerous. While beauty culture was never as oppressive as previous feminist writers argued, the pursuit of the perfect body was not a uniform and unifying event for women. This project departs from and revises celebratory history. It is empowering to reinterpret and re-appropriate an industry that challenges

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<sup>22</sup> Margorie Ferguson, *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazine's and the Cult of Femininity* (Exeter, NH: Heinemann, 1983), 85.

<sup>23</sup> Nowlie M. Rooks, *Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture That Made Them* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 89.

women to change who they are. But the examination of beauty culture through the lens of body image, rather than cosmetics, demonstrates an absence of democratic benefits and qualities. Careful study demonstrates that white, African American, and lesbian women embodied and embraced a variety of forms in postwar America. This variety should be celebrated and mirrored in our world today. If American women found alternative role models in a decade supposedly defined by consensus, then women today should reject a monolithic beauty culture, and instead embrace new, healthier, and attainable ideals.



CHAPTER 1  
CREATING THE IDEAL:  
ACTUARIES, HOLLYWOOD, AND THE FASHION INDUSTRY

*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.*

- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a number of models existed offering women a spectrum of ideal body types and varying opinions about the role of fitness and health in achieving these forms. Specific standards of beauty, characterized or dominated different historical periods, but each ideal was never necessarily unique to that era. Throughout the past decades, one can observe cyclical ideal body forms and the repeated emphasis on specific body parts. For example, the feminine leg was particularly popular in the 1910s and 1920s, and later again in the late 1960s, as can be seen with the popularity of miniskirts and dresses. Beauty and its pursuit have not always been seen as appropriate topics of discussion, however. In the early nineteenth century, conversations centering on “the body” were considered to be “impolite.” Women and girls preoccupied with their appearance were characterized as self-indulgent and vain. However, discussion about the size of certain body parts such as hands and feet found their way into conversations as having lumbering limbs could be seen as lower class.<sup>1</sup> An overview of

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997, xx).

nineteenth and twentieth century ideal body types shows the multiplicity of the sources of these ideals: print media, popular culture, and medicine. A review also highlights that these cultural creators were focused on the ideal *white* woman.

Nineteenth-century women took control of their bodies, manipulating their shapes through diet, fashion, and exercise. In the antebellum period, a frail, waifish woman, the subject of Barbara Welter's important essay, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," dominated middle- and upper-class circles.<sup>2</sup> Referred to as the "Currier & Ives" woman or the "steel-engraved lady" by various others, the ideal woman was slight with small hands and feet, and appeared pale and fragile. Food, femininity, and sexual appetite were inexorably linked. Etiquette books advised young women to eat scantily in public; a ravenous appetite indicated moral turpitude. Slimness was also a sign of social status; a physically frail and weak woman literally depended on her working husband for her livelihood.<sup>3</sup> So popular was this physical ideal, that the mid-nineteenth century witnessed the birth of contemporary *anorexia nervosa*.<sup>4</sup> Prescriptive literature was aimed largely at young, middle-class women and therefore this ideal had only a limited impact on society at large. In the twentieth century this changed, however, when mass media targeted larger audiences, irrespective of class and race.

The "steel-engraving woman" of antebellum America did not command hegemony over female forms throughout the nineteenth century, however. This kind of

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Culture of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966), 151-174.

<sup>3</sup> Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Times, 1983), 50-63.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

“Victorianism” was challenged almost as soon as it appeared in the 1850s. A new wave of sensuality in the post-Civil War era brought with it new repression best illustrated by Anthony Comstock and “real” Victorianism. Moreover, a number of popular medical writers claimed that fat promoted health.<sup>5</sup> By the 1860s, a number of alternative prototypes, each presenting a more active, vigorous model challenged the frail, thin ideal. With the first major appearance of the burlesque troop, the British Blondes in 1868, and the popularity of theatrical actress Lillian Russell, a more buxom and healthy model of beauty replaced the delicate ideal in the latter half of the nineteenth century. These figures marked the beginnings of popular culture’s influence on women’s body esteem, beyond medical advice and prescriptive literatures like *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. Russell was rumored to weigh 200 pounds, but was probably closer to 165 to 180 pounds at the height of her career.<sup>6</sup>

This “voluptuous” ideal faded in popularity by the late 1890s in favor of the tall, athletic “Gibson Girl,” a patrician woman popularized by the drawings of *Life* illustrator, Charles Dana Gibson. A hybrid of the two previous body ideals, the “Gibson Girl” possessed the lithe features of the “steel-engraving lady” with the ample bust and hips of the heartier ideal. Corsets went out of fashion in favor of form-fitting dresses that encourage slenderness. History Lois Banner notes that with Gibson’s figure type, America successfully challenged Europe’s control over popular standards of beauty and

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<sup>5</sup> Banner, *American Beauty*, 8, 107.

<sup>6</sup> For alternatives to the “steel-engraving lady,” see Frances B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), and Jan Todd, *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women, 1800-1870* (Macon, GA.: Mercer University Press, 1998). For more on the influence of burlesque and early American theater see Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

created a new international ideal.<sup>7</sup> The new idyllic woman in 1894 was 5 foot 4 inches tall and weighed 140 pounds.<sup>8</sup>

In 1908, Parisian designer Paul Poiret introduced a new silhouette that shifted visual interest to the legs, away from the Victorian hourglass. The result was a new fashionable figure that featured slender, long limbs, and a relatively flat chest. Women bound their breasts with “correctors” or “flatteners” in attempts to appear fashionably shapeless and boyish. A woman’s attractiveness in this period was not determined by the shape of her torso, but by her face and legs. This new display of the body required fashionable women to diet and exhibit self-discipline. Woods Hutchinson, medical professor and one-time president of the American Academy of Medicine, predicted, “The longed-for slender and boyish figure is becoming a menace, not only to the present, but also the future generations.”<sup>9</sup> What would later be referred to as the “Flapper look” had an influence on even the most staunchly middle-class young women. Rather than writing home about happy weight gain and plentiful meals as they had in earlier decades, young college women instead worried about gaining weight and discussed various diet plans.<sup>10</sup> This body type remained dominant throughout the 1920s, particularly with the popularity of boyishly framed movie actresses like Mary Pickford and Clara Bow. The new mass media allowed the dissemination of the decade’s beauty ideals to a wider audience and had a particularly strong influence among teenagers and white-collar working girls.

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<sup>7</sup> Banner, *American Beauty*, especially chapter 8.

<sup>8</sup> E.O. Smith, *When Culture and Biology Collide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 62.

<sup>9</sup> Woods Hutchinson, “Fat and Fashion,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, August 21, 1926, 60.

<sup>10</sup> Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 99.

Movies played a crucial role in the development of teen girl culture through the 1940s by providing role models and promoting ideas about fashion, beauty, language, and the body.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, for the first time, popular serial fiction like *Grace Harlow* and *Nancy Drew*, aimed at younger girls, featured a chubby character who served as a comedic partner to the slender, well-liked protagonist.<sup>12</sup> The 1920s also witnessed the advent of another source of beauty ideals, the Miss America pageant. The contest's first winner, Margaret Gorman, stood 5 foot 1 inch and weighed 108 pounds. Sixty years later, Gorman's counterparts would weigh approximately the same, but be at least five inches taller with waists three inches smaller.<sup>13</sup>

In the 1930s hemlines fell and narrow waistlines returned. A new, more mature and less playful beauty ideal came into being and remained popular through the war years, culminating with a return to the voluptuousness that recalled late nineteenth-century fashion. Popular actresses like Jean Harlow, Mae West, and Greta Garbo highlighted the re-emphasis on breast size and curves. By the early 1930s, the basic beauty institutions of American culture were established – fashion, cosmetics, modeling, beauty contests, and Hollywood. No new media for disseminating beauty appeared until the introduction of television in the 1950s.

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<sup>11</sup> Kelly Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 129. See also Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 99, 110.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the history of the Miss America pageant see Banner, *American Beauty*; Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I A Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

With the advent of ready-to-wear clothing, the creation of dress sizes also shaped women's weight consciousness. Paris and New York still dominated design, but mass-produced imitations made fashionable clothes widely available by the end of World War I.<sup>14</sup> Although most women's clothing remained custom-made well into the 1920s, store-bought clothes contributed to women's anxieties about the shape and size of their body. As store-bought clothing was standardized with a specific body shape and size, if one's body failed to fit the pre-made patterns, women perceived there was something wrong with their figure.

During 1939 and 1940, the National Bureau of Home Economics in the Department of Agriculture compiled the measurements of more than 15,000 white women to help clothing manufacturers develop their ready-to-wear clothing. The compilation was the first large-scale scientific study of women's body measurements ever recorded. A technician recorded 59 measurements for each volunteer to assure the most accurate results. The results for women between the ages of 25 and 29 revealed that the average white American woman in 1939 was just under 5 feet 3 inches tall, weighed 124.7 pounds, with measurements of 34.2-27.3-37.8.<sup>15</sup> Participants were given a nominal fee for volunteering, which may have influenced the overall results, however. As the country had not yet pulled itself out of the Great Depression, female volunteers probably originated from the most impoverished populations, using the token compensation towards food for their families. This complicated the representative figure of the "average woman" as the social conditions may have skewed the data toward underweight

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<sup>14</sup> Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Louis I. Dublin, *The Facts of Life: From Birth to Death* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1951), 361.

body types.

Although it is tempting to accredit the slenderness of American women at the end of the 1940s to beauty culture's entrenched influence, ready-to-wear clothing was potentially created with a figure of a much skinner woman in mind. However, if the class status of these volunteers is unquestioned, then these figures illustrate how the disseminators of beauty culture had already taken a strong hold of American women's body-esteem even prior to World War II. Despite the shift to a more voluptuous figure in the 1930s, women were still significantly slimmer than the ideal Gibson girl. In the late 1950s, department-store buyers reported that since 1939, the average woman had shrunk three to four sizes.<sup>16</sup> Arthur Jablow, a well-known coat and suit designer, similarly testified that the size scale had taken a downward slide. In the mid-1930s, size 14 became more popular than 18, and the dieter's "goal" became size 12.<sup>17</sup> In the 1940s, stores increasingly ordered more size 10s than ever before, and by 1956, the Jablow size range began with size 8.<sup>18</sup>

### **Postwar America**

According to the French philosopher and feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, female bodies are "projects." Culture and society – not biology – makes a woman a "real" woman. In the years following the end of World War II, feminine beauty ideals were in flux because American culture was unstable as well. Betty Friedan famously argued that

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<sup>16</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 17.

<sup>17</sup> Note that these sizes are not the same as today's manufacturers. Vintage clothing sizes run 4-6 sizes smaller than clothing sizes today. A famous "urban legend" claims that Marilyn Monroe was a size 12 or 14. While this is supposed to make today's women feel better about their own forms because Monroe did in fact wear that size dress, it was a *vintage* size 12 or 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Chicago Defender*, "Era of Dieting Causing Female Figure to Shrink," May 15, 1956, 9.

during this time, American women fell victim to a “feminine mystique” that instructed them to pursue femininity and avoid situations that threatened to strip them of it.

Although the universal validity of Friedan’s claims were challenged by some, in regards to body image and cosmetics, the author-housewife was not exaggerating.<sup>19</sup>

The postwar period saw the reemergence of feminine ideals similar to the “Cult of True Womanhood” from the mid-nineteenth century to combat paranoia that American women had become overly masculine during the war years. Although this was not a complete return to beauty and domestic ideals from the so-called Victorian Era, the postwar ideal certainly was focused once again on family togetherness with women at the center of the home. Young women married earlier than their mothers had a generation earlier and gave birth to more children in rapid succession. Large numbers of women abandoned higher education or a full-time career and instead sought fulfillment through marriage, motherhood, and housework.<sup>20</sup> In the words of one contemporary writer, “The war was over, and [women] were supposed to sashay back to the kitchen and learn how to make green beans baked with Campbell’s cream of mushroom soup.”<sup>21</sup> With memories of a devastating, economic depression and a world war casting shadows over

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<sup>19</sup> For a reassessment of Friedan, see Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958,” *Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (1993): 1455-1482; and Daniel Horowitz, “Rethinking Betty Friedan and The Feminine Mystique: Labor Union Radicalism and Feminism in Cold War America,” *American Quarterly* 48, no. 1(1996), 1-42.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the changes women experienced prior to, during, and after World War II, see Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981); William Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); and May, *Pushing the Limits: American Women, 1940-1961* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 47.



the country, the political, economic, and social institutions endorsed this return to domesticity as patriotic and necessary.

But perhaps more interesting than the returned emphasis on domesticity, was the focus on cosmetic standards. As one scholar notes, “In a society based on strict gender roles, women needed to look like women. They could not resemble Norman Rockwell’s *Rosie the Riveter*.”<sup>22</sup> Although wartime propaganda assured the public that working a “man’s job” would not threaten American women’s femininity or sexuality, reconversion demanded that women forfeit employment to stabilize the home.<sup>23</sup> Among the numerous changes expected of American women to help the country return to tranquility after World War II, came a modification in the perfect feminine figure. Movies and other forms of mass media and culture instructed American women how to be beautiful. More specifically, three major cultural shapers influenced what it meant to be a woman in the postwar years – the fashion industry, Hollywood, and less predictably, insurance companies.

From 1945 to 1970, the most influential cultural creators of beauty ideals changed. In the 1940s and 1950s, high-fashion designers and the movie industry battled for dominance in shaping and defining beauty ideals. As Hollywood struggled to find gimmicks and movie stars to tear Americans away from their television sets in the suburbs, the movies’ influence on how women felt about their bodies waned by the

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<sup>22</sup> Barbara J. Coleman, “Maidenform(ed): Images of American Women in the 1950s,” in *Forming and Reforming Identity*, ed. Carol Siegel and Ann Kibbey (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 10.

<sup>23</sup> For more on wartime and reconversion propaganda see Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

middle of the 1960s. Women's fashion magazines like *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, and teen fashion magazines such as *Seventeen* that catered to the powerful youth market, set body ideals for the latter half of the 1960s and into the 1970s.

Developing at the same time were insurance company standardized tables that suggested the averages of women's weight in relation to age, height, and body type. Although originally created by health and life insurance companies to determine the risk factor for providing coverage to a potential applicant, by the 1940s actuarial tables became broadly used guides for "ideal" and "desirable" weights. As the decades progressed, the "ideal" figure became more and more slender, not just on the glossy pages of high-fashion magazines, but also in medical and actuary approved life insurance charts. As a result of this, the ideology of the perfect female figure became more monolithic rather than celebrating a wide array of body shapes and sizes.

### **Women's Magazines and the Fashion Industry**

Picture-based magazines changed the face of American journalism after 1940. Magazines like *Life* and *Look* were consumed by members of a growing middle class who increasingly looked to these cultural tools to guide them through their newly acquired social mobility. In a culture where television was taking root in suburban living rooms, magazines offered guidance, disseminated the news, and informed Americans how to think and feel about national and international issues. Women's and teen magazines from 1945 to 1970 played a major role in constructing the ideal body type for the "all-American" woman. During the 1950s, five out of six women read at least one

magazine every week.<sup>24</sup> Women looked to fashion periodicals for instruction on how to be feminine and fashionable. In addition to appropriate clothes, the proper body was an essential ingredient of feminine perfection.

Dawn H. Currie argues that women internalize the socializing messages of magazines that persuade women that the pursuit of physical beauty, not intelligence, should be their ultimate goal. Similarly to de Beauvoir, she also observes that within a sociological discourse, women's magazines are one way in which "bodies become gendered."<sup>25</sup> Not all scholars see women's magazines as a manipulative medium, however. Marjorie Ferguson argues that although women's magazines "foster and maintain a cult of femininity," because editors and advertisers target women as a marketable demographic, they award status to women as a group.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, because women's magazines do not provide a homogenous message, Mary Ellen Zuckerman argues that this demonstrates that women do not passively consume and accept all the content presented to them. Magazine editors instead actively consider what their readership wants to see and read, and creates the periodical with their target audience in mind.<sup>27</sup>

When postwar American women looked at the cover of magazines at the grocery store, the drug store, or elsewhere, they were assaulted with a wide variety of feminine

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<sup>24</sup> Dawn H. Currie, *Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and Their Readers* (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 55.

<sup>26</sup> Marjorie Ferguson, *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity* (Exeter, NH: Heinemann, 1983), 184-185.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *History of Popular Women's Magazines Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), xv.

forms. Responsible for this were three modeling agencies, appropriately labeled “The Big Three,” which dominated the modeling industry in the postwar years. Each agency had a very specific idea about feminine beauty. Although male models existed, as one reporter of the era noted, “Nobody is interested in whether they diet or have devised a formula for successful living.”<sup>28</sup> John Robert Powers, the most established of the three agencies (1933), specialized in “high-fashion” models and was therefore more stringent with the figure measurements of the women and girls under his employ. The typical junior models for the Powers agency stood 5 feet 4 inches, with 33-23-34 measurements.<sup>29</sup> His high-fashion models adhered to the motto, “Slender, Tender, and Tall.”<sup>30</sup> Powers’ high-fashion models were at least 4 inches taller than his junior prototypes, with the ideal model standing 5 feet 9 inches with a 34-24-34 build. Powers was cognizant that this figure was not realistic for the majority of women and cautioned fashion magazine readers to not copy the body types set by his models.

Walter Thornton, best known for his pin-up model agency, noted, “The best clothes drape is a tall, willowy woman, built along the lines of a window dummy...a full, curvaceous figure causes fitting problems.” He added, however, that this was not a figure that appealed to men. The typical pin-up girl in the Thornton agency was between the junior and high-fashion Power girls in height, but with more exaggerated dimensions (34-21-34).

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<sup>28</sup> Gilbert Millstein, “The Modeling Business,” *Life*, March 25, 1946, 111.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-113.

<sup>30</sup> Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 231.

Harry Conover was the newest of the Big Three and his agency specialized in male and child models, but his trademark was Cover Girls. In 1941, when John Powers turned down the reigning Miss America saying she was built too much like a football player, Conover signed her to a contract. His typical model was shorter than the high-fashion and pin-up models at 5 feet 4 inches with measurements of 33-23-34.5.<sup>31</sup> Conover's models looked "more robust, more wholesome, more middle-class, more Midwestern," according to Hillel Schwartz.<sup>32</sup> Conover noted, unlike the fashion trade, that magazine Cover Girls were usually picked by men, with the male ideal of beauty in mind. The agency head prophesied that the ideal girl of the immediate future would be fleshier than high-fashion models. "The boys home from the wars are looking for something with more curves, someone who is believable," he argued, "who looks like the girl next door, only perhaps a little prettier."<sup>33</sup> All three types of models had little in common measurement-wise, however, with the average American woman. According to the US Department of Agriculture in 1947, the typical woman stood 5 feet 3.25 inches tall with measurements of 35.5-29.25-38.75.<sup>34</sup> In 1954, the median woman was just slightly taller and weighed 132 pounds.<sup>35</sup>

### **J'adore Dior**

On February 2, 1947, French fashion designer Christian Dior unveiled a new fashion line that featured an hourglass silhouette with a tiny waist, high rounded breasts,

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<sup>31</sup> Millstein, "The Modeling Business," *Life*, March 25, 1946, 112-113.

<sup>32</sup> Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 231.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas R. Carskadon, "The Female Form and What of It," *Esquire*, March 1947, 42, 130-131.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Readers Digest*, "Meet the Typical American – Male and Female," February 1954, 34.

and curved shoulders. Carmel Snow, editor for *Harper's Bazaar*, dubbed it the "New Look." The design also favored a full, flared skirt and an almost obscene amount of textiles, a microcosm of the relaxed postwar restrictions on consumable products. Of his design, Dior noted, "We came from an epoch of war and uniform, with women like soldiers with boxer's shoulders. I designed flower women, soft shoulders, full busts, waists as narrow as liana and skirts as corollas."<sup>36</sup> The popular feminine fashion reflected the combination of social repression and sexual exploitation. Hemlines fell to mid-calf length and flared skirts were held out by starched crinoline petticoats. Dior's silhouette, although heralded as "natural" and "womanly" required women to wear a hidden armory of foundation garments like girdles and corsets to achieve the hourglass silhouette. Dior reportedly believed that waists wider than 17 inches were "repulsive."<sup>37</sup> Young women compared their tiny waists and exulted in their measurements, which had now become the most important numbers in a woman's life.

Later in the 1950s, designer Cristobal Balenciaga for the House of Dior abandoned the hourglass figure for the H-shape, a look that inspired shapeless silhouettes like the Parisian sack dress, the trapeze, and the balloon dress. But unlike the "New Look," Dior's second silhouette did not inspire Americans, particularly men who had grown accustomed and appreciative of the curve-clinging styles of the late 1940s. Dior's "New Look" remained the basis for American women's fashion well into the 1950s. It

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Barbara J. Coleman, "Maidenform(ed): Images of American Women in the 1950s," in *Forming and Reforming Identity*, ed. Carol Siegel and Ann Kibbey (New York: New York University Press, 1955), 9-10.

<sup>37</sup> Teresa Riordan, *Inventing Beauty: A History of the Innovations That Have Made Us Beautiful* (New York: Broadway, 2004), 96-97.

would not be until the 1960s that a new ideal of the female figure was established.



*Figure 1. Bar suit from Dior's "New Look" collection, 1947*

Dior's changes in fashion could be seen everywhere, particularly in department stores. Reflective of the changing pattern of ideal forms, mannequins changed their shape, now mirroring the "New Look" with a tiny waist, full hips, and conical breasts. Fashion scholar Harold Koda notes that the relative naturalism of the body from the 1930s until the war was abandoned with the "New Look." Dior flattened the stomach and buttocks with girdles, and the hips and bust were emphasized with padding or small panniers. This was not simply a return to the corseted past, however. Previous corset silhouettes were vertical or S-curved; the New Look featured a forward-jutting pelvis and a concave buttock.<sup>38</sup> Dior's "New Look" was so popular that its absence in non-period films, according to Edith Head, the premier costume designer for Paramount Studios,

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<sup>38</sup> Harold Koda, *Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 2-3.

“was a self-inflicted slap in the face to Hollywood.” Movies that were made in 1946 and shelved until the following year looked suddenly dated from a fashion point of view.

“Anything less than the New Look was depressing,” Head recalled, “a reflection of a war gone by, and nobody wanted it.”<sup>39</sup> Films that did not feature the Parisian designer’s feminine fashion appalled female-moviegoers who went to the movies to see the latest fashions.

Hollywood held a major role in making high-fashion accessible to the average American woman. Many popular stars’ most famous gowns were copied by ready-to-wear manufacturers; women saw the famous designs on screen and could later purchase a copy of a featured dress straight off the rack. For example, Elizabeth Taylor’s party dress with the sunflower-covered bust in *A Place in the Sun*, an Edith Head creation, became the most popular high school prom dress in 1951. Although Head designed the majority of Audrey Hepburn’s wardrobe for *Sabrina* (1954), Hubert de Givenchy created Hepburn’s white and black lace gown which other clothing manufacturers scrambled to re-create. Givenchy also designed Hepburn’s black dress in *Breakfast At Tiffany’s* (1961); Holly Golightly’s iconic “little black dress” is still one of the most essential cocktail attires for women.<sup>40</sup> Instead of seeing ready-to-wear clothing as a loss of individuality, American women saw it as an easy way to stay fashionably up-to-date. And when fashion inevitably changed in future seasons, the affordability of the accessible clothing was relatively painless for women’s pocketbooks.

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<sup>39</sup> Edith Head and Paddy Calistro, *Edith Head’s Hollywood* (New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1983), 69.

<sup>40</sup> Robert W. LaVine, *In a Glamorous Fashion: The Fabulous Years of Hollywood Costume Design* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1980).



### Hollywood's Competing Ideals and Alternate Models

Hollywood had just as much of a part, if not a larger one, than fashion design houses in governing definitions of feminine beauty in postwar America. As a result, two combating figure ideals emerged – the high-fashion model and the pin-up girl. Hollywood's major studios discovered early on that “actresses, like fingerprints never match.”<sup>41</sup> Despite the similarities of bust, waist, and hip measurements, few measured up to Marilyn Monroe. Although other starlets might have been able to dance, sing, and maybe even act a little, Monroe out-powered all of them in box office receipts. Much has been written about Marilyn Monroe, both sympathetic and critical. Film historian Molly Haskell remarks “if she hadn't existed we would have had to invent her, and we did, in a way. She was the fifties' fiction, the lie that a woman has no sexual needs, that she is there to cater to, or enhance, a man's needs.”<sup>42</sup> Equally enviable and pathetic, Monroe represented the kind of woman that other women feared might be their husband's secretary on nights he had to “work late.”

However, while Monroe eventually evolved into the reigning busty queen, she certainly was neither the first nor the only actress who attempted to build a career from busty sex appeal. MGM Studios touted “Sweater Girl” Lana Turner as the successor to platinum blonde Jean Harlow. Twentieth Century-Fox had Monroe, and later Sheree North and Jayne Mansfield. Kim Novak's studio, Columbia Pictures, changed her real first name from Marilyn to avoid confusion with and too many comparisons to her

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<sup>41</sup> *Colliers*, “Math for Marilyn,” April 1954, 30.

<sup>42</sup> Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in Movies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 255.

Twentieth Century-Fox competition. Universal International heralded Mamie Van Doren as the answer to Monroe's box office success. When asked how a young starlet could become a star, Van Doren responded, "I can only say: be born stacked and pretty. I know of no other advice."<sup>43</sup> Even America's World War II allies had their own version of the blonde sex goddess. England tried to compete with Diana Dors, France had their buxom sex star in Brigitte Bardot, and the Soviet Union participated in the battle with actress Irina Skobtseva.

Monroe and her copycats may have ruled the pin-up magazines, but they did not hold a monopoly over the box office. Popular actresses like Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn materialized in conscious and unconscious opposition to Monroe and those like her. Haskell argues that women wanted their daughters to grow up to be like Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn. They seemed "safe from the kind of humiliation to which Marilyn Monroe and Jennifer Jones submit."<sup>44</sup> Kelly and Hepburn represented elegance and independence. But while mothers might have hoped their daughters grew up to emulate the slenderly chic actresses of the 1950s, movie magazines warned their female readers that the new gamine girls like Hepburn with their short-cropped hair and boyish figures were problematic. In a decade that desired real divides between the genders, androgyny was not yet wholly fashionable nor considered appealing. One Hollywood producer lamented, "where's a woman's sex when you have to wait for her to turn around to reveal her womanhood?" The article's author warned, "Before you rush to the beauty parlor for the shearing and before you starve yourself into a matchstick figure, hear what some of

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<sup>43</sup> Mamie Van Doren, *I Swing* (Chicago, IL: Novel Books, 1965), 51.

<sup>44</sup> Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 268.

the male authorities in Hollywood have to say about sex appeal.”<sup>45</sup> But although Audrey Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe represented two very different types of popular actresses in the 1950s, both women’s figures were the same variation on the classic hourglass figure. Monroe’s 36-24-34 figure to Hepburn’s 31.5-22-31 is the same waist-to-hip ratio of .70.<sup>46</sup>

Doris Day was another actress who did not appear to fit the “sweater girl”/manufactured star mould. Day, a big-band singer turned actress, was the most popular film star in the country. While Monroe appealed mostly to men, Day appealed to both genders. In addition to her movie roles, fan magazines fashioned the singer/actress as a no-nonsense, blue jeans wearing, make-up eschewing role model.<sup>47</sup> But even the tomboyish Doris Day actually had a large bust and curvy, yet trim figure. Both she and Marilyn Monroe stood at 5 feet 5 and a half inches and weighed approximately 120 pounds. When Molly Haskell interviewed the reclusive actress in the late 1970s, the film historian revealed her shock that Day was as curvy as the late-Marilyn Monroe. She notes, “[Doris Day] was a tomboy and therefore on one side – my side – of the chasm that separated the ‘women’ from the ‘girls’ in the most sexually schizophrenic of decades.”<sup>48</sup> Monroe and Day represented different sides of the sexual spectrum. But although Hollywood celebrated a varying degree of sexual availability with their most popular female actresses, they continued to promote women with similar slender, yet curvy figures.

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<sup>45</sup> *Photoplay*, “Hollywood’s New Look in Sex,” September 1954, 62.

<sup>46</sup> Riordan, *Inventing Beauty*, 173.

<sup>47</sup> *Screen Stars*, “The Heck with Glamor,” August 1951, 48-50, 86.

<sup>48</sup> Molly Haskell, *Holding My Own in No Man’s Land: Women and Men and Film and Feminists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 32.

Despite the alternative body types of the high-fashion model and the curvy Hollywood star, the ideal figure was always a white body. Postwar America experienced a break from its ethnic past. Popular magazines paid scant attention to the ethnic make-up of Hollywood and television's biggest stars. Lynn Spigel argues that network television and its programs helped ease the transition as Americans moved from inner city neighborhoods to the homogenized suburbs, severing the ties to their former ethnic backgrounds.<sup>49</sup> A telling example is the career of bombshell and pin-up perennial, Rita Hayworth. Born Margarita Carmen Cansino in 1918, Rita Hayworth began her Hollywood career in 1935 cast in largely supporting roles. With her heavy Mediterranean features, Hayworth struggled to convince Columbia Pictures' Harry Cohn to star her in a leading role. The actress eventually agreed to painful electrolysis to recede her telling low-hairline and changed her hair color and her name to become a leading lady. Hayworth's popularity peaked in the mid-1940s, and during World War II she was the second most popular pin-up girl, next to Betty Grable.<sup>50</sup> None of this appeared in the fan magazines, however, and the public was largely unaware of the lengths Hayworth went through in her transformation from starlet to star. As historian Matthew Frye Jacobson observes, Caucasians are made, not born.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>50</sup> Albin Krebs, "Rita Hayworth, Movie Legend, Dies," *New York Times*, May 16, 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/1017.html> (last accessed 1 March 2011).

<sup>51</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 4-7.



*Figure 2. Rita Hayworth's transformation*

### **Slim, Ideal, Stocky – Actuaries and Insurance Tables**

The fashion industry and Hollywood battled to create one cultural standard of ideal body size during the 1940s and 1950s. Insurance companies, which created “normal” height/weight ratios during this time, created yet another standard - biological. Data collected from population-wide (albeit, white) surveys enabled actuaries to compile means and median statistics while input from medical doctors informed the weight ranges for bodies with the lowest rates of mortality. In 1942, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (MetLife) published a table of ideal weights for women ages 25 and over with respect to different bone frame sizes (small, medium, and large). The table was so popular that MetLife created a corresponding table for men in 1943. This was not the first height and weight table of its kind, but was the first that took into account women’s various bone structures. Although the acknowledgement of different body types was progressive, no concrete technique was published that told women which of these three bone structures applied to their own body. Previous tables had also allowed for weight increases with age, but the widely distributed MetLife chart suggested that these gains were unhealthy as well as undesirable.

Belgian mathematician, Lambert Adolphe Jacques Quételet constructed the first height and weight table in 1836, but it was not widely accepted as it listed only one average height and weight for each age. In 1846, John Hutchinson, a British surgeon, expanded on the Belgian's chart, publishing the average weight of 30-year-old men ranging from 5 feet 1 inch to 6 feet tall. Early tables were highly limited, however, due to lack of data and medical experience. A more uniform approach was made possible in 1889 with the creation of both the Actuarial Society of America and the Association of Life Insurance Medical Directors of America (ALIMDA).<sup>52</sup>

In 1895 George R. Shepherd, medical director of the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company was charged by ALIMDA to chair a committee to create a standard, industry-wide height and weight table. Insurance companies took an early interest in the height and weight of their applicants because they believed these figures were an important indicator of health, and subsequently a factor in the acceptance or denial of an applicant's petition for health and life insurance. At the end of the nineteenth century, weight continued to be equated with well-being while thinness was discouraged. Shepherd presented the final product at the ALIMDA annual meeting in 1897. The table was based on the heights and weights of 74,162 accepted male life insurance applicants in the United States and Canada and became the industry-wide standard. Because of the smaller number of women policyholders, a table for women was not developed until 1908. Until then, women's weight standards were inferred from the men's table.<sup>53</sup>

Starting around 1910, doctors and actuaries began to endorse the preferability of

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<sup>52</sup> Amanda M. Czerniawski, "From Average to Ideal: The Evolution of the Height and Weight Table in the United States, 1836 – 1943," *Social Science History* 31, no. 2 (2007): 273-279.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 279-280.

underweight to overweight in regards to health and long-life. Previously, fear of illnesses like tuberculosis or pneumonia that caused unhealthy weight loss guided medical opinion about body mass. But as sanitary and medical knowledge improved, attitudes about underweight versus overweight shifted. As a result, between the world wars the height-weight-age tables were subtly adjusted downward from average weights towards the “ideal.” First, table-makers tightened the poundage spectrum for each of the three body types. Previous tables that listed “average” instead of Dublin’s new “ideal” weights had allowed a broader spectrum of acceptable weight for each height. Secondly, the allowance of extra pounds for older Americans was discontinued. Actuary data revealed that underweight middle-aged and senior Americans had lower mortality rates than those who gained weight as they aged. And finally, with the encouragement of Louis Dublin, long-time statistician for MetLife, table-makers began only listing “desirable” weights rather than average statistics.<sup>54</sup>

Many fashion magazines used the MetLife standard table to help their readers set weight goals, but others completely made up their own ideal charts. Some included the body frame distinctions, while others only reprinted the desirable weights for the “medium” build designation. Moreover, the word choice to describe the three body types was revealing. Some women’s magazines stuck to MetLife’s language of small, medium, and large, while magazines like *Teen* relabeled these categories as “Slight,” “Ideal,” and “Stocky.” Still prevalent during this time was the belief that one’s body type correlated directly to one’s personality. Those with larger builds, endomorphs, were believed to be relaxed, to have a love of comfort, and to be sound sleepers. They were also believed to

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<sup>54</sup> Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 157; Stearns, *Fat History*, 111.

take great pleasure in eating and this hunger expanded to a need for affection and approval. Mesomorphs, or people with medium builds, were characterized as assertive and energetic with a need for exercise. People with slender builds, or ectomorphs, were seen as restrained, inhibited, seeking solitude when troubled, but reacting quickly and with youthful vigor to situations.<sup>55</sup>

*Table 1. "Desired" Weights of Women 25 years old and older, 1942 and 1959  
Weight in pounds according to frame*

Height	<i>Small Frame 1942</i>	<i>Small Frame 1959</i>	<i>Medium Frame 1942</i>	<i>Medium Frame 1959</i>	<i>Large Frame 1942</i>	<i>Large Frame 1959</i>
5'0"	105-113	96-104	112-120	101-113	119-129	109-125
5'1"	107-115	99-107	114-122	104-116	121-131	112-128
5'2"	110-118	102-110	117-125	107-119	124-135	115-131
5'3"	113-121	105-113	120-128	110-122	127-138	118-134
5'4"	116-125	108-116	124-132	113-126	131-142	121-138
5'5"	119-128	111-119	127-135	116-130	133-145	125-142
5'6"	123-132	114-123	130-140	120-135	138-150	129-146
5'7"	126-136	118-127	134-144	124-139	142-152	133-150
5'8"	129-139	122-131	137-147	128-143	145-158	137-154
5'9"	133-143	126-135	141-151	132-147	149-162	141-158
5'10"	136-147	130-140	145-155	136-151	152-166	145-163
5'11"	139-150	134-144	148-158	140-155	155-168	149-168
6'0"	141-153	138-148	151-163	144-159	160-179	153-173

*Statistical Bulletin of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1942 and 1959*

<sup>55</sup> Louis I. Dublin, *Factbook on Man: From Birth to Death* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 362.



Insurance actuaries and medical doctors worked together to create a biological ideal to promote well-being and lower the rates of mortality. For insurance companies, this was partly an altruistic endeavor, but the creation of height-weight tables was originally conceived to ascertain who was less of a health risk to insure. Hollywood and the fashion industry created a second standard – a cultural ideal that in hindsight appears more stringent than the biological tables. As one scholar has noted, the existence of two ideals is not necessarily problematic, as long as the population understands the differences and behaves accordingly.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, however, the pursuit of cultural ideals often trumps the biological, resulting in body image dissatisfaction.

In the years immediately following World War II, the gap between the biological and cultural ideal was minimal. Although high-fashion models have always been uncommonly slender, the figures of the most popular Hollywood stars, cover girls, and pin-up models showed little deviation from standardized height-weight tables. At 5 feet 5 and a half inches tall, both Marilyn Monroe and Doris Day's 120 pound figures were just under the "acceptable" weight for a woman with a medium build and on target for someone with a small figure. This changed in the 1960s, however. Even though the MetLife height-weight table was reconfigured again in 1959 towards a more slender biological ideal, the divide between culture and reality became more pronounced in the latter half of the 1960s. That gap has steadily widened into the next century.

### **An End of an Era**

The 1960s were a turbulent time in America, and not safeguarded from this were women's beauty ideals. With Marilyn Monroe's death in August 1962, the era of the

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<sup>56</sup> Smith, *When Biology and Culture Collide*, 63.

busty blonde officially closed. Susan Douglas remembers, “When she died, it seemed to me...that the seemingly dumb-blond, busty bombshell would no longer exert the cultural or sexual pull that she once did.”<sup>57</sup> In 1965, Mamie Van Doren and Jayne Mansfield began filming *The Las Vegas Hillbillies*. Van Doren regretfully remembered the filming, commenting, “I realized that Jayne and I were quickly becoming anachronisms. The era of the blondes was gone, and we seemed to be futilely trying to hold on to it.”<sup>58</sup>

Monroe’s death signaled an end of an era, but it wasn’t just the end of buxom blondes. It was also the end of Hollywood’s influence on the way women thought about their bodies.

The movie industry, like the country, struggled to adapt to the revolutions that would become the radical sixties. The creation of new technologies like Cinemascope, Technicolor, 3-D films, and other less successful gimmicks came as a result of dwindling movie attendance. With the mass move to suburbia, Americans’ consumption patterns changed; past moviegoers now cut back on outside entertainment when they had a television in their living room. Moreover, the political and cultural environment was particularly unfavorable to Hollywood.<sup>59</sup> Union strikes, a monopoly indictment, investigations by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), suburbia, and the popularity of television created a hostile environment in which the movie industry struggled to compete.

Along with the decline of the big studio system, Hollywood momentarily lost its

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<sup>57</sup> Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 42.

<sup>58</sup> Mamie Van Doren, *Playing the Field: My Story* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1987), 207-208.

<sup>59</sup> For more on the decline of Hollywood, see Ronald L. Davis, *Celluloid Mirrors: Hollywood and American Society Since 1945* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1997).

position as one of the harbingers of American beauty ideals. One fan wrote to *Motion Picture*, lamenting that television celebrities were more “polished and sophisticated” than Hollywood actresses. Calling Jayne Mansfield “a joke,” Elizabeth Taylor “haphazard,” and teen-queen Annette Funicello stuck “in a little-girl world,” her letter to the editor highlighted fan disenchantment with the state of movies in the 1960s.<sup>60</sup> Men and films about male bonding dominated the box office in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. Faye Dunaway, Jane Fonda, Vanessa Redgrave, and Barbara Streisand became the most bankable female stars, but opportunities for women were few. Richard Zanuck of Twentieth-Century Fox declared that in the late 1960s even Marilyn Monroe would have had a hard time becoming a star.<sup>61</sup>

Despite the popularity of television, the new media never had the same clout as Hollywood in dictating fashion, beauty, and the shape of the female body. A major reason for this was network television’s high-level of censorship. Of concern was that the new medium might bring inappropriate material right into American families’ living rooms. Lynn Spigel notes that early television, unlike the glamour-girl machine of Hollywood, aimed to present “unthreatening women.”<sup>62</sup> A few buxom stars like Dagmar and Faye Emerson snuck onto live sketch-comedy and late-night programming, but even Emerson’s low-cut dresses faced the threat of censorship.<sup>63</sup> For the most part women were portrayed as sexless like matronly Jewish mother, Molly Goldberg, or as middle-

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<sup>60</sup> *Motion Picture*, “Interesting Letters,” December 1963, 12.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 151-154.

<sup>63</sup> Bob Thomas, “Censor Trouble Seen in These Low Necklines,” *Tri-City Herald*, June 11, 1951, 2.

aged housewives like Margaret Anderson (*Father Knows Best*) and June Cleaver (*Leave it to Beaver*). And while Lucile Ball may have been a glamour girl on the big screen, television programming contained her sexuality as zany housewife, Lucy Ricardo.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Twig and the Tree**

Fashion magazines like *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Cosmopolitan* harbored a near-monopoly on style and beauty without Hollywood to contend with in the mid- to late-1960s. Although women's magazines continued to look to Paris for the latest fashions, one British model took the Western world by storm. Part of the British Invasion that brought the Beatles, miniskirts, and panty hose to American shores also swept in Leslie Hornby – a 16 year-old-girl who stood 5 feet 6.5 inches, weighed 91 pounds, with 32-22-32 measurements. Better known as Twiggy, the emaciated British teen played an important role in the slenderization of American feminine bodies. Between 1966 and 1970, the average American 16-year-old weighed 122.7 pounds and stood 5 feet 3 inches high.<sup>65</sup> Revised MetLife tables suggested that at Twiggy's height and small build, a woman 25 and over should weigh between 126 and 135 pounds. Reports fluctuated on how much the scrawny model actually weighed, ranging from 91 pounds at the lightest and 97 pounds at her heaviest. "Twiggy is called Twiggy because she looks as though a strong gale would snap her in two and dash her to the ground," one fashion journalist remarked. "In a profession where thinness is essential, Twiggy is of such meager

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<sup>64</sup> Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 151-154.

<sup>65</sup> Cynthia Ogden, Cheryl D. Fryar, Margaret D. Carroll, and Katherine M. Flegal, "Mean Body Weight, Height, and Body Mass Index, United States 1960-2002," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Vital and Health Statistics* No. 347, October 27, 2004, 3.

constitution that other models stare at her.”<sup>66</sup>

The model’s story is memorable. An androgynous pixie-hair cut changed her life in 1966, turning the waifish teen from a high-school dropout to one of the world’s most popular models seemingly overnight. Soon she was on the cover of British *Vogue* and flying to America, where hemlines had continued undisturbed since the end of World War II, to appear on the pages of *Seventeen* and *Vogue*. But even the in-demand “It” girl was unhappy with her body. “Whether you’re thin, fat, small, dark, blond, redhead, you wanna be something else,” the model recalled in a recent interview. “I wanted a fairy godmother to make me look like Marilyn Monroe. I had no boobs, no hips, and I wanted it desperately.”<sup>67</sup>

Twiggy’s American counterpart was Penelope Tree. Tree, the daughter of a well-to-do family, was first legendarily spotted at one of Truman Capote’s black and white balls at age 17. The next day Diana Vreeland at American *Vogue* called, and for the next four years, Tree would be the American “It” girl, her look and her style personifying the late 1960s. In a recent interview, Tree laughed at the irony that her boyish hips and hollowed-out cheekbones helped get her work when she was secretly suffering from anorexia. Tree weighed herself every day, watchful to never let her weight dip below 100 pounds, but not much above that mark either.<sup>68</sup> A skin disease, drugs, and a nervous breakdown ended her modeling career prematurely.

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<sup>66</sup> Polly Devlin, “Paris: Twiggy Haunt couture,” *Vogue*, March 1967, 64.

<sup>67</sup> Leanne Italie, “Twiggy: ‘It could have gone terribly wrong,’” *Associated Press*, March 29, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/wireStory?id=10234056> (last accessed 4 March 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Louise France, “A rare interview with Penelope Tree, the ultimate Sixties It girl,” *The Guardian*, August 3, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/aug/03/celebrity.women> (last accessed 4 March 2011).

Some historians argue that Twiggy was the predecessor to the emaciated models of today.<sup>69</sup> Such observations, however, are misleading; high-fashion models have always been willowy and slight. As historian Lois Banner notes, since the creation of fashion photography, the “canonical” and “best” models have been those whose slender bodies did not compete with the clothes they were paid to wear.<sup>70</sup> Twiggy was a novelty, not simply because she was so thin, but because she was androgynous and young. Moreover, her matchstick-skinny legs were the perfect mannequin on which to highlight the new mini-dresses and skirts.

The popularity of Twiggy testifies to the influence of youth culture in the late 1960s. Unlike previous models, she appeared simultaneously on the cover of teen periodicals as well as high-fashion magazines, and was clearly marketed specifically to the powerful disposable income of the youth market. Teen culture, particularly girl culture, was certainly not new to the 1960s. Throughout the postwar period, from hula-hoops to raccoon-skin caps, manufacturers were well aware of the almighty teen dollar. When *Seventeen* magazine debuted in September 1944, the first run of 400,000 copies sold out in six days. By February 1947, circulation exceeded 1 million and by July 1949, over 2.5 million girls were reading the magazine.<sup>71</sup> Hollywood too began to cater to the youth market. In the 1950s, moviemakers began to systematically study audiences for the first time and discovered that young people outnumbered adults. As a result,

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<sup>69</sup> Dorothy Hoobler and Thomas Hoobler, *Vanity Rules: a History of American Fashion and Beauty* (Brookfield, CT: Twenty-First Century Books, 2000), 112.

<sup>70</sup> Banner, *American Beauty*, 287.

<sup>71</sup> Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox*, 2.

Hollywood produced a number of low-budget “teen flicks.”



Figure 3. Twiggy – Seventeen Magazine, July 1967

Twiggy did not experience the same popularity outside of teen culture. In fact, non-fashion and non-teen magazines like *Life* and *Look* marveled and poked fun at the tiny teen, describing her as a “boy-girl” model with the figure of a five-year-old child.<sup>72</sup> Readers wrote in, scoffing about the model. “I hope she doesn’t feel too guilty about the large number of ‘sway-backs’ she will undoubtedly inspire in the present generation of sheep,” wrote Beverly J. Rolison. Another did not directly attack thin models, but marveled at how Twiggy was more popular than her British counterpart, Jean “the Shrimp” Shrimpton, calling the former “sexless” while Shrimpton was “a girl-woman-goddess type.”<sup>73</sup> Shrimpton, another popular British model, was 7 years older than

<sup>72</sup> *Look*, “Is It a Girl? Is It a Boy? No, It’s Twiggy,” April 4, 1967, 84-90.

<sup>73</sup> *Look*, “Letters to the Editor,” May 16, 1967, 4.

Twiggy with more traditional high-fashion measurements of 34-24.5-34 at 5 feet 9 inches.

Twiggy's popularity was complicated by her rejection of femininity. Although contemporary scholars point to Twiggy as the downfall of healthy body types in the mass media, in many ways the model was "feminist" with her male clothing, short pixie hair, and androgynous body. Twiggy's popularity with young American girls emphasizes the growing gap between postwar women and their baby boomer children. Curvy, "plump," and reproduction-friendly feminine figures seemed old-fashioned next to the carefree form of the emaciated youth. Twiggy represented not only extreme thinness, but hers was a free and modern body, rejecting the ideals of the immediate postwar world. Susan Douglas recalls that as she watched "martyrs" like Marilyn Monroe on the big screen, it reminded her of her mother; both women did not seem to have control over their lives. Above all, Douglas notes, "I especially wanted to avoid ending up like Mom."<sup>74</sup> Young women, getting swept into a burgeoning women's movement, saw their 1950s mothers adhering to a very specific feminine ideal of beauty. Just as "Flapper girls" of the 1920s revolted against a "Victorian" body that appeared trapped in the home and built only for reproduction and pleasing men, Twiggy was a revolt against the Moms and Monroes.

Skinny high-fashion models even influenced men's magazines. *Playboy* Playmates became taller and more slender in the late 1960s, with the photographic emphasis moving away from large breasts and accenting legs instead. Although the breast size of *Playboy's* centerfolds slightly shrank by the late 1960s, the streamlining of America's most significant impact on Playmate models was weight instead of their bust-

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<sup>74</sup> Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 42.



to-waist-to-hip proportions. While the foldout Playmate between 1953 and 1964 on average weighed 116.7 pounds at just under 5 feet 5 and a half inches, the models featured in the latter half of the 1960s weighed a full 4 pounds less. In the late 1960s, Playmates were also younger than their 1950s counterparts. Although the average age of *Playboy* centerfolds in the 1950s was 23 years, in the 1960s, the average age of the fold-out model was only 20. Twiggy and her high-fashion counterparts were “discovered” when they were less than eighteen years old. This tradition has carried on today in high-fashion modeling; many of the most popular supermodels start their careers early in their teens when curves have not yet filled out their frames.

Twiggy, Penelope Tree, and others like them controlled the popular body-type of the late 1960s, characterized by an adolescent androgyny and angularity. Their influence was not inevitable, however, even with Hollywood’s eminence fading. In November 1967, *Vogue* featured the mannequin models for André Courrèges, the French designer responsible for pulling the miniskirt into *haute couture*. Of his models, Courrèges claimed, “I don’t care about their measurements or their weight...it is much more important that she be feminine and vigorous.” *Vogue* printed the measurements of three Courrèges models. The women on average stood 5 feet 8 inches, were 24 ½ years old, weighed 126 pounds, with bust measurements of 34.75, and uncommon hip proportions for a high-fashion model at nearly 37 inches. When asked about the curvaceousness of his models, he replied, “Hips are feminine. A woman needs hips to be a woman.”<sup>75</sup> Although tiny-bodied teens did not have a monopoly in high-fashion magazines, the impact of Courrèges’ curvy models was minimal. Twiggy was featured on the cover of

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<sup>75</sup> *Vogue*, “Beauty Bulletin: New Body – More Woman Than You’d Think,” November 1967, 136-138.

the November *Vogue* issue and nearly every other cover for the rest of the decade. In the 1970s, fashion mannequins began to display a wider range of physical types, but the impact of Twiggy-couture persisted. “Beauty” continued to be personified by youthfulness and slenderness.<sup>76</sup>

### Conclusions

American women faced very specific cosmetic ideals in the postwar period. In the 1940s and 1950s, the high-fashion industry and Hollywood promoted two very specific and unique body types – a hyper-skinny fashion model, and a shorter, more buxom and curvaceous pin-up girl, respectively. The buxom models of the 1950s gave way to what one scholar has described as an “almost relentless slenderization of the ideal of American women.”<sup>77</sup> In the 1960s, as Hollywood struggled to find female celebrities to take the place of the previous decades’ fading stars, women’s magazines continued to parade waifishly thin young women on their covers. In this way, the creators of cultural body ideals became more monolithic in the mid-1960s.

The victory of the thin ideal over the more curvaceous figure created by the “New Look” and Hollywood’s biggest stars signaled a win for young women taking control of their bodies and picturing a future beyond reproduction and patriarchal control. But the extreme slenderization was not without its damaging consequences. Feminist writers may have opposed Christian Dior’s “New Look” because of the fashion’s reliance on undergarments that manipulate the body in unnatural ways, but foundations like corsets, bras, and girdles also allowed women with less-than perfect figures to appear firmer and

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<sup>76</sup> Koda, *Extreme Beauty*, 2-3.

<sup>77</sup> Smith, *When Biology and Culture Collide*, 62.

more fit. When the 1960s arrived, and women threw away bras or turned away from bunched crinoline dresses in favor of miniskirts, they could no longer hide their “imperfections” beneath undergarment shapers.

Less undergarment foundations, and more minimalistic clothing meant stricter diet and exercise regimes for women who desired “fashionable” bodies. American designer Bill Blass noted in the *Ladies Home Journal*, “Until now it was fairly easy to find clothes that helped you hide figure faults, sloppy posture. But today’s pared-down knee-baring fashions have you out in the open now, and the only thing to do is shape up fast.” Designer Rudi Gernreich agreed. If one was not fashionably thin he argued, “You’ll just have to take weight off... Without that, you really can’t look fashionable.”<sup>78</sup> Women in the 1920s faced similar dilemmas when fashion of the day dictated that new bodily freedoms required higher levels of self-discipline. For those women for whom the ideal figure did not come naturally, many sought strategies to reshape their bodies. Despite the “freedom” from foundation garments that came with Twiggy-couture, paradoxically, the thin movement demanded women discipline their bodies even more rigorously to achieve a svelte figure.

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<sup>78</sup> *Ladies Home Journal*, “Exercise,” November 1965, 94.

## CHAPTER 2

“WE MUST, WE MUST, WE MUST INCREASE OUR BUST”

### UPLIFTING THE FEMININE BREAST

*“If you ever want to get out of those baby bras you have to exercise,” she told us.*

*“What kind of exercise?” Gretchen asked.*

*“Like this,” Nancy said. She made fists, bent her arms at the elbow and moved them back and forth, sticking her chest way out. She said, “I must - I must - I must increase my bust.” She said it over and over.*

*We copied her movements and chanted with her. “We must - we must - we must increase our bust!”*

*“Good,” Nancy told us. “Do it thirty-five times a day and I promise you’ll see results.”*

- Judy Blume, *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*

The main characters in Judy Blume’s coming of age tale, *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, are fixated on three things: getting “It” (their periods), boys, and breasts. Why? Judy Blume was a child of postwar America and wrote what she knew. The 1950s and 1960s were undoubtedly a time of “mammary madness.” Shapely, ample breasts remained a constant desire throughout this period even though the preferred shape and weight of the model female changed. From blonde, buxom Hollywood starlets, to the plethora of men’s pin-up magazines that thrived and died, to the sophistication of breast augmentation surgery, breasts reigned supreme in the decades after World War II.

Although fashions and ideal figures have come and gone, perhaps no singular female body part has experienced more shifting and unnatural shaping than breasts. As one scholar has noted, “The history of the chest is as much about its suppression as it is about its augmentation.”<sup>1</sup> Just as the ideal feminine figure went through a number of transformations since the turn of the century, so has the ideal breast. From the 1900s until World War I, the monobosom, a pigeon-like breast remained fashionable as a result of straight-front corsets. Around 1914, Caresse Crosby, a socialite also known as Mary Phelps Jacobs, received a patent for a bra-like contraption featuring a ribbon and two handkerchiefs. Historians of fashion debate who created the first bra, but it is generally agreed that Crosby’s patent most resembled what was perfected in later decades. During the 1920s, suppression rather than support became the function of brassieres. Young women bound their breasts with bands of chiffon, satin, or lace in order to obtain the fashionably boyish silhouette made popular by the “Flapper” girl. The flattened style fell out of popularity in the 1930s when bras once again served a more natural support function.<sup>2</sup>

Large-breasted women became fashionable only after World War II. Helping to usher in this new feminine ideal was the pen and colors of *Esquire* illustrator Albert Vargas. In 1941, Vargas popularized a slightly muscular female figure with rounded

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Koda, *Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 52.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the history of the brassiere and undergarments see Jane Farrell-Beck and Colleen Gau, *Uplift: The Bra in America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), Beatrice Fontanel, *Support and Seduction: A History of Corsets and Bras* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc.), Carolyn Latteier, *Breasts: The Women’s Perspective on an American Obsession* (New York: The Haworth Press, 1998), Teresa Riordan, *A History of the Innovations that Have Made Us Beautiful* (New York: Broadway, 2004), and Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

breasts. From the 1940s through 1960, the ideal breast size in America increased, as E. O. Smith observes, “due in no small part to the pen of Albert Vargas.”<sup>3</sup> In Alfred C. Kinsey’s 1953 study of female sexuality, the former entomologist noted that American males were more interested in breasts than European men, who preferred the lower half of women.<sup>4</sup> As one *Esquire* columnist observed of this phenomenon, “Confronted by such a bulge of blouse or sweater, the American male snorts like a caribou in the spring thaws. When an actress with cantaloupe contours appears on the screen,” he continued, “Marines stomp their feet, husbands tug at their leashes, and college boys roll their eyes like Tristains.”<sup>5</sup> The American admiration for large-breasted women was globally recognized. Reports surfaced about prostitutes in Asian countries receiving silicone injections into their breasts to better appeal to American soldiers stationed abroad, and Japan became a forerunner in breast augmentation procedures.<sup>6</sup>

Others recognized and marveled at the country’s fascination with mammary size. In a satirical anthropological essay about an imaginary tribe, the “Nacirema” (“American” spelt backwards), the author observes, “General dissatisfaction with breast shape is symbolized in the fact that the ideal form is virtually outside the range of human variation. A few women afflicted with almost inhuman hypermammary development are

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<sup>3</sup> E. O. Smith, *When Culture and Biology Collide: Why We Are Stressed, Depressed, and Self-Obsessed* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 61.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1953), 254-55.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Hecht, “Bosoms Away,” *Esquire*, July 1957, 73.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) 246; Philip J. Hilts, “Strange History of Silicone Held Many Warning Signs,” *New York Times*, January 18, 1992, 1.

so idolized that they make a handsome living by simply going from village to village and permitting the natives to stare at them.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, showing the power of naked female sexuality, in a fictional story, “The Breasts of the Durhams,” the Iron Curtain is destroyed when Allied soldiers befriend civilian Yugoslavs by hiring a burlesque dancer to entertain the men.<sup>8</sup>

Beauty and health guides from the period instructed women on the import of the bosom. “The curve of a smooth, velvety breast is particularly attractive; the lack of such a curve not only causes some to make coarse jokes on the subject, but actually repels,” one such manual claimed. “I have often, in my experience, heard men refer to a girl with some words such as: ‘She has a lovely face, but she has no breasts!’ And that settles the matter, so far as that man is concerned – and he is in the majority.”<sup>9</sup> Popular culture declared to women of the period that to find and keep the attentions of men, one needed large breasts. In addition, one’s employment could also be predicated on breast size. “It may be a sad commentary upon our civilization, and upon the efficacy of higher education,” one a journalist observed, “but in certain employment circles a well-filled sweater is as great an asset as a Phi Beta Kappa key.”<sup>10</sup>

Nowhere was the country’s adulation for large-breasted women more apparent than Hollywood. As one contemporary scholar has observed, “The unwritten law in

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<sup>7</sup> Horace Miner, “Body Ritual among the Nacirema,” *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 3 (1956): 506.

<sup>8</sup> G. R. Stevens, “The Breasts of the Durhams,” *Esquire*, May 1952, 50, 118.

<sup>9</sup> Zenda Daye, *How to Develop the Bust*, (Sydney: World Wide Mail Order, 1952).

<sup>10</sup> Victor Warren Quayle, “Beauty and the Bust,” *Esquire*, June 1954, 85.

which movie casting during the fifties was that ‘Only big busts need apply.’” Today, this breathy, buxom, dim-witted blonde made popular in the 1950s is synonymous with Marilyn Monroe. But even before the blonde bombshell made a splash in her first feature films, a buxom brunette was showing up on the walls of military barracks and dormitory rooms: Jane Russell. The actress appeared in Howard Hughes’ *The Outlaw* in 1943, but Russell’s breast-size had already made her a pin-up queen prior to the release of the film. In the article, “Who Will Fill Jane Russell’s Blouse?” a *Flirt* magazine author observed that Hollywood producers were quickly clamoring to find their own version of Russell or even a starlet who could “out-do her lush proportions.”<sup>11</sup>



*Figure 4. Monroe (left) and Russell make their mark outside of Grauman's Chinese Theater, 1953*

In a publicity tour for the musical comedy, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), Russell and her co-star, Marilyn Monroe, were top contenders in “the battle of the bosoms.” The two posed for a photograph so their measurements could be compared inch by inch. According to general consensus, Russell had prettier legs but Monroe had

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<sup>11</sup> *Flirt*, “Who Will Fill Jane Russell’s Blouse?” March 1948, 10-11.



more provocative eyes. However, as the column's author commented, "Who's looking at eyes, anyway."<sup>12</sup> Director Billy Wilder had once predicted that gamine actress Audrey Hepburn would "make bosoms obsolete," but not even she could shake America's preoccupation with breasts.<sup>13</sup>

Americans were certainly not blind to this fixation. Authors writing on the subject, male and female, were conscious that this was a new American phenomenon. One columnist noted, "Social historians of the future may, or may not, refer to the middle twentieth-century as the Uplift Age, but be that as it may, Hollywood, TV, and the fashion designers have exalted the female bosom in a manner unprecedented in modern times."<sup>14</sup> As a result, much contemporary speculation existed as to why large breasts had become so desired. Most contributed men's reaction to the end of the world war as the reasoning behind mammary madness. One author argued that in times of danger, for example war, "men turn to maternal female symbols" such as breasts. Further, he went on to hypothesize, in times of relative freedom women's hemlines rise, and men's focus turned towards legs, "which are sometimes interpreted as symbols of sexual freedom."<sup>15</sup>

Many worried that this fixation on breasts was an indicator of the infantilization of the American man. Ben Hecht, a columnist for *Esquire*, pointed out that a woman's breasts served "no sexual function" but were instead designed for infant nourishment.

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<sup>12</sup> *Screen Stars*, June 1953, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Benita Eisler, *Private Lives: Men and Women of the Fifties* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1986), 58.

<sup>14</sup> Quayle, "Beauty and the Bust," *Esquire*, June 1954, p. 85, 100.

<sup>15</sup> Robert W. Marks, "Motion Carried: The Legs Have It," *Esquire*, May 1954, 60.

According to Hecht, this was “scientific insight into our national mammary worship.”

The author also likened the American obsession with consumption as another sign of male infantilism, calling suburban homes adult “play pens.” He continued to argue that men who fixated on breasts similarly gravitated to then-President Dwight Eisenhower as a fatherly figure.<sup>16</sup> In response to the article, *Esquire* readers wrote in to discredit Hecht’s theory. One man protested the idea that American men were attracted to breasts because of a continued attachment to their mothers. Men, he argued, “have succeeded in cutting off all apron strings and think of the female breasts as an important part of the allure of a woman. They realize that a woman proudly displays well-rounded contours to male admirers as an integral part of her femaleness and to advertise her potential capabilities as a mother.”<sup>17</sup>

Since that time, scholars have attempted to make sense of this mammary phenomenon. One observer suggests that by dating women with large breasts, men showed their wealth; by affording the expenses that went along with maintaining a relationship with a large breasted woman, they commanded abundance.<sup>18</sup> Another has argued that the aftermath of World War II “frighten[ed] the Western world into a conservative retrenchment that brought back the breast.”<sup>19</sup> This theme of breasts acting as

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<sup>16</sup> Hecht, “Bosoms Away,” *Esquire*, July 1957, 73-74.

<sup>17</sup> *Esquire*, “The Sound and the Fury,” October 1957, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 67.

<sup>19</sup> Latteier, *Breasts*, 37.

a kind of reassuring, nurturing mother is mirrored in a number of other works.<sup>20</sup> The celebration of large breasted women, however, was not just a way for men to be sheltered after the horrors of World War II. Instead, the popularity of breasts was a response to the growing assertiveness of American women.

Women gained power and confidence during the war years; when veterans returned from abroad, at stake was the mythology that women were supposed to only be mothers and wives. Due to women's involvement in the masculine workforce during World War II, Americans worried about a perceived explosion of female sexuality.<sup>21</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey's publication in 1953, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, mirrored fears that "nice girls" did in fact have sex prior to marriage. Although men desired "well-equipped" mates, women in control of their sexuality produced more dread than desire. Hollywood personified these fears through the dangerous *femme fatales* in *film noir* of the 1940s and 1950s. What made the *femme fatale* so dangerous was not that she was a sexual being, but rather that she knowledgeably used her sexual allure to manipulate and ruin men. Early in her film career, Monroe herself was a *femme fatale* in films like *Don't Bother to Knock* (1952) and *Niagara* (1953).<sup>22</sup> But she is best remembered for her roles as the antithesis to the *femme* – the dumb blonde.

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<sup>20</sup> Fontanel, *Support and Seduction*; Yalom, *A History of the Breast*.

<sup>21</sup> See Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Joanne Meyerowitz, ed. *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Post-War America* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994); Joanna Pitman, *On Blondes* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 225.

<sup>22</sup> For further discussion of the *femme fatale* see *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

In the 1950s, as a woman's breasts got larger, her IQ became smaller. Although the alphabetic labeling of bra cup-sizes resembles a school grading system, it at first seems illogical that A's would be given to the smallest breasts. However, if one views women with larger cup sizes as less intelligent than small-breasted women, the sizing system suddenly makes sense.<sup>23</sup> When TV-personality Dagmar, who made a career out of being a large breasted, dumb blonde lost twenty pounds, she claimed she could now "think faster." The late-night star whittled inches from her figure, including her mammoth bust line, on a diet she noted "would kill most girls." "[T]oo much weight stymies my mind," Dagmar complained. "The fat was getting around my brain."<sup>24</sup> Dumb blondes, in the tradition of 1920s and 1930s chorus girls, helped to sanitize female sexuality and make it acceptable and accessible. These busty, blonde women might be out to ensnare a wealthy "Daddy," but their sexuality is innocent, naïve, and childlike.

Even movie stars from the 1940s, who previously had banked on their dancing, singing, or comedic talent suddenly lost their intellectual acumen in the 1950s. In 1953, Marilyn Monroe received top billing over 1940s pin-up girl, Betty Grable in *How to Marry a Millionaire*. As the film's title suggests, the plot revolves around three women who scheme together to marry rich men. Both Grable and Monroe, the blondes, rely on the intellect of the brunette Lauren Bacall to achieve their plan. In 1941 however, Grable had played out this exact same scheme in her film, *Moon over Miami*, but in that film,

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<sup>23</sup> Carolyn Latteier, "Cosmetic Breast Surgery: The Origins, 1945-1968," (MA Thesis, Washington State University, 1997), 45.

<sup>24</sup> Hal Boyle, "Dagmar Trims Off 20 Pounds: Claims She Can Think Faster with Less Poundage," *The Spokesman-Review*, January 22, 1953, 16.

Grable's blonde character had conceived of the plan herself. In the fifties, Grable became just another dumb blonde. Her former smart cracking, dancing and singing ways are reduced in *How to Marry a Millionaire* to comedic misunderstandings surrounding her severe lack of intellect and common sense. With their cartoon-like proportions, sexual abandon, and child-like innocence, "sweater girls" like Marilyn Monroe and her busty, blonde counterparts, were Hollywood's attempt to repress the growing assertiveness of American women.



*Figure 5. Betty Grable (left) and Marilyn Monroe in How to Marry a Millionaire (1953)*

Additionally, the Monroe-type reaffirmed masculinity and male heterosexuality in a decade where women not only challenged gender norms, but where manliness suffered a “crisis” and bachelorhood had become suspect.<sup>25</sup> One scholar notes the uneasiness regarding gender and sexuality in the era saying, “men had to look and act tough and

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<sup>25</sup> See Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: Gays and Lesbians in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

masculine; women had to appear as soft and pink as a nursery.”<sup>26</sup> As the average age of marriage dropped and anxieties about homosexuality elevated, busty women served the same role as men’s magazines like Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy*.<sup>27</sup> It is no coincidence that the Monroe-type and *Playboy* magazine originated in the same decade or that Monroe was *Playboy*’s first centerfold in December 1953.

This masculine desire for extreme femininity explains Hollywood’s decision to promote busty actresses. Because the Hollywood Production Code forbade exposing more than a few centimeters of visible cleavage, the studios, in an effort to outdo each other, encouraged their starlets to use padded bras and to strive for sheer size. Even Monroe, who appeared to be “all-natural,” reportedly wore breast padding when in bathing suits or strapless gowns designed to compress the bust.<sup>28</sup> “Eventually, the padded bras built us out to such mammoth dimensions that we felt a little self-conscious,” Mamie Van Doren remembers. “The bullet-shaped cones under our tight sweaters were just short of becoming hazards to navigation.”<sup>29</sup> Blonde, busty, and dumb protected and reaffirmed men’s masculinity. In a decade where the pressure to marry early and start a family had become overwhelming, Monroe and her wannabes created an uncomplicated escape.

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<sup>26</sup> Lattier, “Cosmetic Breast Surgery: The Origins, 1945-1968,” 11.

<sup>27</sup> For the role of *Playboy*, anxieties about homosexuality, and the destruction of the “breadwinner ethic,” see Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983).

<sup>28</sup> Audrey Minor, “Operation Hollywood: Custom Tailored Bosoms” *Confidential*, July 1954, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Mamie Van Doren, *Playing the Field: My Story* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1987), 71.

### **Damned If You Have Them – Damned If You Don’t**

Women were certainly not blind to the mammary madness of the postwar period. Indeed, many were active participants in reifying this masculine desire. One of the most oppressive impacts of this “Uplift Age” was its affect on adolescent girls. Young women reaching the age of puberty compared their chest-size to and pined to look like the Hollywood celebrities in fan magazines. Girls attached their self-worth to the size of their breasts. Menstruation, as well as breasts, was a sign that a young girl was becoming a woman, but as Nora Ephron observes, “But you could *see* breasts; they were there; they were visible.”<sup>30</sup> Without ample flesh to fill out their sweaters, American teens worried if they would ever find a boyfriend. Would they ever be desirable to men?

Nora Ephron self-identified as a tomboy in her adolescence. She could throw a football and climb trees, but instead of reveling in the ability to straddle both worlds, Ephron wanted desperately to be “a definite indisputable girl....And nothing would do that for me, I felt, but breasts.” She notes with disbelief that her mother was actually proud to be flat-chested. “It was incomprehensible to me that anyone could ever be proud of something like that. It was the 1950s, for God’s sake,” the writer declares. “Jane Russell. Cashmere sweaters. Couldn’t my mother see that?” Ephron recalls sobbing hysterically when she realized that her best friend had “shaped up” and grown breasts over the summer. She felt as though her life-long friend had left her behind.<sup>31</sup> Carolyn Latteier similarly recalls her own adolescence in the mid-1950s. “Being skinny and flat-

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<sup>30</sup> Nora Ephron, “A Few Words about Breasts,” *Esquire*, May 1972, 95.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

cheded became for me the symbol of my immaturity,” she remembers. “I felt the lack of breasts was an impoverishment of my own nature – a deep failure that was my fault.”<sup>32</sup>

Historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg notes that anxiety about breast size, more than any other body part, characterized the teenage experience during this era.<sup>33</sup> Because full breasts were the ideal, young American girls wrote in their diaries wistfully envying classmates with larger chests. Teens in gym class locker rooms discreetly compared themselves to other girls, noting who wore a bra and who did not. A 1944 teen survey in *Calling All Girls* discovered that 65 percent of readers wore bras, most buying their first between the ages of 13 and 15.<sup>34</sup> By the early 1950s, several styles of “training” bras were available in AA and AAA sizes for girls who did not require a bra, but wanted one nonetheless.

Adolescent girls were not just plagued by an absence of breasts; those who hit puberty earlier than their other female classmates faced similar anxieties about their chests. Ephron remembers her girl friends, for whom puberty had come early, complaining about the difficulties their breasts caused them. Teen boys snapped their bra straps in class, and they could not sleep on their stomachs. “They were stared at,” she recalls, “whenever the word ‘mountain’ cropped up in geography.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Latteier remembers two childhood friends who wore bulky clothes to “armor themselves” against

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<sup>32</sup> Latteier, *Breasts*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Joan Jacob Brumberg, *The Body Project: an Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997), 111-118.

<sup>34</sup> Kelly Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 51.

<sup>35</sup> Ephron, “A Few Words about Breasts,” 158.



other eight graders; they were just as alarmed with the size of their breasts as the author was to be flat-chested.<sup>36</sup>

This was not just a unique predicament to the typical adolescent girl. Even the bra size of teen celebrities came under scrutiny. Annette Funicello was the most popular Mouseketeer on the television program *The Mickey Mouse Club* from 1955 to 1959. Susan Douglas argues that Funicello was unique among the other Mouseketeers because she was favored by Disney and because “she was getting ‘them.’” The teen star’s breasts were envied by other girls, lusted after by boys, but also were the tagline of numerous jokes. Douglas contends that Funicello taught girls an early, uneasy lesson: “Girls were defined by their bodies,” she argues. “Girls were damned if they had big ones and damned if they had little ones.”<sup>37</sup>

Laura Danker, the chesty middle-schooler in Judy Blume’s *Are You There God, It’s Me Margaret* is evidence of this as well. Although she does nothing to actively provoke it, Laura is a character around whom much gossip is created because of her large breast size; her classmates all assume she is sexually active because she fills out her sweater. The story’s main character, Margaret, falsely believes that Laura is the teacher on her first day at her new school because the unfortunate middle-schooler hit puberty earlier than everyone else in class. When Margaret reveals the rumors about her, Laura is crushed. She challenges the unsympathetic protagonist to imagine what it would be like to have to wear a bra as early as the fourth grade, “and how everybody laughed and how

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<sup>36</sup> Latteier, *Breasts*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 31-32.

you always had to cross your arms in front of you,” the girl cries. “And about how the boys called you dirty names just because of how you looked.”<sup>38</sup> Although adolescence is a time of general bodily discomfort, during the postwar years, the size of a teen’s breasts caused more anxiety than any other transitioning body part. But unlike other unalterable aspects like height and skeletal structure, breast development came to be interpreted as something women could control.



*Figure 6. Annette Funicello as a Mouseketeer in 1955 (left) and later in the 1960s as DeeDee in the popular teen beach party movies*

### **Cashing In: Breast Enlargement Schemes**

The obsessive focus on women’s breasts and its symbolic and erotic import encouraged numerous entrepreneurs to cash in on the country’s mammary madness. A brief scan of women’s and celebrity fan magazines from the decades reveals ads whose products all promise the same thing – a larger bust for the less-than-fortunate woman.

<sup>38</sup> Blume, *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, 117.

Most advertisements gave little indication of *how* their product produced an inflated bust line, but “before” and “after” illustrations promised potential customers they could achieve the desired results. To curb the numerous attempts to exploit women’s desire for larger breasts, the FDA routinely confiscated pills and creams during raids on manufacturing plants, and the United States Post Office charged mail-order companies with mail fraud, invoking criminal charges on those responsible for scam products.

Three categories of bosom building products – vitamins, bust creams, and hydro-massage – filled the back pages of women’s fashion, teen, and fan magazines. Vitamin supplements like “PRO-FORMA” promised to “restore your breasts to feminine beauty” in just six to twelve weeks. Ironically, *pro forma* is Latin for perfunctory, or to seek a minimum requirement and conforming to conventions. The active ingredient in “PRO-FORMA,” was Extract of Galega, a plant that increases lactation. The product bottle read: “On the basis of their research and experience, our medical advisers have stated that extract of galega has helped some women to make their breasts fuller and firmer. However, the material weight of medical opinion is to the contrary.”<sup>39</sup> Officers for Tyler Pharmacal Distributors, Inc., manufacturers of “PRO-FORMA,” tangled with the FDA and the Post Office for the better part of a decade when the product was deemed “ineffective.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Charles D. Ablard, “In the Matter of the Complaint Against Tyler Pharmacal Distributors, Inc.” H.E. Docket No. 4/232, July, 14, 1958. HYPERLINK "<http://www.usps.com/judicial/1958deci/4-232.htm>" <http://www.usps.com/judicial/1958deci/4-232.htm> (last accessed 1 March 2011).

<sup>40</sup> *Tyler Pharmacal Distributors, Inc., Plaintiff-Appellant v. U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Defendant-Appellee*. Docket No.16637, United States Court of Appeals Seventh Circuit, March 5, 1969. HYPERLINK "<http://ftp.resource.org/courts.gov/c/F2/408/408.F2d.95.16637.16643.html>" <http://ftp.resource.org/courts.gov/c/F2/408/408.F2d.95.16637.16643.html> (last accessed 1 March 2011).

Advertisements for bust-creams promised the dutiful application of their product would encourage the growth of mammary tissue. One lotion, “Formalon,” claimed its product to be the greatest invention since the atomic bomb or penicillin.<sup>41</sup> The secret of such creams was small doses of estrogen that temporarily increased a woman’s breast size. If application of these products ceased, however, the bust returned to its original size. These were not just harmless product scams, however. Physicians believed that prolonged use of estrogenic products affected normal body functions like a woman’s menstruation cycle. Daniel Platt of the Formalon Company pled guilty to charges of “misbranding” in 1948. The “before” and “after” pictures in advertising were discovered to be fraudulent. He was fined \$3,000 and given a suspended sentence of three years in jail.<sup>42</sup>

Other products like “Abunda,” “Lady Bountiful,” “Lady Ample,” and “Voluptae,” guaranteed larger breasts through hydro-massage or with the use of a small vacuum. The main device of such products consisted of small plastic cups to which a hose was attached. Printed instructions directed the user to attach the suction cups to her naked breasts and the hose to a water faucet, which created a vacuum when the tap was turned on. Women were instructed to “exercise” with the device for 20 minutes a day with the

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<sup>41</sup> Formalon advertisement, American Medical Association (AMA) archives, Chicago, Illinois, 0287-20.

<sup>42</sup> “Misbranding of Formalon Cream.” *United States v. Daniel Platt (Formalon Company)* F.D.C. No. 21466. January, 23, 1948. United States National Library of Medicine. HYPERLINK "<http://archive.nlm.nih.gov/fdanj/handle/123456789/11293>" <http://archive.nlm.nih.gov/fdanj/handle/123456789/11293> (last accessed 1 March 2011).

false promise that massage would increase blood circulation and encourage tissue growth.<sup>43</sup>

Women did not blindly send in for these largely mail-order products. Their skepticism can be seen in the numerous letters sent to the American Medical Association (AMA) inquiring if bust-enhancing products were effective and safe. Oliver Field, Director of the AMA's Investigations Bureau noted, "There seems to be no end to the gullibility of the ladies when it comes to redoing the works of Nature in the vicinity of the chest. We have received inquires by the score on surgical procedures, hand pumps, and even pills put out by those who realize there is gold in them thar [sic] hills, particularly those cute little hills."<sup>44</sup> The AMA religiously reported that there was no known exercise, preparation, or mechanical device that could increase the size of a woman's breasts.<sup>45</sup>

No "grand deceiver," however, was paid as much attention to as "falsies." In 1948, more than 4.5 million pairs of falsies were sold in the country, causing the bra inserts to become a multimillion-dollar industry. In addition to plush padding, in 1952, the Very Secret, a bra with inflatable cups was introduced. But the "secret" would only remain as long as the woman stayed away from sharp objects or the eager hands of her partner. *Esquire* contributor Victor Warren Quayle argued that falsies created "equality"

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<sup>43</sup> Lady Ample files, AMA archives, Chicago, Illinois 0095-06.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Oliver Field to Art H. Cole, Cleveland Better Business Bureau, July 23, 1954, AMA archives, Chicago, Illinois 0095-19.

<sup>45</sup> "Facts You Should Know About Health Quackery," Better Business Bureau Educational Committee, December 1971, 7. AMA archives, Chicago, Illinois, 0018-12.

for flat-chested women.<sup>46</sup> Another *Esquire* author described, “A type for every personality is provided, ranging in dimensions from the coy and cute Tip Toe Through the Tulips to the Stop, Look and Listen number, favored by ladies who live near dangerous railroad crossings.”<sup>47</sup> Flat-chested women were told not to be embarrassed by the fake padding. Edith Head, top costume designer for Paramount Pictures, told cinema fans, “If you are flatter than you wish you were...remember, there is nothing wrong with bust pads. It is very stupid to pretend there are no such things.”<sup>48</sup>

Joan Bennett, actress and beauty columnist for *Screen Stars*, similarly urged her readers in this “bosom-minded generation” that there was no disgrace in wearing falsies or having a padded bra. She equating the bra cushioning with the shoulder pads that one wears in a suit coat, noting, “There have to be alterations for every figure.”<sup>49</sup> Women of all ages wrote in to Bennett in the early 1950s. Many said they were satisfied with their figures except for the size of their breasts. Young teens lamented not filling out even 32A cups, and mothers decried losing cup sizes after the birth of their children. Bennett reminded her readers that no exercise could increase ones cup size, but that building up the chest muscles that support the breast could add inches to one’s measurements. Rather than simply relying on falsies, however, she suggested an exercise like Nancy Walker’s “we must, we must” exercise in *Are You There God, It’s Me Margaret*. Similar bust-

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<sup>46</sup> Quayle, “Beauty and the Bust,” *Esquire*, June 1954, 109.

<sup>47</sup> Herb Graffis, “Figures About Females,” *Esquire*, February 1951, 75.

<sup>48</sup> Edith Head and Paddy Calistro, *Edith Head’s Hollywood* (New York: E. P. Dutton, Inc., 1983), 65.

<sup>49</sup> Joan Bennett, “Yours For Beauty,” *Screen Stars*, February 1952, 47, 92.

enhancing regimes appeared in guidebooks and other prescriptive literature: “Fold your arms in front of you and grab each arm with the opposite hand just in front of the elbow. Push in with hard, jerky movements. You can tell you are doing the exercise correctly because you can feel the breasts move around the muscles tightening.” If practiced religiously day and night for ten to fifteen minutes, Bennett claimed one would see results in a few months. And while waiting, she urged her readers to purchase a Peter Pan bra – with build-in pads stitched into the cups.<sup>50</sup>

Other cultural advisors were not fully behind bra padding. One beauty guidebook advised, “strive for individuality. With false breasts you cannot have individuality. The false bosom is standardized; it is unnatural.”<sup>51</sup> Moreover, while falsies and other kinds of cushioning might give a girl a boost of confidence, the specter of discovery always held the promise of panic. Embarrassing stories dealing with falsie mishaps litter both men’s and women’s magazines as well as fiction of the time. One woman’s falsies popped out while swimming, and they floated past other swimmers. Another’s escaped the confines of her bra at the movies and landed in the lap of another moviegoer.<sup>52</sup> Nora Ephron’s extra padding brought on anxiety when she had her first boyfriend in high school. She enjoyed being intimate with him, but was terrified that while doing so, the teen boy would discover the padding and lack of natural breasts in her bra. Moreover, she incredulously wondered how no one had ever commented on the padding since she

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<sup>50</sup> Joan Bennett, “Yours for Beauty,” *Screen Stars*, August 1951, 84.

<sup>51</sup> Daye, *How to Develop the Bust* (1952), 3.

<sup>52</sup> Quayle, “Beauty and the Bust,” *Esquire*, June 1954, 109, 97

owned three bras, each with a different size cup. “Each time I changed bras,” she notes, “I changed sizes.” Getting jostled could cause the extra foam to poke inward. Ephron marvels, “I think about all that and wonder how anyone kept a straight face about it.”<sup>53</sup>

The fear of “discovery” is mirrored in literature as well. Margaret, Judy Blume’s adolescent heroine, stuffs her bra with cotton balls when she attends a co-ed birthday party. She quickly worries about the extra padding however, when the party games shift from pin-the-tail on the donkey in favor of more adult games like “7 Minutes in Heaven.”<sup>54</sup> When Annice, one of the roommates in Valerie Taylor’s *The Girls in 3-B*, first meets her eventual boyfriend Alan, she feels like a phony from her attempted beatnik poetry to her falsies. The two become intimate and Alan discovers her bra padding and calls her out on it: “You don’t have much of a milk fund, do you? You wear falsies.” Annice is horrified and shields her vulnerability with anger. “It’s only slight padding,” she insists, “and besides, it’s none of your goddam [sic] business.” Even after they have sex for the first time, Annice is still embarrassed by the sight of her padded bra lying on the floor.<sup>55</sup> Erika Frohman in Taylor’s *Journey to Fulfillment* similarly panics when “parking” with her date. When the high school boy moves his hand closer to the top of her strapless dress, Erika becomes unnerved, fearing he will discover the foam-rubber padding in her strapless bra. “It was a ridiculous thing to think about at a time like this,”

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<sup>53</sup> Ephron, “A Few Words about Breasts,” 96.

<sup>54</sup> Blume, *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, 44, 92

<sup>55</sup> Valerie Taylor, *The Girls in 3-B* (New York: Midwood Tower, 1964) 134.



Taylor writes, “but she was ashamed of the pretense which Judy and Peg and even Mrs. Miller had urged upon her.”<sup>56</sup>

Falsies eventually became less popular in the 1960s. Whereas early in the 1950s the Sears Roebuck catalogue had offered over 20 kinds of bra inserts, by 1961 that number had fallen to 6; by 1966, only three shapes of falsies were available from the mail-in catalogue.<sup>57</sup> One woman declared she would still rather wear falsies than exercise, however: “I’m not going to exercise to get what I can buy.”<sup>58</sup> But because of the obvious problems with padded bras, inserts, and inflatable bras, other ways to obtain a larger bust were desired.

### **Plastic Surgery**

Developing alongside new ways to change the size and shape of one’s breasts through diet, exercise, and padded bras, cosmetic surgery became more sophisticated and acceptable to the average American. Plastic surgery was still in its genesis as late as the 1920s; the profession was not strictly defined and its practitioners’ place on hospital staffs was questioned. But with the end of World War II and the need to rehabilitate injured GIs, plastic surgery quickly developed as a field and a practice.<sup>59</sup> By the 1950s, corrective procedures were no longer confined to those with physical deformities or only available to Hollywood celebrities. In 1949, 15,000 Americans underwent plastic surgery

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<sup>56</sup> Taylor, *Journey to Fulfillment* (New York: Midwood Tower, 1964) 134.

<sup>57</sup> Sears Roebuck Catalogue (Chicago, IL: Sears, Roebuck and Co., 1961), 205-226; Sears Roebuck Catalogue – Fall and Winter (Chicago, IL: Sears, Roebuck and Co., 1966), 447.

<sup>58</sup> Quayle, “Beauty and the Bust,” *Esquire*, June 1954, 109.

<sup>59</sup> Gustave Aufricht, “The Development of Plastic Surgery in the United States,” *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 1, no. 1 (July 1946), 3, 21-22.

operations. A decade later, the number increased tenfold, to 150,000, and by 1969 nearly half a million people obtained cosmetic corrections.<sup>60</sup>

Although cosmetic surgery was perfected due to the need for reconstructive surgery for injured GIs after World War II, increasingly Americans viewed it as desirable for the rest of the population as well. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, magazine articles appeared discussing the relative safety, ease, and manageable price of cosmetic corrections ranging from face lifts to breast augmentation.<sup>61</sup> Over half of Dr. M. T. Edgerton's breast augmentation patients reported they had originally read about the operation in magazines.<sup>62</sup> Readers were assured that recovery time was minimal and more common operations were not egregiously expensive. Fashion magazines urged their readership to not be embarrassed to talk about plastic surgery with their doctors. One periodical even proposed confronting the operation like an architect discussing plans for a new building.<sup>63</sup>

Teen magazines, unlike women's fashion magazines, did not present a uniform attitude about plastic surgery. Joan Bennett advocated plastic surgery in *Screen Stars*, but only if the patient was at least 18 years old or if her features were fully matured.<sup>64</sup> Young readers were cautioned not to pursue cosmetic operations without good cause. As

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<sup>60</sup> Harriet La Barre, *Plastic Surgery: Beauty You Can Buy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Wilson, 1970), 1.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-141; *Vogue*, "The Perfect Bosom," July 1968, 91.

<sup>62</sup> M. T. Edgerton and A. R. McClary, "Augmentation Mammoplasty: Psychiatric Implications and Surgical Indications" *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* April 1958, 280, 294.

<sup>63</sup> *Vogue*, "Bosom Perfection: New Possibilities," October 1959, 139.

<sup>64</sup> Joan Bennett, "Yours For Beauty," *Screen Stars*, April 1951, 81.

one article advised its readers, “If all you want is relief from boredom, go out and join some joggers or form a folk-rock group.”<sup>65</sup> Some argued that anxieties about specific body features could manifest in other areas even if the problem area was surgically corrected. Other articles, however, mirroring more mature publications, noted that plastic surgery was no longer taboo and that it was now possible to have “a nose straightened, or a chin strengthened without... gossip.”<sup>66</sup>

While cosmetic surgery became more accessible to the average American, historian Elizabeth Haiken finds few instances of African Americans pursuing these corrective procedures. She argues that those who sought surgery did so to improve their economic situation.<sup>67</sup> In this way, black cosmetic surgery patients mirrored the desires of models and starlets who believed larger breasts would help them in a competitive job market. Although no mention of breast implants or surgical weight reductions entered the conversation in *Ebony* and other black periodicals, some black women sought plastic surgery to alter their faces to better resemble Anglo-Saxon features. In the 1950s and 1960s, rhinoplasty was also popular among women of Jewish or Middle Eastern descent. Two of the most popular “corrections” within the African American community were nose narrowing and lip thinning. One surgeon in Harlem claimed that ninety percent of his operations were those two procedures.<sup>68</sup> An advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* proclaimed that the surgery was inexpensive, relatively painless, with little chance of

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<sup>65</sup> *Seventeen*, “I Hate My Nose,” September 1968, 131.

<sup>66</sup> Arthur Roth, “Do you need a new nose?” *Teen*, December 1959, 20.

<sup>67</sup> Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 213.

<sup>68</sup> *Ebony*, “Plastic Surgery: Many Negroes Narrow Noses, Thin Lips Through Operations,” May 1949, 19.

scarring.<sup>69</sup> One Chicago model, 25-year-old Marjorie Zinn, boasted that after surgery, her new features made her face look leaner, her cheekbones higher, and a new dimple had even appeared in her smile.<sup>70</sup> However, as articles, photography, and letters to the editor in *Ebony* and other black periodicals magazine reveal, women like Zinn were in the minority; in the postwar era, black women began to rebel against the idea of a universal (white) beauty ideal.

A number of corrective and cosmetic surgeries were perfected in the years immediately following World War II.<sup>71</sup> The advancement of many procedures, particularly facial reconstruction and skin grafts, came as a result of injuries sustained during the war. But one surgical method gained in popularity unconnected to the aftermath of wartime combat – female breast augmentation. Plastic surgeons recognized that falsies and other attempts to less intrusively correct small breasts were wholly unsuccessful. Swimsuits and other fashionably scant apparel called for an alternate and better solution to the small-breasted woman’s problems. Moreover, hand creams, hydro-massage, exercise, hormone treatments, and vitamins were equally unsuccessful.

One of the earliest examples of breast augmentation appeared in the 1890s when Dr. Robert Gersuny of Vienna used paraffin injections to increase women’s breast size.

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<sup>69</sup> *Chicago Defender*, “Advertisement,” February 11, 1956, 10.

<sup>70</sup> *Ebony*, “The Girl Who Changed Her Face,” March 1956, 77-79.

<sup>71</sup> For a further discussion on the history of cosmetic and plastic surgery see Sander L. Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997). Both authors are more concerned with a timeline of plastic surgeries – when each was developed and by whom. While valuable, my work focuses more on the social and cultural meanings and motivations for having large breasts.

The practice halted prior to World War I when paraffin was discovered traveling to other places in the body besides the breasts.<sup>72</sup> In the 1920s, breast reduction procedures regained popularity to help women suffering from *gigantomastia*, a term created to describe the “condition” of large breasted women. It seems too coincidental, however, that breast reduction surgery technologies became more sophisticated and accepted in a decade largely defined by fashionable women binding their breasts. Medical literature on the reduction procedures generally concerned themselves with preserving the lactation function of the breast through nipple transplantation rather than attention to protecting the erotic function.<sup>73</sup>

By the 1930s, because of the mental and physical anguish suffered by those with *gigantomastia*, breast reduction surgery was accepted in medical circles. Plastic surgeon H. O. Bames argued that the procedure not only relieved the patient from physical discomfort, but from mental suffering as well, noting, “the former feeling of depression and inferiority is replaced by heightened morale, happiness and feminine pride.”<sup>74</sup> These same themes – happiness and femininity – were later used during the 1950s to justify the need for breast enlargement surgery.

Surgeons after World War II originally displayed little sympathy for small-breasted women. Historian Elizabeth Haiken notes that this attitude quickly changed when a consumer market appeared for the procedure – women encouraged by fashion

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<sup>72</sup> Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 233.

<sup>73</sup> Jacques W. Maliniac, “Evaluation of Principal Mamaplastic Procedures,” *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* (July 1949): 359-373.

<sup>74</sup> H. O. Bames, “Reduction of Massive Breast Hypertrophy,” *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 3, no. 5 (September 1948): 569.

magazines, eager to fill-out Dior’s “New Look” and inspired by busty movie stars, all clamored for ways to increase their breast size.<sup>75</sup> In 1950, cosmetic surgeon H. O. Bames identified three types of breast “deformities”: (1) *Hypomastia*, or the underdevelopment of breasts, (2) *Hypermastia*, or overdevelopment of the breast between two to three times what was considered typical and (3) *Gigantomastia*, which he labeled as when each breast weighed ten or more pounds. Bames did not “invent” these terms – they had been a part of medical literature for centuries; but for the first time, all three “maladies” were now defined as “problems” worthy of medical attention. Bames noted that the correction of the latter two “diseases” was already receiving consideration from doctors because of the physical distress overly large breasts caused women. But Bames also observed that *hypomastia* had recently begun to garner attention.<sup>76</sup>

Soon after the end of World War II, physicians in the United States began experimentally inserting various kinds of sponges behind women’s mammary glands to increase breast size. The postwar zeal for science and technology also encouraged this experimentation. The very first breast augmentation patients were women whose careers generally depended on breast size – actresses, burlesque dancers, and other kinds of entertainers. The busiest surgeons were located in Hollywood “where a correctly-turned bosom is more important to an actress’ career than whether she can recite ‘Twelfth

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<sup>75</sup> Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 236.

<sup>76</sup> H.O. Bames, “Breast Malformations and a New Approach To the Problem of the Small Breast” *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 5, no. 6 (June 1950):499-506.

Night.”<sup>77</sup> Fan magazines awarded little attention to the plastic surgery stories of celebrities – no one wanted to read that their favorite cover girl was made of plastic. Magazines like *Confession* and *True*, more tabloid than fan magazine, did not shy away from the topic, however. *Confidential* magazine reported that Tallulah Bankhead, Marlene Dietrich, Gloria Swanson, starlet Sara Shane, and Olympic skater-turned-actress, Sonja Henie, had all gone under the knife. Most of these women, however, were either older actresses trying to compete with younger stars or up-and-coming actresses looking for a title role. Box office stars like Audrey Hepburn, Hedy Lamarr, and Marilyn Monroe were rumored to wear falsies.<sup>78</sup> Reports in recent years have surfaced, however, that pioneering plastic surgeon W. John Pangman implanted Ivalon implants into Monroe or that she had direct silicone injections that became infected just before her death.<sup>79</sup>

By the mid-1950s actress, model, and dancer plastic surgery patients became the minority for breast enhancements. Once the surgery was more accepted and sophisticated, the majority of patients came from two specific groups of women. The first and largest pool consisted of adult women, most married and with children. The second group was made up of young women ranging from sixteen to their early twenties. About two-thirds of patients, it was reported, had a sense of inadequacy about their breast

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<sup>77</sup> Audrey Minor, “Operation Hollywood: Custom Tailored Bosoms,” *Confidential* (July 1954), 14.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-15, 64-65.

<sup>79</sup> Joan Kron, “Nipping and Tucking in Tinseltown,” *Allure*, May 1995, "[http://www.facelift.com/1995\\_niptucktinseltown\\_home.html](http://www.facelift.com/1995_niptucktinseltown_home.html)" [http://www.facelift.com/1995\\_niptucktinseltown\\_home.html](http://www.facelift.com/1995_niptucktinseltown_home.html) (last accessed 1 March 2011); Teresa Riordan, *Inventing Beauty: A History of the Innovations that Have Made Us Beautiful* (New York: Broadway, 2004), 110.

size since adolescence. The other one-third experienced dissatisfaction with their breasts after the birth of a child.<sup>80</sup> A March 1960 survey sent out to 500 plastic surgeons in the United States and Canada reported a total of 2,008 reduction mammoplasties compared to 2,516 patients who underwent breast enlargement surgery.<sup>81</sup> A later questionnaire sent out in mid-August of the same year recorded that the majority of physicians performed only 1 to 50 breast augmentation surgeries.<sup>82</sup> One doctor, however, reportedly had operated on 3,000 women. This surgeon, no doubt, was Dr. Robert Franklyn.

Robert A. Franklyn, born Frank Mark Eisenberg, graduated from New York University College of Medicine in 1941. Although he was licensed to practice medicine in New York, California, and New Jersey, he was not a member of any specialty group in plastic surgery, nor was he a member of his local medical society or the American Medical Association. Franklyn first appeared in medical journals in the 1940s regarding his work with cosmetic facial surgeries. In the early 1950s, however, recognizing the demand for a successful breast implant, he turned his energies to breast augmentation. In 1953, Franklyn advertised his unique surgery in *Pageant* magazine, a digest-sized periodical that appeared as a Sunday newspaper insert. Franklyn claimed that over 4 million women suffered from *micromastia* (immature breasts) and “an accompanying

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<sup>80</sup> M. T. Edgerton, E. Meyer, and W.E. Jacobson, “Augmentation Mammoplasty II: Further Surgical and Psychiatric Evaluation,” *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 27, no. 3 (March 1961): 296-297.

<sup>81</sup> Reuven K. Snyderman and Jesus G. Lizardo, “Statistical Study of Malignancies Found Before, During, or After Routine Breast Plastic Operations,” *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 25, no. 3 (March 1960): 253-256.

<sup>82</sup> Harold I. Harris, “Survey of Breast Implants from the Point of View of Carcinogenesis,” *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 28, no. 1 (July 1961): 82.



sense of deficient femininity.” He estimated that one-third of these women experienced “acute psychological disturbances that border on the tragic.” The doctor pointed out how other kinds of plastic surgery, exercise, diet, hormone injections, and creams failed to create a realistic natural breast. Franklyn went on to describe his procedure, which he claimed was a relatively easy and inexpensive, 25-minute operation.

<sup>83</sup> In 1956, Franklyn reported he averaged 10 to 15 “breast platform” operations a week.<sup>84</sup>

By 1967, it was estimated that the self-proclaimed “Dr. Beauty” had performed 10,000 surgeries and that his operation now only took 15 minutes.<sup>85</sup>

In reaction to his article in *Pageant*, the American Medical Association was flooded with inquiries from both men and women seeking more information about Franklyn and other surgeons who could perform a similar “Breastaplasty” surgery. The interest in Franklyn was so high, the AMA responded in November of that year with a report against Franklyn’s ethics and continued to investigate the material he was implanting behind women’s pectoral muscles. At first doctors, working in conjunction with the AMA, believed Franklyn used a compound known as Ivalon, a polyvinyl alcohol and formaldehyde sponge originally created at the Mayo Clinic by Drs. John H. Grindley and John M. Waugh.<sup>86</sup> Ivalon was fallible as an implant because after surgery, the

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<sup>83</sup> Robert Franklyn, “Breastaplasty: The Operation that Remolds Flat-chested Women,” *Pageant*, August 1953, 68-75.

<sup>84</sup> Armand Hartley, “Surgery’s New Miracle: Permanent Curves!” *Confidential*, January 1956, 19, 46.

<sup>85</sup> Ralph Lee Smith, “All the Twiggies Want to be Sophia,” *True*, November 1967, 81-82.

<sup>86</sup> W. John Pangman, *Southern General Practitioner of Medicine and Surgery* 115, no. 12, (December 1953), np.

sponge shrank as much as 20 percent and often hardened and calcified. The secretive surgeon denied using Ivalon and refused to reveal of which materials his foam insert consisted, intensifying the tenuous relationship between himself and the AMA. He later marketed his sponge as Surgifoam.

Breast inserts were not the only surgical avenue cosmetic doctors explored. In the 1920s and 1930s, surgeons also had begun experimenting with a technique called autologous fat transplantation, wherein fatty tissue usually found in the abdomen or buttocks was transferred to the breast. This technique continued into the 1950s. Although the early results of this method were generally satisfactory, the body often reabsorbed the transplanted fat or caused unsightly bulges and cysts that made early breast cancer detection difficult. In addition, the donor site scars on the abdomen or buttocks were objectionable.<sup>87</sup> Despite these complications, surgeons such as Dr. Gustave Aufrecht, attending surgeon at New York's Lenox Hill Hospital continued favoring fat transplation over Ivalon implants because he argued, "It just will not do to have a lump as hard as a baseball inside the breast."<sup>88</sup> Although complications existed for surgeons who used autologous fat transplantation as well as those who subscribed to foam inserts, the AMA responded with the names of plastic surgeons at the request of women who had seen an article in a magazine and now wanted breast augmentation. They continued to caution, however, against Dr. Franklyn's "Breastaplasty" surgery.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Michael Gurdin and Gene A. Carlin, "Complications of Breast Implantations," *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 40, no. 6 (December 1967), 530; Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 236.

<sup>88</sup> *Chicago Defender*, "Surgeon Reports Success in Building in Uplifts," November 6, 1957, 9.

<sup>89</sup> Robert Alan Franklyn files, AMA archives, Chicago, Illinois, 0288-13.

The search for a more perfect implant continued into the 1960s. Doctors identified six characteristics for the ideal implant: (1) chemically and physically inert; (2) remain soft; (3) no shrinkage; (4) look and feel as natural as possible; (5) not cause fluid formation, inflammation or infection, and; (6) once inserted beneath the skin, become firmly attached to body tissues.<sup>90</sup> In 1962, two Houston plastic surgeons, Thomas Cronin and Frank Gerow, in conjunction with the Dow Corning Corporation, developed the first silicone implant prototype. By filling inflatable silicone bags with hospital-grade silicone gel, three sizes of the mold were made: small, medium, and large, the latter being thought only to be desired by burlesque dancers.<sup>91</sup> The Cronin implants, also known as Simaplast, were such a success that women who were dissatisfied with their Ivalon implants because they shrank or hardened removed the original implants and replaced them with silicone.<sup>92</sup> Dow Corning was able to sell the silicone implants without regulation because the FDA did not yet have authority over medical devices.<sup>93</sup>

Although silicone gel breast implants were widely accepted as the safest and the most satisfactory way to augment the size of a woman's breasts, other versions continued to be utilized. One San Francisco topless dancer, Carol Doda, infamously went

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<sup>90</sup> Benjamin F. Edwards, "Teflon-Silicone Breast Implants," *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 32, no. 4 (November 1963): 519.

<sup>91</sup> Latteier, "Cosmetic Breast Surgery: The Origins, 1945-1968," 20.

<sup>92</sup> Paule C. Regnault, "Indications for Breast Augmentation," *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 40, no. 6 (December 1967): 526.

<sup>93</sup> The Medical Device Amendment to the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetics Act gave the FDA authority over medical devices in May 1976. "<http://www.fda.gov/medicaldevices/>" <http://www.fda.gov/medicaldevices/> (last accessed 3 March 2011).

overboard with liquid silicone injections, ballooning her bust from 36 to 44 inches.<sup>94</sup>

The procedure was similar to the earliest paraffin injections wherein the material was directly injected into the skin, rather than a silicone-filled implant being inserted behind the pectoral wall. Silicone injections were deemed “unethical” by the California Society of Plastic Surgeons and banned by the FDA in 1965. In the face of these restrictions, some surgeons continued to use the injections. One such doctor was Robert Franklyn. Despite the popularity and apparent success of silicone implants, Franklyn used silicone injections to firm the breasts of women who had suffered *ptosis* as a result of breast feeding. He called his procedure, “Cleopatra’s Needle.” When the silicone injections were not enough, however, the doctor turned to a new material – Teflon. Franklyn claimed that the material would last 300 years and that the procedure “makes it possible for a 90-year-old woman to have breasts like a teenager.” Moreover, he boasted his new technique was now only a 5-minute operation.<sup>95</sup>

Plastic surgeons universally agreed that corrective procedures for physical deformities improved one’s daily life. Mammoplasty surgeries, however, provided a new justification – psychological relief. Surgeries like rhinoplasty, face lifts, or the correction of a cleft lip could improve a patient’s psychological being, but breast augmentation stood out because it served no aesthetic function that falsies or a padded bra could not correct. Only the woman and perhaps her significant other would know the truth. Moreover, small breasts were a unique concern because they threatened a woman’s

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<sup>94</sup> Bruce Davidson, “The Naked Luncheon,” *Esquire*, March 1966, 99.

<sup>95</sup> Hugh Wyatt, “Girls Can Put On Teflon Front Now,” *Daily News*, June 27, 1970.

femininity. Even if a woman had a too-large nose or ears that stuck out, these physical features did not affect her gender identity.

At a meeting of gynecologists, Dr. Goodrich Schouffler of the University of Oregon observed that many American women were developing “a highly-dangerous bosom complex.”<sup>96</sup> “Whether one views them as the victims of the attitudes of a crass society, or as uniquely distorted character problems in a psychiatric sense, none-the-less,” Dr. M. T. Edgerton wrote, “their lives and often the lives of their husbands and families are made miserable by the development of such conflicts.”<sup>97</sup> Blaming advertisements and “questionable publicity,” the respected surgeon asserted that many physically normal women had developed “an almost paralyzing self-consciousness” and that his patients “were in sad and even neurotic condition” because of their small breasts. He noted that some had even sought psychiatric help.<sup>98</sup> Dr. H. O. Bames attributed these anxieties on “our cult of the body beautiful.” He argued that excessive dieting to achieve a sylph-like figure was partly to blame for insufficient breast volume, and noted, “the fair sex has decided that in order to present such a desirable figure, it is easier to pad a little where needed than to hide the bulges which result from a more liberal food allowance.”<sup>99</sup>

Although doctors had few qualms about justifying breast augmentation surgery

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<sup>96</sup> Jay Smith, “The Big Bosom Battle,” *Playboy*, September 1955, 26.

<sup>97</sup> Edgerton and McClary, “Augmentation Mammoplasty,” *PRS* 21, no. 4 (April 1958): 279.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 244; *Chicago Defender*, “Surgeon Reports Success in Building In Uplifts,” November 6, 1957, 9.

<sup>99</sup> Bames, “Breast Malformations and a New Approach To the Problem of the Small Breast,” *PRS* 5, no. 6 (June 1950): 499-506.

for adult women, they were largely against the procedure for teenage girls. One doctor, writing in *Teen* magazine argued, “Styles in body shapes change just as styles in clothes change. There are certainly very few situations in which it’s wise to proceed with surgery that increases the size of the breasts.” Although this doctor encouraged young women to pursue cosmetic surgery to correct nose, chin, and skin blemishes, in regards to breasts he noted, “the individual natural contours are better left the way they are.”<sup>100</sup> Physicians argued that if a teen was not emotionally mature enough, or if their Freudian “ego” was not developed, breast augmentation could cause severe anxiety post-operation. One surgeon described a recent teen patient who, after her surgery, worried that her implants would “fall out” or “explode.”<sup>101</sup>

Mammoplasty patients differed from other groups of patients who sought plastic surgery. Doctors discovered that women who elected to have breast augmentation were more likely than other plastic surgery patients to have had a previous surgical procedure, such as a tonsillectomy or appendectomy, than a woman who desired, for example, rhinoplasty. Moreover, patients seeking breast augmentation had a higher than usual concern for their appearance. Doctors noted, however, that there was no clear uniformity on social position, occupation, religion, or education among the women upon whom they operated.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Arthur Roth, “Do you need a new nose?” *Teen*, December 1959, 22-23.

<sup>101</sup> Norman J. Knorr, J.E. Hoopes, and M.T. Edgerton, “Psychiatric-Surgical Approach to Adolescent Disturbance in Self Image,” *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 41, no. 3 (March 1968): 251.

<sup>102</sup> Edgerton and McClary, “Augmentation Mammoplasty,” *PRS* 21, no. 4 (April 1958): 280, 294.

Before allowing a woman to elect to undergo the invasive surgery, prospective patients went through a series of evaluations, both physical and emotional, to evaluate the woman's social situation and needs. Women whose doctors did not believe their neurotic tendencies could be alleviated with the surgery or who had not yet met physical maturity were denied the surgery.<sup>103</sup> Dr. T. R. Van Dellen, medical columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* observed, "if a woman feels she is nothing but her appearance, she will still feel she is nobody even after her breasts have been enlarged."<sup>104</sup> Would-be patients noted in their psychiatric evaluations that the problem was "a life and death matter" and frequently used words and phrases such as "empty inside," "inadequate," "hollow," and "unacceptable," when describing their self-image.<sup>105</sup>

The motivation for actresses and topless dancers to desire larger breasts may be clear, but what about the needs and desires of average American girls and women? Why would they pursue such experimental surgery? The typical woman pursued breast augmentation surgery for three very specific reasons: first, women felt they were cheating or lying by wearing falsies to increase their breast size. Secondly, patients felt like less of a woman or unfeminine without large breasts. And lastly, and most importantly, women desired the surgery to find or keep a husband.

The fear of discovery and a feeling of inauthenticity were powerful enough to encourage some women to pursue breast augmentation. Prospective patients noted that

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<sup>103</sup> Regnault, "Indications for Breast Augmentation," *PRS* 40, no. 6 (December 1967): 524.

<sup>104</sup> Ralph Lee Smith, "All the Twiggies Want to be Sophia," *True*, November 1967, 83.

<sup>105</sup> Edgerton and McClary, "Augmentation Mammoplasty," *PRS* 21, no. 4 (April 1958): 297.

padded bras were not only hot and uncomfortable, but the fear that the falsies would slip out and their padding would be discovered, negatively affected their self-confidence. Evelyn Golini, a recent widow who found herself thrust into the workforce after the untimely death of her husband, desired breast surgery because she feared her co-workers knew her bra was padded and laughed at her behind her back. “I must go into the world after thirteen years as a housewife,” she wrote, “and I’m terrified.”<sup>106</sup> Women conveyed the worry that they would be in a serious accident and their bra padding would be discovered. Surgeons also noted the idea of “cheating” was present in a large portion of their patients. One woman expressed, “I felt I would be cheating them...For instance, how would *I* feel if I went out with a man and later discovered he wasn’t really a *man*?” Small-breasted women felt like “phonies” with their foam inserts, which only exasperated feelings of inadequacy.<sup>107</sup>

Because breasts are the most visible sexual identifier, women held the belief that without adequate breasts, they were not feminine, and therefore not real women.<sup>108</sup> This sense of inferiority affected even married women. One husband wrote to the AMA asking for the name of a doctor or hospital who could perform breast enlarging surgery on his wife. He noted, “She has a definite inferiority complex because of the smallness of her breasts and I feel that an operation to increase their size and contour will be

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<sup>106</sup> Letter from Evelyn Golini to Oliver Field, June 16, 1954. Robert A. Franklyn files, AMA archives, Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>107</sup> Edgerton and McClary, “Augmentation Mammoplasty,” *PRS* 21, no. 4 (April 1958): 297.

<sup>108</sup> La Barre, *Plastic Surgery: Beauty You Can Buy*, 81.



beneficial to her mental health.”<sup>109</sup> Many women traced feelings of inadequacy and inferiority back to their teen years, being shy and embarrassed because of small breast size. They recalled dreading physical education in school as showering and changing clothes in front of other girls provoked anxiety about the size of their breasts. Comparisons, particularly to other women in their family, caused additional frustration.<sup>110</sup>

Even late in the 1960s when androgyny was en vogue, the feminine breast was still of import. “In these times the female breast often seems to be the only distinguishing sign of sex,” Dr. Hugh A. Johnson asserted. “Nothing says quite so well, ‘I am feminine,’ as a nicely formed breast. The flat chested girl is painfully aware of this; with her padded brassieres, she is ridiculed by her more generously endowed sisters.”<sup>111</sup> As one contemporary observed, “[b]reasts aren’t a fad.” Whether fashion called for small or large breasts, “to have breasts,” the author continued, “*real* breasts, is vitally important to women.”<sup>112</sup>

Beyond feelings of inauthenticity, the fear of discovery, and the desire for increased femininity, women often pursued breast augmentation to find a husband or improve their marriage. Younger women, those aged 16 and older, often refused to date

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<sup>109</sup> Letter from Ben H. Mitchell to Oliver Field, June 14, 1954. Robert A. Franklyn files. AMA archives, Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>110</sup> Knorr, Hoopes, and Edgerton, “Psychiatric-Surgical Approach to Adolescent Disturbance in Self Image,” *PRS* 41, no. 3 (March 1968): 250.

<sup>111</sup> Hugh A. Johnson, “Silastic Breast Implants: Coping with Complications,” *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 44, no. 6 (Dec 1969): 588.

<sup>112</sup> La Barre, *Plastic Surgery: Beauty You Can Buy*, 93.

or were afraid to fall in love with a man only to have him discover that they had no breasts. One patient described that she went through a phase of feeling so unattractive that she purposely wore oversized and sloppy clothing “so no boys would look at me.”<sup>113</sup> Young women reported feeling incapable of loving and being loved and attributed this attitude to their inadequate breast development.

Doctors took note of the frequency with which their patients became motivated to request the elective surgery due to marital stress. Some women whose relationships were in jeopardy believed that by enlarging their breasts, their marriages could be saved.<sup>114</sup> A 42-year-old housewife reported that she primarily desired the operation to satisfy the wishes of her husband. In the 1950s, doctors did not consider this a reason to deny her the procedure. By the early 1960s, however, surgeons had changed their criteria of contraindications to augmentation mammoplasty and denied the operation to women who sought the correction predominantly to please others.<sup>115</sup>

Even as late as 1968, the feminine breast was seen as integral to helping a woman find and keep a mate. The New York Supreme Court awarded Migdatia Massato \$150,000 in a suit against her plastic surgeon, Dr. William Sparer, when complications after her plastic surgery resulted in the loss of both of her breasts. Sparer had directly injected silicone into Massato’s breasts in 1964. “Well-shaped breasts are vital in a woman’s search for a husband,” announced Justice Thomas A. Aurelio. The court

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<sup>113</sup> Edgerton and McClary, “Augmentation Mammoplasty,” *PRS* 21, no. 4 (April 1958): 301-302.

<sup>114</sup> Knorr, Hoopes, and Edgerton, “Psychiatric-Surgical Approach to Adolescent Disturbance in Self Image,” *PRS* 41, no. 3 (March 1968): 249.

<sup>115</sup> Edgerton, Meyer, and Jacobson, “Augmentation Mammoplasty II,” *PRS* 27, no. 3 (March 1961): 290, 300.

decided in Massato's favor as at age 37, she was already considered a "spinster" and would now have an even harder time finding a husband "under the present circumstances."<sup>116</sup>

In the case of a 46-year-old widower, a Miami, Florida circuit court awarded Mrs. Lavon Crawford \$13,000 because a breast-lift caused a 4-inch loss from her bustline. Crawford, a widower who was engaged to be remarried, visited the office of Dr. James G. Robertson in 1959 to have an ingrown toenail removed. As she sat in the waiting room, Crawford flipped through literature on face-lifts and breast surgery. In her scheduled appointment with the doctor, she discussed and agreed to have a face-lift, breast-lift, and the original toe surgery. In her court case against Robertson, Crawford claimed the doctor did not tell her the surgery would reduce the size of her breasts, and that at 38 inches, she was now "flat as a pancake." Prior to the mammoplasty, her bust had measured 42 inches. She told the circuit court that the operation had caused her to lose her fiancé and she was still unmarried.<sup>117</sup>

In the written reports of plastic surgeons, one can glean the voices of female patients and their reactions to their respective surgeries. One doctor noted that the final evaluation could not be judged by "geometric measurements," but by the self-esteem boost the surgery had provided for the patient.<sup>118</sup> The idea of being allowed to choose the size of one's breasts proved to be a staggering reality for some women. "I didn't really

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<sup>116</sup> M. Cartwright, "\$150,000 N.Y. Breast Surgery Suit Recalls Japanese Case," *Chicago Defender* April 30, 1968, 19.

<sup>117</sup> *San Antonio Express*, "Breast Surgery Suit Costs Doctor \$13,000," December 1, 1967, 12.

<sup>118</sup> Bames, "Breast Malformations and a New Approach To the Problem of the Small Breast," *PRS* 5, no. 6 (June 1950): 506.

believe the doctor was telling me I could select my ideal breast,” one female patient reported. “I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.”<sup>119</sup> Women with unilateral mammary hypoplasia (one breast larger than the other) chose to make their breasts larger rather than simply reducing the larger breast to match the smaller, further evidence that women believed a bigger bust was more attractive.<sup>120</sup> Another woman, whose doctor believed she had “reasonable breast development,” still demanded augmentation. The surgeon believed that the correction would result in breast size “excessive from an esthetic standard,” but the patient stated that anything less would be unacceptable.<sup>121</sup>

Most women reported satisfaction with their post-surgery results, noting that the operation had changed their lives for the better. They told their doctors they were far less breast-centric, less self-conscious, and now enjoyed activities they were unable to before. Others claimed they no longer felt like “an odd or different creature” or “sexually deformed.”<sup>122</sup> Comments about improved marital bliss were common, including reports that sexual relations had improved as body self-consciousness no longer existed. One patient recalled the joy and liberation she felt after her surgery in being able to throw away her padded bras and falsies.<sup>123</sup> Still another patient, a doctor’s wife, stated, “For the first time I feel like a really complete woman.”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> La Barre, *Plastic Surgery: Beauty You Can Buy*, 84.

<sup>120</sup> Thomas D. Rees and Christian C. Dupuis, “Unilateral Mammary Hypoplasia,” *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 41, no. 4 (April 1968): 309.

<sup>121</sup> Edgerton, Meyer, and Jacobson, “Augmentation Mammoplasty II,” *PRS* 27, no. 3 (March 1961): 298.

<sup>122</sup> Edgerton and McClary, “Augmentation Mammoplasty,” *PRS* 21, no. 4 (April 1958): 289-298.

<sup>123</sup> La Barre, *Plastic Surgery*, 87.

Breast augmentation certainly was not without its dangers. Painful blisters regularly formed near the incision site and required drainage. If the breast implant was not properly sterilized prior to insertion, infection could occur. Actress Joan (née Josephine) Dixon filed a malpractice suit against Manhattan plastic surgeon, Dr. Manfred von Linde in 1963 when her implants became infected. Dixon, a starlet who had appeared in a handful of films, desired breast augmentation surgery to better play Elizabeth Taylor's body-double in the film *Butterfield 8* (1960). She had the surgery on November 4, 1959 and required four subsequent months of treatment to cure an infection that caused "disfiguring scars, substantial loss of body tissue and progressive and permanent loss of hair from her head." A second, corrective breast surgery was required in March 1960.<sup>125</sup>



*Figure 7. Hollywood starlet, Joan Dixon, c.1950 before her 1959 breast surgery*

In numerous accounts, women's bodies rejected the implant altogether and the internal padding had to be surgically removed. Prior to the Simaplast implant, women

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<sup>124</sup> Edgerton and McClary, "Augmentation Mammoplasty," *PRS* 21, no. 4 (April 1958): 289, 298.

<sup>125</sup> *Bridgeport Post*, "Trial Opened in Surgery Suit," February 8, 1963, 52.

complained that the Ivalon insert had shrunk or calcified. Even the widely accepted silicone implants were prone to leakage, particularly in patients who desired aggressively large breasts.<sup>126</sup> Other common complaints were that breasts had not been made large enough. One woman, who had hoped her breasts would be double their original size, reported that even after surgery she continued to wear falsies and therefore felt “doubly deceitful.” This patient was seen as atypical however. Her doctor noted that she had “hysterical character tendencies” due to her father’s “aggressive interest” in women and her husband’s penchant to flirt with other women.<sup>127</sup>

In less physical complaints, other patients expressed disappointment that the operation had failed to alleviate marital issues. Doctors noted that the desire to change how others responded to them, rather than affecting their internal feelings, was an unrealistic expectation.<sup>128</sup> Monetarily, breast augmentation was expensive. In the 1950s, the surgery cost between \$1,000 to \$1,500. In the 1960s, the price of the operation dropped to between \$750 and \$1,250.<sup>129</sup> To put this in perspective, the average family during these years made just over \$3,000 in wages. For single women without a man’s bank account to tap into, the surgery was even further out of reach. The median income

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<sup>126</sup> Johnson, “Silastic Breast Implants: Coping with Complications,” *PRS* 44, no. 6 (Dec 1969): 588-591.

<sup>127</sup> Edgerton and McClary, “Augmentation Mammoplasty,” *PRS* 21, no. 4 (April 1958): 291.

<sup>128</sup> Edgerton, Meyer, and Jacobson, “Augmentation Mammoplasty II,” *PRS* 27, no. 3 (March 1961): 296.

<sup>129</sup> *Vogue*, “Bosom Perfection: New Possibilities,” October 1959, 126, 139, 141; *Vogue*, “The Perfect Bosom,” July 1968, 91.

for white women in 1950 was \$1,060. In 1960, that average increased to just \$1,349.

<sup>130</sup> In this way, unlike make-up or hair dye, access to breast enlargement surgery was not democratic. Still, some Hollywood hopefuls went through with the costly surgery believing that their new body would garner them more roles and eventually pay for itself. Despite the frequency of complications and high cost of the elective surgery, however, no patients reported in post-surgery interviews that they would have preferred to forego the operation.<sup>131</sup>

### Conclusions

Women with large breasts were no doubt celebrated in the immediate postwar years. One need only look to the most celebrated Hollywood stars of the 1950s to see evidence of this popularity. An actress required little actual performance acumen as long as she could fill out her sweater. This is just one historical example of women being judged by the shape of their bodies. The privileging of large bosomed women had a particular affect on teenage girls who desired the full curves of their favorite cover girls and mothers who lamented the loss of an inflated bust after the birth of a child.

In a consumer-driven market, new companies and methods of achieving larger breasts quickly appeared, taking advantage of women's pocketbooks and their low body image. But why did female consumers of all ages stuff their bras, exercise, and send away for mail-order scams in an attempt to increase their cup-size? Claims of increased

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<sup>130</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Income Growth Rates in 1939 to 1968 for Persons by Occupation and Industry Groups, for the United States," *Current Population Reports*, Series P-60, No. 69 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970).

<sup>131</sup> Edgerton, Meyer, and Jacobson, "Augmentation Mammoplasty II," *PRS* 27, no. 3 (March 1961): 290-291.

femininity and self-confidence litter the historical record, but one reason outnumbered all other motivations – they were told it was what men wanted. Women attempted to take control of their bodies and their marital futures with the aid of vitamins, lotions, and hand pumps that promised specific results, but no exercise or special diet plan can create naturally larger breasts.

The compression and reshaping of feminine breasts to fit a fashionable ideal is not new, but the reverence of busty women was unique to postwar America. Remarkably, Americans were highly cognizant of this obsession and its novelty. Many contemporaries attributed the preference for large breasted figures to the infantilization of American men; but favoring women with aggressive mammary glands was a way to sexualize, maternalize, and minimize women's power, in hopes to shuffle American women back to the kitchen and the bedroom. Even with the popularity of flat-chested fashion models like Twiggy or similarly small breasted actresses like Audrey Hepburn late in the 1960s, women continued to desire larger breasts. The sustained technological advances in plastic surgery are evidence of this. But breast augmentation surgery was just one extreme example of the lengths to which women in the postwar years went to re-sculpt their figures to mirror the women that Hollywood and the fashion industry deemed most beautiful and desirable.



## CHAPTER 3

### BUILD-UPS AND SLIM-DOWNS: RE-SHAPING AMERICA

*Mama won't let me diet anymore...This morning I was having my usual half grapefruit for breakfast and she made me eat a slice of whole wheat bread and a scrambled egg and a piece of bacon. That's probably at least 400 calories, maybe even five or six or seven hundred.... I wonder if I could stick my finger down my throat and throw up after every meal? She says I'm going to have to start eating dinner again too, and just when I was getting down where I want to be and I've quit fighting the hunger pains.*

- Anonymous, *Go Ask Alice*

The anonymous author of the published diary, *Go Ask Alice*, is obsessed with her weight. Her journal is not only a recounting of her daily activities, but of how much weight she has gained or lost. The fifteen-year-old girl avoids chocolate and French fries and equates her new popularity at school with the ten pounds she has recently lost. When she has whittled her frame down to 115 pounds, the teen author wistfully notes her desire to lose an additional 10 pounds. "Mom says I don't want to get that thin," she writes, "but she doesn't know! I do! I do! I do!"<sup>1</sup>

Joan Jacobs Brumberg observes that ever since the 1960s, the diaries of adolescent girls repeat the same concerns: "I've been eating like a pig," "I've got to lose weight," or "I must starve myself."<sup>2</sup> Most women in postwar America did not pursue cosmetic surgery to alter the shape of their bodies, but they did try to remold their figures

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, *Go Ask Alice* (Simon and Schuster, NY. 1971), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997), 119.

through diet, exercise, and other slimming strategies. In the years following World War II, the preoccupation with weight affected women of all ages, turning into a national obsession.

Dieting and fitness was transformed into a multibillion-dollar business in the twentieth century. In 2000, Americans spent about \$30 billion on dieting programs and food. Another nearly \$2 billion was spent on running and exercise shoes, and \$3.6 billion on fitness and exercise equipment. And for what purpose? As one scholar observes, “All in the hopes of looking a few years younger, a few pounds thinner, sexier, and generally more physically attractive.”<sup>3</sup> This fixation on exercise and dieting as a way to achieve bodily perfection is certainly not a modern creation of the twenty-first century. Americans began the full-fledged war against fat in the postwar years when the fashion industry promoted thinness as the ascetic ideal and the insurance and medical communities equated health with size. Fewer than 200 years ago, however, weight was not an important issue. At the turn of the twentieth century in fact, being underweight, not overweight was the leading concern of medical doctors.<sup>4</sup>

### **A Brief History of Slimming in America**

The first “weight-watchers” were Sylvester Graham and his vegetarian followers in nineteenth-century America. Grahamites watched their weight, not because they wanted to be thin, but because they believed that a simple diet would make them healthy

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<sup>3</sup> E. O. Smith, *When Culture and Biology Collide* (2002), 64.

<sup>4</sup> Amanda M. Czerniawski, “From Average to Ideal: The Evolution of the Height and Weight Table in the United States, 1836 – 1943,” *Social Science History* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 273.

and robust.<sup>5</sup> The first penny scale appeared in the United States in 1885. The new weighing machine showed up in drug and grocery stores and soon expanded to street corners, movie theaters, banks, office buildings, railroad stations, and subways. By 1932, even small, remote towns had them.<sup>6</sup> The penny scale transformed the way Americans thought about weight. With the ability to measure one's body to the nearest pound, weight transitioned from a qualitative subject to a quantitative evaluation.<sup>7</sup>

Between 1890 and 1910, middle-class America initiated the battle against body fat when several factors – changing gender roles, consumerism, economic status, medicine, modernity, and mortality – simultaneously collided.<sup>8</sup> America became a weight-watching culture when people increasingly believed that the body was tied to the self. Being fat or thin often has little to do with one's shape or size, but rather an assumed identity directly attached to the body. Criminologists used weight to identify character types, insurance companies and actuaries tied weight to risk and mortality, and the fashion industry used weight as a litmus test for beauty.<sup>9</sup> According to historian Peter N. Stearns, never before in American history was dieting so popular along with an

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<sup>5</sup> Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Roberta Pollack Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1989), 90.

<sup>7</sup> Czerniawski, "From Average to Ideal," 273.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Fraser, "The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the United States," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 9, 147.

aversion to “obesity.”<sup>10</sup>

Weight loss and body size has a particular significance for women. Although accounts of women starving themselves surface as far back as the Middle Ages and holy ascetics like Catherine of Sienna, a new kind of “fasting girl” emerged in the nineteenth century. *Anorexia nervosa* was the result of not only a new authority of medicine in the period, but also larger changes in bourgeois life. The self-restraint necessary to achieve this body type was a characteristic valued in antebellum society. Food refusal and its accompanying slimness were signs of social status as thin, frail women were unfit for productive work. Additionally, advice books of the era cautioned women to be careful of what and how much they ate. Hunger and gluttonous eating were connected to sexuality and desire; therefore by demonstrating a modest appetite, a woman exhibited her own sexual virtue. In this way, modern *anorexia nervosa* existed before there was Twiggy or a mass preoccupation with slimming.<sup>11</sup>

Feminist writers have argued that in eras when women gain power politically and professionally, they face the strictest beauty ideals.<sup>12</sup> Small, thin women are the body ideals in decades when women make strides toward gender equality and therefore need to take up less physical space. For these writers, this explains the slender ideals for American women in the 1920s and again in the 1960s. Naomi Wolf argues “if we were

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<sup>10</sup> Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Greta Rensenbrink, “Fat’s No Four-Letter Word: Fat Feminism and Identity Politics in the 1970s and 1980s,” in *Historicizing Fat in Angel-American Culture*, ed. Elena Levy-Navarro (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), 213-244.

all to go home tomorrow and say we never meant it really – we’ll do without the jobs, the autonomy, the orgasms, the money – the beauty myth would slacken at once and grow more comfortable.”<sup>13</sup> It is for these reasons therefore, that one can make sense of the voluptuous feminine body ideals of the 1940s and 1950s. But to accredit the dramatic change in ideal feminine forms from a cartoonish, hourglass silhouette in the 1940s and 1950s to the extreme slenderization of the 1960s as a backlash against the second wave of feminism is too simplistic of an explanation.

### **“Build-up” Diets**

In the years immediately following World War II, the emphasis in magazines and health books was not on starving oneself or fad diets. Instead, prescriptive literature urged women to build up their bodies to become sturdy, vigorous machines. Although historians have been quick to note the relentless attempts to push women back into the home and back into their role as mothers and housewives, this does not acknowledge that immediately after World War II, women were still seen as needed. “These days,” one beauty guide observed, “women need all their strength to stand up to the strenuous calls upon their system and food is the only thing to provide that strength.”<sup>14</sup> This message was a continuation of wartime attitudes about the female body. “Strictly Personal,” an official U.S. War Department training film, stressed the importance of vigorous exercise, a balanced diet, and ample sleep to female military volunteers. The omnipresent narrator announces in the film’s opening minutes, “In perfect physical shape; yes that's what it

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<sup>13</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 272.

<sup>14</sup> Stacy Lett Waddy, *Posture and Poise* (Sydney: Dymock’s Book Arcade, 1944), 10.

takes to do the man-sized job you've picked for yourselves when you volunteered.”<sup>15</sup>

Delicate waifs would not help America win the war, and neither could they help restore the nation after the global conflict.

Women’s magazines and other types of prescriptive literature advised housewives on the best kinds of exercises and food to help them stay energized and “build up” their bodies. Exercise regimes focused on stretching and strengthening muscles without the use of bulky weights. Moreover, most articles highlighted exercises one could perform to strengthen muscles while simultaneously doing the daily housework.<sup>16</sup> Yet even with these strategies, one can see the concern for building a trim figure. Diets focused on the continued food shortages after the war. Women’s fashion magazines listed meal plans like *Harpers Bazaar*’s “Nine-Day-Wonder Diet” or *Vogue*’s “Diet X” with food availability in mind. These annually re-printed diets rarely exceeded 1,000 calories, but were re-designed every few years based on the latest food or beverage fads. “Remember: sugar is scarce,” one magazine asserted. “Give your share to your family and win their hearts while you are improving your figure.”<sup>17</sup> Exercise and a nutritional diet was also seen as a strategy for young widows coping with the loss of a husband or boyfriend in the war. The *Ladies Home Journal* told the story of a recent widow with two children whose unhappiness had shrunk her already slight figure to less than 100 pounds. Rather than

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<sup>15</sup> “Strictly Personal,” United States Army Pictorial Service, 1945. U.S. National Library of Medicine. Digital Collections: <http://collections.nlm.nih.gov/muradora/objectView.action?pid.nlm.nlmuid-9422795-vid> (last accessed 1 March 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Louise Paine Benjamin, “Three-Way Perspective,” *Ladies Home Journal*, April 1945, 140.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

allowing her GI husband's premature death to signal the end of her own life, however, she rebounded and re-built her figure.<sup>18</sup>

In a stark contrast to articles that appeared later in the 1960s, women's magazines and fan periodicals in the immediate postwar years addressed the plight of underweight women. "You don't have glamorous curves; your chest is flat; your legs are like toothpicks; your neck is scrawny," the beauty editor for *Screen Stars* described. "You feel masculine, like a boyish figure, when you want so much to feel feminine."<sup>19</sup> Ironically, this look became fashionable and desirable in the late 1960s. "A chubby, well-groomed figure is always attractive," another author advised her female readers.<sup>20</sup> With the popularity of curvy silhouettes because of the "New Look" and Hollywood's most celebrated stars, underweight women sought ways to add extra pounds. An advertisement for NUMAL, a vitamin that supposedly encouraged appetite, reminded its female readers, "A skinny, scarecrow figure is neither fashionable nor glamorous. Remember, the girl with the glamorous curves gets the dates."<sup>21</sup>

While celebrity diets would be popular magazine fodder in the mid- to late-1950s, too-skinny celebrity stories appeared in the years immediately following World War II. Most famously, Italian bombshell Sophia Loren gushed to reporters how her current figure of 38-24-38 had not always been so plentiful. Growing up she was unpopular, scrawny, and unadmired. Her playmates even taunted her, calling her "The Stick." The

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<sup>18</sup> Louise Paine Benjamin, "Build-Up Diet," *Ladies Home Journal*, January 1945, 105.

<sup>19</sup> Joan Bennett, "Yours for Beauty," *Screen Stars*, December 1951, 63.

<sup>20</sup> Maureen Daly, "The Trouble with Women..." *Ladies Home Journal*, August 1946, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Advertisement, "Skinny Girls Are Not Glamour Girls," *Screen Stars*, August 1951, 5.

actress reported that a steady diet of spaghetti helped her gain her famous curves, and by age 15, all the men were whistling at her.<sup>22</sup> Teen magazines continued to publish stories geared toward helping the too-skinny girl as late as 1963.<sup>23</sup> This type of journalism had all but disappeared in periodicals aimed at older women, however.

### **Slimming Down**

The dieting industry became a viable economic giant in the 1950s. Magazine articles that had once featured strategies to “build up” bodies were systematically replaced by slenderizing techniques. A *Life* magazine article from 1956 marveled, “She [the American woman] is shaken on tables, beaten by machines, starved, steamed, packed in mud and needles with cold water.” The amount of money American women collectively spent on beauty products reportedly totaled more than double the defense budget of Italy.<sup>24</sup> Between 1950 and 1955, diet soda drink sales increased by 3,000 percent. “Food substitute” products like the chalk-powder drinks Metrecal and the “Rockefeller Diet” was introduced in the 1950s as well. Metrecal’s earnings expanded from \$4 million in the late 1950s to \$13 million in 1960.<sup>25</sup> By 1959, 92 diet books were in print, and by 1961, 40 percent of all Americans used reduced-calorie products.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the 1950s and into the early part of the 1960s, the *Ladies Home Journal* featured weight loss “success” stories. In other magazines, these kinds of stories

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<sup>22</sup> Kathryn Tate, “The Stick,” *Motion Picture*, 1948, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Rubie Saunders, “Skinny You,” *Calling All Girls*, October 1963, 103.

<sup>24</sup> *Life*, “Billions of Dollars for Prettiness,” December 24, 1956, 121.

<sup>25</sup> Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 106.

<sup>26</sup> Stearns, *Fat History*, 109.



were normally advertisements for a specific weight-loss company, like the diet candy Ayds or the DuBarry Success course; but in the *Ladies Home Journal*, the featured women represented a broad range of motivations, weight-loss methods (diet versus exercise), and results. But universally, starting with Helen Fraley's original success story in August 1952, all women in this column wanted to be significantly smaller than their current figure. Women who appeared in this *Ladies Home Journal* monthly column between 1952 and 1962 originally weighed 203.5 pounds, on average, with measurements of 42.25-34-50. After dieting and exercising for numerous months, they whittled away at their figures to obtain a 35.5-25.5-37 silhouette at 133 pounds. Most women in these stories lost over 70 pounds on a daily diet averaging 1,017 calories.

Women wrote in recalling the shame and humiliation of being an overweight child and teen. Nicknames like "baby blimp" or "fatty-fatty two-by-four" plagued their childhood experiences. They felt unpopular, uncomfortable in their own skin, and ashamed that they could not fit into the latest, youthful fashions. One woman, Rita Hornak, was denied employment because potential bosses believed that she would be a lazy and indifferent worker because of her size.<sup>27</sup> For plus-size women who had managed to find a husband despite their extra pounds, their weight made pregnancy difficult, thus putting a strain on formerly happy marriages.

Teen girls had similar motivations to lose weight as their older counterparts. Two of the most salient motivations for teens were dating and clothes. Most of the young women writing to the *Ladies Home Journal* lamented that boys they had crushes on

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<sup>27</sup> Dawn Crowell Ney, "Too Pretty to be Fat," *Ladies Home Journal*, January 1962, 10, 82.

would not date them because of their size. Overweight teens could not fit into age-appropriate clothing; their extra pounds forced them to shop in the “chubby section” or wear matronly fashions. As teenager Connie Calabro lamented, “Girls felt sorry for me. Boys didn’t like me. In fact, I didn’t even like myself. I wanted so desperately to be able to dress like the other girls. But I looked like a tub in sweaters and skirts.” She even claimed that the only party she ever got invited to was the first skating outing of the season – if the ice withstood her weight, all the other teens knew it was safe for them to skate.<sup>28</sup>

Another first-account storyline proclaimed, “I had to lose 60 pounds to go to college.” The accompanying article described how a young woman was originally denied admission to Edinboro State College in Pennsylvania because she weighed 197 pounds. A letter from the director of admissions told the 18-year-old college applicant that her weight “would be a detriment to your being enrolled as a student at this college.”<sup>29</sup> Edinboro State College, which focused on educating and training future teachers, accepted and denied applicants based on whether the applicant was a “good prospective teacher candidate.” Admission was based upon a number of criteria including: “general scholarship, character and personality, health and physical vigor, and command of English.” Among the numerous health reasons an applicant could be denied admission

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<sup>28</sup> Dawn Crowell Norman, “I Hated My Looks Until I Lost 40 Pounds,” *Ladies Home Journal*, August 1956, 56.

<sup>29</sup> Dawn Crowell Ney, “I Had to Lose 60 Pounds to Go to College,” *Ladies Home Journal*, May 1961, 33.

included “marked obesity.”<sup>30</sup> Being “overweight” was considered detrimental, unhealthy, and unwanted for potential teachers.

The rejection letter was a horrible blow. She told her mother, “I don’t care!” But she did:

Having lived a long time with the "stigma" of being "FAT," I had no self-esteem. I was a chubby child and grew into a very overweight young lady. And trust me, I was reminded of that by everyone - my parents, friends of the family, my brother, and classmates at every grade level...I was pretty much reduced to a pathetic person. I felt sorry for myself, was angry at myself, I WISHED to be thin a lot, I wanted to go to sleep and wake up "normal" and sometimes I wished I wouldn't wake up, but, of course, wishes don't just happen.<sup>31</sup>

In order to convince the university that she would lose the required weight, she agreed to an appointment with the college physician, Dr. Miller, a man she recalls who weighed an unsettling 130 pounds. Dr. Miller had a brief conversation with her, and she convinced him that she would lose the weight. Because she had always dreamed of being a teacher, she had only applied to Edinboro. She had a choice – give up on her dreams or lose the weight. She chose the latter. In retrospect, she was grateful for the letter because it changed her life; however, she notes, “when I think about it now, it’s very scary to think what that could have done to me and may have done to any other young person who may have received that [rejection] letter, too.”<sup>32</sup>

The results of losing the weight varied for women, but all reported positive outcomes. In the previously mentioned story, the woman was accepted into college. No

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<sup>30</sup> Admission guidelines for Edinboro State College, 1961. These guidelines appeared in the admission catalogue and remained intact until the 1970-1971 school year.

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous, email message to author, March 31, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

longer stigmatized because of her weight, Rita Hornak finally found a job. Others experienced a popularity boom and parental pride once they lost unwanted weight. The majority of the women from the column observed that they now dated regularly or had gotten engaged or married since the weight loss and could wear fashionable clothes and bathing suits without shame.

Unlike magazines aimed at an older female demographic, tween magazines of the 1940s, 1950s, and even 1960s, encouraged their readers to develop healthy eating and exercising habits at an early age, but to *not* actually diet. “Don’t be alarmed by those little bumps and bulges because it is much better at your age to be ‘round’ than too ‘skinny,’” one author encouraged.<sup>33</sup> Articles in tween-aimed periodicals like *Polly Pigtales* and *Calling All Girls*, the predecessor to *Young and Modern* magazine (*YM*), reminded their readers that they would be growing several inches in the coming years and that their body would grow more easily with some fat reserves. “Doctors do not recommend dieting for your age,” another journalist noted. “In fact, if you are twelve or under, they say it is even harmful.”<sup>34</sup> *Calling All Girls*, created by the publishers of *Parents* magazine in the fall of 1941, had little interest in reflecting teenage life; its goal was to instill healthy habits and set a good example for young readers. Instead of printing pages of diet plans, these magazines urged their readers to be physically active and to eat nutritionally balanced meals. This same healthy and pro-body conscious attitude disappeared from women’s magazines in the mid- to late-1950s.

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<sup>33</sup> Ann Williams-Heller, “Why So Fatso?” *Polly Pigtales*, Spring 1953, 97.

<sup>34</sup> Victoria Furman, “Everybody’s Thin But Me,” *Calling All Girls*, March 1963, 34.

Periodicals aimed at an older audience, however, encouraged teen girls to diet.

The *Ladies Home Journal* told the story of two sisters, one nineteen and the other fourteen, who “could be true beauties if not for their weight!” At 5 feet 5 inches, Joann Scala weighed 133 pounds and “realizes a trim, slim appearance would increase her popularity on the job as well as on the dance floor.”<sup>35</sup> In these older-audience magazines, teens were advised to keep their diets private, but to still eat three meals a day because, “[a] cranky dieter is no more desirable than an awkward fatty.”<sup>36</sup> Older teen magazines like *Seventeen* published a “Secret Summer Diet” that promised teenagers they could “shed an inch or two of hips or midriff strictly on the sly.”<sup>37</sup> A 15-year-old who weighed 160 pounds at 5 feet 2 inches wanted to lose weight, but her parents would not allow her to diet. *Teen*’s beauty editor suggested she diet “quietly since no one in your family seems to have your best figure interests at heart.”<sup>38</sup>

This secrecy was suggested to older women as well. “I have known too many women who have made themselves obnoxious bores by pivoting eternally on the subject of their reducing programs,” cautioned one woman.<sup>39</sup> Milwaukee pharmacist Hugo Hoffman noted that women were embarrassed to purchase diet pills, candies, and other slimming products. Hoffman remarked that in his own store, only “strangers” purchased

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<sup>35</sup> Dawn Crowell Norman, “Tween-age or Teenage, There’s Always a Beauty Problem,” *Ladies Home Journal*, June 1952, 132, 139.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Seventeen*, “Secret Summer Diet,” July 1968, 98.

<sup>38</sup> *Teen*, “Dear Beauty Editor,” March 1968, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Jean Z. Owen, “I Lost 100 Pounds,” *Ladies Home Journal*, February 1951, 155.

such items; women went out of their way to buy diet products in stores where they would not be recognized.<sup>40</sup> Although women's magazines instructed their readers not to talk about their diets, the multitude of printed "success" stories indicated that once off the diet, bragging about all the self-control and hard work put into one's new figure was permissible.

### **Support Groups and Effortless Exercise**

If diets printed in a magazine or individual success stories were not enough motivation to kick-start a weight-loss plan, dieting groups and youth "fat camps" became *de rigueur* in the 1950s and 1960s. Comparing dieting groups to the water cures of the nineteenth century, Hillel Schwartz describes them as "floating islands under [women's] command, a middle ground by which to establish a sense of dominion and networks of sodality."<sup>41</sup> One of the first national diet support groups, TOPS (Taking Off Pounds Sensibly), originated in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1948. Esther S. Manz, the creator of TOPS, first came to the idea while participating in a group session designed to help pregnant women prepare for motherhood. Recognizing the power of mutual support, Manz transitioned the group mentality into a dieter's helpmate.<sup>42</sup> TOPS grew from a club of three friends to an organization with 2,481 chapters by the early 1960s.<sup>43</sup> Other dieting groups like Weight Watchers immediately followed. Jean Nidetch, the creator of Weight Watchers in 1963, noted, "People have been told they were going to die because they

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<sup>40</sup> *Newsweek*, "The Big Bulge in Profits," July 23, 1956, 62.

<sup>41</sup> Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 210.

<sup>42</sup> "History of TOPS," *TOPS*, <http://www.tops.org/TOPSInformation/TopsHistory.aspx>.

<sup>43</sup> Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 107.

were fat, and it hasn't been enough to motivate them to lose weight. But let someone say, 'You look ugly,' and maybe then something will happen."<sup>44</sup> Weight Watchers grossed \$160,000 in 1964; in 1970, business had skyrocketed to earnings of over \$8 million.<sup>45</sup>

The coincidence of dieting groups where members talk about their struggles and triumphs over eating, and women's magazines which instructed dieting secrecy no doubt created a mixed message for those wishing to lose extra poundage. Should one diet in private and keep her efforts a secret from others? Or should she join a weight-loss group and publicly share her failures and successes? Women's magazines seemed to say to their readers that being overweight was an affliction to keep private. Although columns stressed that *everyone* was on a diet, they also warned readers not to burden others with their weight issues. Support groups like TOPS and Weight Watchers broke through the silence and private shame of plus-sized Americans.

National weight-reducing chains joined the ranks of high-end reducing salons that had appeared in most major cities by the 1950s. Three of the most popular were Elizabeth Arden, Slenderella International, and Helen Rubinstein's salons. At Arden's salons, clients were exposed to a number of weight-loss techniques such as dieting, massage, posture correction, and physical exercise. Passive exercise was also available. Machines like the "Shake-A-Way" table were designed to whittle away at too-fleshy hips and

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<sup>44</sup> Jean Nidetch and Joan Rattner Heilman, *The Story of Weight Watchers* (New York: W/W Twenty-first Corp., 1970), 29.

<sup>45</sup> Stearns, *Fat History*, 109.

thighs. While lying down on a table, two series of rollers “rolled away” at solid fat.

Arden’s salons were also equipped with the Dewar machine, a spot-reducing contraption that used electronic impulses on the muscles.<sup>46</sup> For those with deeper pocketbooks, Arden also offered a “Main Chance” facility in Phoenix, Arizona where for \$400 to \$600 a week, women learned to “live in sumptuous starvation” with the goal of shedding a pound a day. Patrons wore blue swimsuits as their daily uniform to encourage weight loss.<sup>47</sup>

Another “exercise” company, Slenderella International, promised its patrons that their program could slim a girl in “all the right places.” Formed in the early 1950s, Slenderella operated 152 salons at its peak and grossed \$25 million by 1956.<sup>48</sup> Upon discovering that his wife was visiting one of Slenderella’s salons, one man mailed the company a poem he had written. His plea is reminiscent of Sir Mix-a-Lot’s 1991 anthem, “Baby Got Back.” He writes:

Realign the rear  
And I’ll not object, my dear.  
But one thing is a must –  
Don’t you dare disturb the bust!<sup>49</sup>

Advertisements for the salon defied beliefs that physical health and a trim figure demanded “toil and suffering.” Similar to the Elizabeth Arden salons, Slenderella promoted the use of a specially patented machine with rollers designed to pound away

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<sup>46</sup> *Vogue*, “Remaking Your Measurements,” January 15, 1957, 112.

<sup>47</sup> *Life*, “Billions of Dollars for Prettiness,” December 24, 1956, 123.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>49</sup> *Collier’s*, “Slenderella,” December 1956, 46.



unwanted inches. The company claimed one session equaled riding a horse for 10 miles or playing 36 holes of golf, and that afterwards one's shoulders would be straightened, waistline slimmed, muscles toned and firmed, with improved circulation and relaxation. In addition to these "reshaping" benefits, Slenderella also included a high-protein diet plan for women who desired to lose additional weight. The company claimed that the meal plan was not only enjoyable, but "thoroughly livable." Patrons were also given a supply of vitamin and mineral "mints" that one took five-times a day to suppress the appetite.<sup>50</sup>

For \$30, women could experience "One Day of Beauty" at Helena Rubinstein's salon. Less an exercise salon than even the Aden and Slenderella facilities, Rubinstein's salon better resembled a spa-retreat where women were cosmetically pampered. Patrons also benefited from a private counseling session on diet and exercise, and received a supply of Helen Rubinstein "Reduce-Aids," a vitamin-based pill to inhibit appetite. The Rubinstein franchise also offered a "Glamour School," a two-hour a day program where for five days and at the price of \$25, women received a condensed version of charm school with instruction on femininity and poise.<sup>51</sup>

The selling-point for most exercise machine companies and reducing salons was minimal effort on the part of the client. "The trouble with exercise is – it's often so much trouble," one women's magazine lamented.<sup>52</sup> The solution was vibrating devices and roller-tables where women relaxed while the machine did all the work. The Stauffer

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<sup>50</sup> *Harper's Bazaar*, "Program for the Measure of a Beauty," May 1955, 140.

<sup>51</sup> *Vogue*, "Remaking Your Measurements," January 15, 1957, 111.

<sup>52</sup> *Vogue*, "The lazy woman's guide to exercise," March 1, 1954, 80.

System was another salon where patrons were bumped and stretched for 50 minutes at a time. Clients were promised correct posture, the elimination of saggy areas where fat can accumulate, and better muscle tone. For those who preferred the privacy of their homes for passive exercise, for the price of nearly \$200, Relax-A-Cizor created the solution. Relax-A-Cizor, like Elizabeth Arden's Dewar system, utilized electricity to promote muscle contraction. Users were instructed to attach small wires to the "problem" areas. Dialing up the appropriate charge of electrical pulse resulted in the erratic and involuntary contracting and relaxing of targeted muscles. One could effortlessly "exercise" at home while reading a magazine or watching a television program.<sup>53</sup> But while exercise salons and in-home machines emphasized the relative ease with which weight loss was achieved with the aid of their products, this fed into the negative stereotype that "overweight" or "obese" people were lazy, unmotivated, and inactive.

Vibrating belts, roller-tables, and electrodes were not the only bizarre exercise schemes to come out of the postwar period. "Beauty experts" widely believed that by simply pounding away at inches of unwanted fat, the problematic areas would flatten and become streamlined. Even rubbing fleshy areas with a rough bath towel was thought to help "rub away the superfluous inches."<sup>54</sup> Joan Bennett, an actress and beauty contributor for *Screen Stars*, religiously encouraged her readers to roll across the floor 50 to 100 times every morning to carve away extra inches on their hips and derrieres. Bennett also

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<sup>53</sup> *Vogue*, "Remaking Your Measurements," 55-56, 111.

<sup>54</sup> Stacy Lett Waddy, *Posture and Poise* (Sydney: Dymock's Book Arcade, 1944), 48.

suggested rocking back and forth on one's buttocks while grabbing the knees to create a slimmer silhouette. Another exercise that she called "the thumper" consisted of lying on the floor, using one leg as a lever to raise the body, and dropping back down on fatty spots. She also recommended picking up marbles with the toes everyday for twenty minutes to build up calf muscles.

Experts questioned the efficacy of "spot reducing." "When a woman reduces," one PhD-educated instructor of fitness argued, "she loses fat deposits all over the body, not just in the part exercised."<sup>55</sup> Women's magazines, however, repeatedly noted that spot reducing was possible. Dr. Jean Mayer, then-assistant professor of nutrition at Harvard University discouraged *Vogue* readers "in generally good shape" from dieting. Dieting, Dr. Mayer noted, causes weight loss all over. He suggested spot reducing for women who wanted, for example, slimmer thighs and hips, but did not want the rest of their figure to be reshaped.<sup>56</sup> Spot reducing remained common throughout the postwar years.

Another exercise regime, "isometrics," became popular in the early 1960s. Isometrics is any kind of exercise in which the muscles exert force against an immovable object or against themselves without movement. And, like the bumping and rolling machines that preceded it, proponents of the "scientific exercise" promised potential users that they could "exercise without moving a muscle." The benefits of isometrics over isotonic exercise (physical activity), was heralded in periodicals as

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<sup>55</sup> Earl L. Wallis and Gene A. Logan, *Figure Improvement Exercises for Women* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), np.

<sup>56</sup> *Vogue*, "Is spot reducing possible?" May 15, 1956, 44-45.

diverse as *Vogue* and *Sports Illustrated*.<sup>57</sup> Passive exercise appealed to American women not just because of the promise of results with little to no effort. Women also avoided physical exercises like active sports, jogging, or weight lifting because of the worry that too much would transform their bodies into bulky, masculine, and muscled figures. Because of this, postwar magazines held a tenuous position in celebrating professional and amateur female athletes.

### **The Female (Feminine) Athlete**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the debate about women's involvement in sports centered on the potential for exercise to impair a woman's reproductive capacity and to unleash a woman's sexuality. In the 1920s and 1930s, the debate shifted to fears about athletics making women "mannish" and unattractive. This anxiety came to an apex by the 1950s, turning into fears of lesbianism in athletics.<sup>58</sup> One of the most important beauty goals for women after World War II, regardless of body shape or size, was to establish and protect their femininity. An advertisement for "Royal Typewriter" featured a secretary who worried her arms were getting too muscular because of her old typewriter.<sup>59</sup> Experts debated how much exercise was *too* much, and female athletes looked for a way to safeguard their femininity and their heterosexuality all while striving to excel in their respective sports.

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<sup>57</sup> *Vogue*, "Beauty Bulletin: The Shape Terrific," February 15, 1964, 120-124; Gilbert Rogin, "Get Strong Without Moving," *Sports Illustrated*, October 30, 1961, 19-21.

<sup>58</sup> Susan K. Cahn, *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sports* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>59</sup> *Life*, "Advertisement," January 8, 1945, 33.

In October 1954, *Sports Illustrated* asked a panel of “experts” if competitive sports made women less feminine. Marilyn Monroe admitted that she admired the muscles of female athletes, but her husband Joe DiMaggio countered, “Would a man rather take a lovely bit of femininity into his arms or a bundle of muscles?” Italian movie star, Gina Lollobrigida, agreed that some physical activity made a girl “healthy and graceful,” but shunned more “hard” sports because “muscles are good in the kitchen. But they are maybe not good in the evening gown.” Another “expert,” Louis Pieri, noted that femininity flourished with “masculine protection.” The hockey GM noted, “A woman who can trade strokes on the tennis court with most men, for instance, doesn’t look like she needs protection.”<sup>60</sup> To combat the negative stereotype that athletics made women unattractive and masculine, print media celebrated female athletes more for their beauty than their physical accomplishments.

*Sports Illustrated*, first published in August 1954, frequently profiled female athletes over 60 years old or in their early teens. Profiles on junior and senior swimmers, tennis players, and golfers emphasized their record-breaking abilities, not how pretty they were. The magazine indicated it was admissible for young teens and matronly grandmothers to be competitive and singularly focused on sports, but not women of child-bearing ages. For the few women in their twenties or thirties that appeared in the magazine, adjectives like “pretty” and “pert” preceded their names, diminishing the seriousness of their athletic accomplishments. Rare was the story celebrating a woman in this age category as a pure athlete without referencing her femininity and beauty.

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<sup>60</sup> *Sports Illustrated*, “Hot Box,” October 11, 1954, 4-5.

Moreover, even the titles of articles highlighting women's achievements often belittled their victory. In 1959, Barbara McIntire won the 59<sup>th</sup> women's amateur golf championship. *Sports Illustrated* titled the corresponding column, "Miss Dimples Wins the Cup."<sup>61</sup>

*Life* portrayed female athletes as competitive, but similarly emphasized their femininity over their physical prowess. Women whose photographs appeared in the magazine were not necessarily champions in their sports, but instead represented the prettiest stars. Gretchen Merrill, a champion figure skater was a "winsome, thoroughly feminine and beautiful girl." A fashion organization had even named her the "best dressed woman in U.S. sports."<sup>62</sup> One headline qualified swimmer Jeanne Wilson as "the fastest, prettiest female breast-stroke swimmer in the U.S." and gymnast JoAnn Matthews, no doubt in reference to Russia's female competitors, purportedly looked "more like a woman than a woman athlete."<sup>63</sup> Although only ranking fourth nationally in the tennis world, Gertrude Augusta "Gussie" Moran garnered an article in *Life* based on her "lively green eyes, [and] the face and figure of a movie starlet." The author's article boasted, "If good looks could be translated into points on the tennis court, the girl above would probably be the Wimbledon champion this summer."<sup>64</sup> Moran became one of the

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<sup>61</sup> *Sports Illustrated*, "Miss Dimples Wins the Cup," December 7, 1959, 34.

<sup>62</sup> Oliver Jensen, "Champion Figure Skater: Gretchen Merrill Excels in a Graceful and Complicated Sport," *Life*, March 4, 1946, 65-66.

<sup>63</sup> *Life*, "Breast Stroke: Underwater Photographs Show How Pretty Jeanne Wilson Wins Races," April 15, 1946, 51; *Life*, "Tumbling Queen: A Pretty 98-pound Girl from Texas is Country's Best Flip-Flap Artist," June 14, 1948.

<sup>64</sup> *Life*, "Gorgeous Gussie: Now No. 4 Ranking Tennis Player Would Be No. 1 if Looks Counted," April 25, 1949, 91.

most famous tennis stars at the time, not for her prowess on the court, but for her undergarments. Moran shocked the tennis world at Wimbledon in 1954 when she showed up for her second match wearing lace-edged panties under her tennis skirt. “[F]rom that day on I found more attention being focused on my backside than on my backhand,” the athlete recalled.<sup>65</sup>

Although periodicals like *Life* and *Sports Illustrated* largely avoided stories that showed white female athletes looking less-than-feminine, the magazines showed an obsession with Soviet female athletes in the same sports. Numerous photo essays of the hardy Russian women appeared in these periodicals. Columns simultaneously masculinized female Russians while making male competitors effeminate, demonstrating the backwardness of Communism. Editors claimed the female competitors were the “stronger Soviet sex” and that “frail Red males” owed their team victories to their female teammates.<sup>66</sup> These were women to be pitied, however, rather than emulated. One photograph and caption observed that training was so intense that athletes were not allowed to go on dates and therefore danced with each other in the evenings.<sup>67</sup> In contrast to the way Eastern European female athletes were portrayed compared to their American competition, *Sports Illustrated* reported that while the Russian and Hungarian female gymnasts outmatched the “agility and graceful precision” of their U.S. competitors, the

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<sup>65</sup> Deirdre Budge, “Something for the Girls...” *Sports Illustrated*, September 27, 1954, 35-36.

<sup>66</sup> *Life*, “The Stronger Soviet Sex,” September 18, 1950, 60-61.

<sup>67</sup> *Life*, “‘Toil and Sweat’ Win Out Over ‘Amusement’: Hardy Soviet Girls Sweep International Ski Meet,” January 5, 1954, 128-129.

American women “drew photographers in droves” and “rated medals in good looks.”<sup>68</sup> The column’s language and tone privileged neither national team as though being attractive was just as valid as actually winning the competition. The media’s coverage of physically imposing Communist women while simultaneously celebrating the femininity of American women athletes may seem counter-intuitive. Susan J. Douglas notes that because of America’s fervent fear of Communism, “*our* women had to be very different from *their* women.”<sup>69</sup> “It was because all their women were dead ringers for Mr. Potato Head that we knew their society was, at its heart, joyless, regimented, and bankrupt.”<sup>70</sup> Because of the mixed messages women received from the media about participation in physical sports, they looked for less strenuous ways to lose weight that would not threaten their femininity.

### **“Lazybones” Weight Loss - Diets and Diet Pills**

“Build-up” diets of the late 1940s and early 1950s focused on energy, health, and vigor as the goal of shaping up. American women wanted to be slim, no doubt, but what they meant by “slimness” was different than what the definition would be by the end of the 1960s. The most crucial difference between the immediate postwar years and the beginning of the 1960s was the dieter’s goal. In the early to mid-1950s, the ideal woman still had flesh on her bones. The average contestant in the 1954 Miss America Pageant weighed 121 pounds and measured 5 feet 6.1 inches tall – around 11 pounds less than the

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<sup>68</sup> *Sports Illustrated*, “Wonderful World of Sports,” January 7, 1957, 38.

<sup>69</sup> Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 47, italics original.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.



national average and just a little below MetLife's "desirable" weights.<sup>71</sup> The culture of slimming culminated with Twiggy in the late 1960s. Her body type represented as a bookend, rather than a dramatic, overnight change in the aesthetic ideal.

In addition to having a new diet goal, a new ideal body type to strive toward, by the mid to late 1950s, a new attitude towards weight loss also appeared in women's magazines – easy, effortless slimming down. Starting with *Harper's Bazaar's* "Lazybones Diet" in 1958, women's magazines turned away from promoting physical and even passive exercises as a legitimate means to lose weight. The "Lazybones Diet" promoted a curtailed eating regime, and dieters were also urged to spend the Friday-to-Sunday period in complete idleness. The magazine promised a weight-loss of two or two-and-a-half pounds over a "quiet summer weekend." If this was not clear instruction enough, *Harper's Bazaar* continued, "let us be clear on the meaning of quiet, which here does not cover three sets of tennis or twenty lengths in the pool, or in fact, any expenditure of energy beyond household operational necessities." As the magazine instructed, "sloth is mandatory" because of the limited 800 to 1,000 calorie daily diet.<sup>72</sup>

Some of the most extreme, stringent diets were reprinted and analyzed in women's high-fashion magazines. The "Egg and Wine" diet became the latest crash diet popular in the summer of 1964. Designed as a weekend plan to slip off a few pounds in a few days, diet followers ate an egg dish and drank wine at every meal. The wine, being an amphetamine, acted like any kind of appetite inhibitor. Moreover, the alcohol content

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<sup>71</sup> Miss America statistics in Frank Deford, *There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 313-16, 325.

<sup>72</sup> *Harper's Bazaar*, "Lazybones Dieting," July 1958, 81.

made the dieter not care about just eating eggs. The “Starvation Diet” pulled no punches with its name. Dieters burned fat through fasting, consuming nothing but water and vitamin pills. The “Rice Diet” was another extreme diet wherein participants ate only rice and vegetables garnished with neither butter nor salt. Originally conceived of at Duke University, the first “Rice Diet” testers had to stay on campus and could only eat their meals at designated “Rice Houses.” The Human Chorionic Gonadotropin (hCG) injection was another highly controversial diet-aid. For 30 to 40 days, dieters went to their doctor to receive an injection of hCG, a hormone produced during pregnancy, and were given a strict daily diet of 500 to 700 calories. It is unclear if followers lost weight because of the hormone injection or from the abbreviated diet, but the American Medical Association argued the injection was neither a safe nor an effective way to achieve weight-loss.<sup>73</sup>

Most diets reprinted in the various women’s and fashion magazines were intended for women who desired to lose 5 to 10 pounds to reach a fashionably low weight. The extreme calorie cutting was only suggested for a brief amount of time, a few weeks at most, with some diets then suggesting a secondary “maintenance” diet for when the desired weight loss was achieved. But no distinctions were ever made between diets for women who desired to lose a few pounds or dieting strategies for women like those featured in the *Ladies Home Journal* who wanted to shed 50 to 100 pounds. America supposedly suffered from an “obesity epidemic,” and yet the most circulated media for

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<sup>73</sup> *Vogue*, “Beauty Bulletin: 7 top diets explored and rated by Vogue,” October 1964, 180.

diet advice – women’s magazines – failed to advertise the real work that losing large amounts of weight would require.

America’s obsession with easy weight-loss came to an apex with a diet pill scandal in the late 1960s. Diet pills and appetite suppressants were certainly not new, however. In the early 1950s, one popular diet pill was the “vitamin candy” Ayds, whose sales quadrupled between 1949 and 1955.<sup>74</sup> Advertisements for the product promised users could eat everything they wanted. Ayds was promoted as a “specially made, low calorie candy fortified with health-giving vitamins and minerals.” Just by eating one candy prior to every meal, users “automatically” ate less and could lose weight “naturally, safely, and quickly.”<sup>75</sup> What was different about the diet pill scare in the late 1960s was the mass number and types of pills being prescribed and the number of “medical doctors” making a handsome living off the rainbow-colored tablets. The FDA estimated that there were between 5,000 and 7,000 “fat doctors” who every year treated 5 to 10 million patients, selling more than 2 billion diet pills and grossing close to half a billion dollars.<sup>76</sup>

In 1968, *Life* magazine published an expose on diet pills. The article began with the retelling of the story of Cheryl Oliver, a college coed who worried about her weight and ultimately died from taking a lethal combination of diet pills. Commonly prescribed drugs for weight loss included amphetamines to suppress appetite; barbiturates to counter the jitters the amphetamines could cause; thyroid which increases the rate the body burns

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<sup>74</sup> *Newsweek*, “The Big Bulge in Profits,” July 23, 1955, 61.

<sup>75</sup> *Screen Stories*, “Too fat? Here’s an easy way to reduce says Barbara Hale,” April 1953, 25.

<sup>76</sup> *Life*, “Scandal of the Diet Pills,” January 26, 1968, 22-23.

calories; digitalis, a heart drug; diuretics which flush water from the body; and laxatives. Using diet pills she had received in the mail, Oliver at age 19 went from 160 pounds to 120. The medical examiner contributed the teen's death to an excessive loss of potassium in her body and digitalis poisoning.<sup>77</sup>

Following this tragic tale, *Life* sent an investigative reporter, Susanna McBee, undercover to 10 "obesity" doctors. At the time McBee was 5 feet, 5 inches tall and weighed 125 pounds. According to Met Life's desirable weight tables from 1967, the reporter was at an ideal weight, and even a little on the skinny side of the spectrum.<sup>78</sup> Of her own body she stated, "No one has ever called me fat. A little on the hippy side perhaps. But never fat. I am a reliable size 10." Over a six-week period, McBee visited a number of osteopaths and other "fat doctors" posing as a woman who wanted to lose weight. The reporter expected to be rejected by all the health care professionals as she was neither "overweight" nor "obese." To her surprise, however, all 10 doctors welcomed her business and in fact congratulated her for "catching the problem" early on. Among the doctors McBee visited, there was no consensus on diet or exercise. Moreover, she noted the preliminary physical examinations she received ranged from exotic tests to merely a weight and measurement assessment. "There was consensus

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> At 5'5", the 'desirable weight' for women 25 and over was 118-127 for a small frame, 124-139 for a medium frame, and 133-150 for a large frame.

though,” she wrote, “on one point: pills, pills, pills.” Between the 10 doctors she visited, McBee was prescribed 1,479 pills.<sup>79</sup>

The Senate Antitrust Subcommittee, headed by Senator Philip Hart of Michigan, began hearings in late January 1968 on what was considered to be a major scandal in American medicine – the obesity business. McBee, the undercover *Life* magazine staffer, was a key witness along with several of the doctors whom she had exposed in her investigative report. Most of the doctors defended dispensing the hundreds of rainbow-colored pills to McBee. Even after the *Life* expose, readers wrote in to the magazine with continued praise for the potentially deadly pills. One woman who had whittled her body from 198 pounds to 135 pounds wrote, “I would rather live my present, happy, full life for half as long than to prolong a miserable, self-hating half-life of a fat woman.” She claimed that due to her weight loss, she was now popular and had acquired a new job that doubled her income.<sup>80</sup> For women such as her, the supposed pay-off was far too great a temptation, even if her health was jeopardized.

The American love-affair with diet pills in the mid- to late-1960s was indicative of an overall change in exercise and diet literature. Although previous “exercise salons” had advertised what little actual work one had to do, there was a new emphasis on effortless weight-loss in the 1960s. Short-cut slimming attempts were certainly not created in the 1960s, but they did become more of a visible trend in women’s magazines. Hollywood plastic surgeon Robert A. Franklyn bemoaned to *Esquire* how often he would

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<sup>79</sup> Susanna McBee, “A Slender *Life* Reporter Visits 10 ‘Fat Doctors,’” *Life*, January 26, 1968, 24-27.

<sup>80</sup> *Life*, “Editorial,” February 16, 1968, 18A.

receive female patients who weighed over 200 pounds who desired fitting into size 12 dresses. Rather than dieting, he noted, “they would rather have their stomachs sliced off in a single go.”<sup>81</sup> Exercise books that did not reach the same numbers as women’s periodicals lamented these minimal exertion slimming schemes. “There must be an exertion of near maximum efforts to obtain best results,” one figure improvement guide indicated.<sup>82</sup>

By the late 1960s, articles that reassured teen girls that they would grow into their bodies, or that they should eat three-balanced meals a day had all but disappeared. Studies revealed that the number of high school girls who thought they were too fat had grown between 1966 and 1969 from 50 to 80 percent.<sup>83</sup> Drawing on the protest vernacular of the day, *Seventeen* magazine suggested readers could hold a “Thin-In” in their September 1968 issue. The event guest list would include girls on diets (“and who isn’t?” the magazine pointed out). Decorations would include large pictures of very thin models, entertainment was an exercise period, and food included low-calorie snacks.<sup>84</sup> Similarly in *Teen* magazine, a young girl wrote in to the periodical’s beauty editor to ask advice about what style of pants she should wear if she has heavy hips, thighs and calves? Instead of suggesting a flattering cut, the *Teen* editor responded, “We suggested buying any favorite pant style – one or two sizes too small. Or spend your entire month’s allowance on a pantsuit that’s too small, and you’ll find a new supply of willpower for

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<sup>81</sup> Robert A. Franklyn, “Confessions of a Plastic Surgeon,” *Esquire*, June 1951, 111.

<sup>82</sup> Wallis and Logan, *Figure Improvement Exercises for Women* (1965), np.

<sup>83</sup> Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 185.

<sup>84</sup> *Seventeen*, “Streamlines,” September 1968, 184.

diet and exercise.”<sup>85</sup> While teen magazines in the 1940s and 1950s had urged their readers to build a positive relationship with their bodies, by the 1960s they now mirrored the message of periodicals aimed at an older generation – slenderizing at all costs.

So the question remains, why did women obsess over their figures in postwar America? As others have noted, starting with the turn of the century, Americans became concerned with weight loss. But in the years after World War II, slimming down became a national obsession. Women dieted and exercised their way towards skinnier, more firm and trim figures starting in the early 1950s because of a tightened relationship between fashion, foreign policy, insurance figures, and medical opinion. Dior’s “New Look” began a democratization of fashion and declared that thin was “in.” Postwar anxieties about Communism also led to concerns about weight. And at the same time, faulty medical and insurance actuary data misled the American population to believe that not only was being “overweight” unattractive, now it was deadly as well.

Fashion standards had a broader audience in postwar America. In the nineteenth century, far less women were affected by ideals of beauty as fashion was generally limited to the upper classes. Moreover, until the mid- to late-nineteenth century the country’s population was largely rural; local community standards, rather than urban fashionability, influenced the majority of women.<sup>86</sup> As standardized ready-to-wear clothing became more available and accepted in the postwar years, women now had the time and the money to keep up with the latest fashion trends. Dior’s “New Look”

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<sup>85</sup> *Teen*, “Dear Beauty Editor,” August 1966, 53.

<sup>86</sup> Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 66-67.

demanded slenderness above all. Although the silhouette featured high-rounded breasts and full hips, these were features that could be simulated with rubber or foam padding. A tiny hand-span waist, however, could not be faked, even with the help of girdles and corsets. Dior noted that for a woman to wear his design, she must have an “*épée silhouette*” – be as slender as a fencing blade. Moreover, clothing stores stocked smaller sizes; in order to be truly stylish, the average woman had no choice but to slim down. Men’s clothiers, however, continued to sell the same sizes as they had the previous twenty years.<sup>87</sup>

Dieting and exercise also gained new importance in the 1950s and 1960s partly from fear that Americans were growing bodily and mentally soft, and could therefore be more easily influenced by Communist propaganda. In a postwar era defined by excess and mass consumption, middle-class America needed to exhibit restraint not of consumption of products, but bodily restraint from food and drink. “We’ve been called ‘soft’ and our children have been described as physically unfit, inferior in strength and stamina to children of other countries,” the *Ladies Home Journal* warned. “Our technology has created a physical void.”<sup>88</sup>

Finally, and more damaging, dieting gained momentum and credence in the postwar period due to the widely-publicized belief that fat was literally killing America. The health industry, led by Louis I. Dublin of the MetLife Insurance Company, launched

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<sup>87</sup> *Newsweek*, “The Big Bulge in Profits,” July 23, 1956, 63.

<sup>88</sup> Patricia and Ron Deutsch, “These Five were Cured of Overweight,” *Ladies Home Journal*, March 1963, 131.



an all-out campaign against “obesity” and “overweight.” In 1951, Dublin spoke at an American Medical Association symposium on what he saw as a direct correlation between fat and mortality. “Overweight” individuals purportedly died 282 percent faster than “normal” people.<sup>89</sup> The medical profession had always considered “obesity” to be unhealthy, but they generally situated their definition of too much fat at the far end of the weight spectrum. Dublin redefined “overweight” as 10 percent above actuary table ideals and “obese” as 20 to 30 percent above it. In doing so, the influential insurance company statistician catapulted, overnight, “average” Americans into the category of “overweight.”<sup>90</sup>

Just as earlier health-weight tables had been flawed, Dublin’s study relied on questionable methodology. His research was based on 25,998 men and 24,901 women who were insured between 1925 and 1934 with policy renewals in 1950. The majority of policyholders, however, were of Northern European origin – a group generally taller and leaner than national averages. Moreover, weight data was sloppily collected. Applicants were weighed and measured with their clothes and shoes on and at least 20 percent of applicants self-reported their own heights and weights.<sup>91</sup> To further complicate Dublin’s findings, the statistician based his studies on the presumption that fat, not other factors, caused premature mortality. For example, Dublin argued that mature-onset diabetes was caused by “obesity.” With the disease, large amounts of insulin are released in the blood.

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<sup>89</sup> *Newsweek*. “The Big Bulge in Profits,” July 23, 1956, 61.

<sup>90</sup> Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 118.

<sup>91</sup> Jean Mayer, “Overweight and Obesity,” *Atlantic*, August 1955, 69-71; *Ibid.*, 118.

Insulin is a lipogenic, or fat-producing hormone. Therefore, being “overweight” may be a symptom of the disease, not its cause.<sup>92</sup>

But insurance companies could not have created this fear of fat without the support of the medical community. And unique to this period, doctors were more trusted as experts than ever before. The career and success of pediatrician, Dr. Benjamin Spock is evidence of this. But the problem was that these “experts” relied on Dublin’s faulty data. In their own reports, medical doctors and scientists continually referred to the MetLife studies as if they were gospel, rather than looking for independent sources. The scientists and doctors agreed: being overweight shortened ones life and weight loss lengthened it. The federal government, partly because of Communism, but also in part because of the growing “obesity myth,” funded several studies. In 1961 the U.S. Public Health Service conducted their own height-weight studies, and in 1969 the White House held a special conference on Food, Nutrition and Health.<sup>93</sup> The government’s attention to weight and health fed the ever-growing panic that the country was suffering from an “obesity” epidemic far worse than what Dublin had earlier suggested.

The national weight-loss campaign was originally directed at men because reports revealed they were at the highest risk of heart disease.<sup>94</sup> But women, not men, became the most religious dieters. *Readers Digest* reported that 34 million adults considered themselves “too fat” in 1954, but noted that women were more eager to lose weight than

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<sup>92</sup> Seid, 119.

<sup>93</sup> Seid, 120-123, 141.

<sup>94</sup> Ehrenreich, Barbara. *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983), chapter 6.

men.<sup>95</sup> In 1954 a Gallup poll discovered that twice as many women worried about their weight than men did, and one in three of them dieted compared to one in seven men. Moreover, the motivations for female dieting had little to do with health. A 1959 Roper poll reported that 66 percent of women dieted to “make their clothes fit better” or to avoid “look[ing] heavy.”<sup>96</sup>

### Conclusions

While trying on a dress, a woman was shocked to discover that the garment was unflattering on her figure as the design had considerably less material than the previous fashion season. Instead of passing over the skin-revealing dress, the shopper purchased the gown and then frequented three different exercise salons to streamline her legs; she then went on a rigorous diet to trim her body all over, and performed isometric exercises to firm her upper body. This story, which appeared in *Vogue* in 1965, was not a satirical lament about the fashion industry. The same story could have appeared in a men’s magazine or an African American periodical to highlight the seemingly ridiculous efforts women suffer through all for the sake of fashionability. Instead, such stories in fashion magazines functioned as “How To” guides for readers. *Vogue* assured its reading audience that even if fashion reverted to the kind of cover-up heavy clothes like those of the “New Look,” with a slender body, one would still be ahead of the game. “By fitting yourself to the small mould, by tailoring your body to the small proportion of the present,” the magazine assured, “you’ll always be confident that when it comes to

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<sup>95</sup> *Readers Digest*, “Meet the Typical America – Male and Female,” February 1954, 34.

<sup>96</sup> Peter Wyden, *The Overweight Society* (New York: Willow Marrow, 1965), 9.

keeping fashionably warm, there is after all nothing like a bikini.”<sup>97</sup> Fashion is rarely designed to fit bodies. Instead, the body must be contoured to fit the garment. Although cotton and textiles are more easily manipulated than flesh and bone, magazines aimed at both teen and women audiences encouraged their readers to actively reshape their bodies to fit a culturally created ideal. Fashion design, particularly the “New Look” and later mini-dresses and skirts, encouraged dieting.

Just as the ideal body shape transitioned from a woman with curves to an androgynous and shapeless silhouette in the postwar years, the strategies to obtain the model figure changed as well. Guide books and women’s magazines encouraged moderate physical activity and a nutritionally balanced diet in the years immediately following World War II to create energized, “built-up” women ready to guide the nation into peacetime. By the mid-1950s, however, advice columns tilted towards weight-loss and slenderizing tactics. At least part of this can be attributed to the influence of the Iron Curtain and the beginning of the Cold War. A fat, passive nation would be unable to compete with or combat Communism. But because Soviet women were active and strong, American women had to be the opposite.

Louis Dublin headed the war against fat. Aided with actuary statistics, Dublin worked to make a correlation between “overweight” and early death. Americans took up the mantle in the war against fat; insurance companies and doctors seemed to agree that being heavier than Dublin’s height-weight tables would lead to a premature death. Dublin’s reports ultimately decreed, however, that no one was ever *too* thin. Part vanity,

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<sup>97</sup> *Vogue*, “Beauty Bulletin: What makes the body fit the fashion?” February 15, 1965, 120, 124, 146.

part health concerns, women looked to magazines for advice on how to lose weight. Little effort weight-loss schemes such as crash diets, diet pills, and passive exercise salons appealed to a postwar American population rapidly becoming accustomed to instant gratification and immediate results. Promises of effortless weight-loss not only sold these products, but they also continued the damaging myth that fat people are lazy. “Overweight” and “obese” women were not only seen as unattractive; in a country whose historical foundations praised a solid work ethic, indolence was not a desirable trait.

## CHAPTER 4

### WHAT MEN WANT: MEN'S MAGAZINES AND THE GIRL-NEXT-DOOR

*There's something wrong, either psychologically or glandularly [sic], with some guy who isn't interested in pictures of pretty girls.*

- Hugh Hefner

In the 1950s, while mainstream magazines like *Collier's*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Look*, and *Life* all struggled with subscription numbers, magazines aimed at a male readership flourished. At their apex, fifty different periodicals not only existed in print, but they also sold in the hundreds of thousands to a significant portion of the male population.<sup>1</sup> For example, *Playboy* magazine, created in 1953, grew to be the eleventh highest selling periodical in the United States in the postwar years.<sup>2</sup> Men's magazines addressed a number of topics, but one theme overwhelmed all other subjects – the American Woman. Periodicals such as *Playboy*, *Esquire*, and other lesser-known monthlies offer a unique and previously unexamined source regarding female body image in postwar America. While periodicals aimed at white women largely spoke through a united voice about a specific body image, men's magazines catered to a variety of tastes and anxieties when it came to the “softer sex.” In numerous and critical ways, the “ideal

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<sup>1</sup> Max Allan Collins, *Men's Adventure Magazines in Postwar America: the Rich Oberg Collection* (Los Angeles, CA: Taschen, 2004), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Lohof, *American Commonplace: Essays on the Popular Culture of the United States* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1982).

woman” presented in men’s magazines departed dramatically from the beauty goals promoted in women’s magazines. But although this was a departure from the waifish high-fashion model found on the cover of women’s magazines, the ideal celebrated in men’s magazines was not necessarily a healthy or realistic alternative.

### **The Evolution of Men’s Magazines and the Girl-Next-Door**

The “Godfather” of men’s magazines was *Esquire*. Founded in October 1933, *Esquire* adopted a masculine agenda that embraced consumption, sexuality, style, and taste.<sup>3</sup> With its pages filled with men’s fashion, highbrow fiction, and a limited amount of “cheesecake” photography, *Esquire* appealed to the reader who identified with the middle or upper class. Like *Playboy* magazine decades later, *Esquire* evaded claims that its content was too effeminate by inserting pin-up photography and racy jokes and cartoons. Despite being the predecessor to other postwar magazines, however, the majority of men’s periodicals that followed *Esquire* approached a very different publication philosophy when it came to content and tone. Later men’s magazines like *True*, *Flirt*, *Beauty Parade*, and *Glamor Parade* [sic], appealed to a working-class readership less interested in fashion and fiction. Instead of highbrow fiction, readers were offered adventure stories, and rather than examining the latest in business-suit fashion, these publications instructed men how to buy a high-quality hunting rifle or where to find the best fishing.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the history of men’s magazines in the twentieth century, see Dian Hanson, *Dian Hanson’s The History of Men’s Magazines*, Volume II (Los Angeles, CA: Taschen, 2004); Elizabeth Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Tom Pendergast, *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture, 1900-1950* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).

These working-men's magazines found their pin-up models in burlesque revues, nightclub shows, and on casting couches. The now-defunct periodicals also catered to a number of specific fetishes rather than appealing to a broader audience. Pictorials featured women's wrestling, elaborate costumes, and spanking. Models wore binding corsets, fishnet stockings, and skyscraper high-heels, with long hair falling past their cinched waists. As one author explains, "This was the age of the leg, only because it was the one erotic aspect of a woman that could be legally revealed. Legs were exaggerated and glorified, covered in fishnets and propped on the highest heels."<sup>4</sup> By the mid-1950s, however, strippers lost their place in men's magazines. With the genesis of *Playboy* magazine in 1953, the fishnets and high-heeled women of *Beauty Parade* and similar magazines began to look dated. Moreover, many readers were tired of seeing the same models in all of the same magazines. While Bettie Page or Marilyn Monroe could "play havoc with any male's hormone balance," by the mid-1950s these actresses and models had found their way into virtually every men's magazine.<sup>5</sup> As historian Dian Hanson observes, "the bad girls had to give up pages to the Girl Next Door."<sup>6</sup>

Hugh Hefner was not unfamiliar with the publishing world when he created *Playboy* magazine in 1953. In fact, his experience working at various men's magazines inspired him to create what he saw as a unique venture. As a promotional copywriter for *Esquire* magazine, Hefner received an early education from a magazine that favored

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<sup>4</sup> Hanson, *Dian Hanson's The History of Men's Magazines*, 44.

<sup>5</sup> *Playboy*, "Letters to the Editor," April 1956, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Hanson, 186.



style, fashion, and intellect in a men's periodical, but when *Esquire* transferred its headquarters to New York City, Hefner stayed in Chicago.<sup>7</sup> Hefner then worked for Publisher's Development Corporation, a publishing house that produced a number of "girlie" magazines including *Art Photography*, *Modern Sunbathing*, *Sunbathing Reviews*, and *Modern Man*. *Modern Man* was typical of most men's magazines of the early 1950s, focusing on the outdoors as the "male" domain with fishing trips, golf outings, and camping. Due to censorship fears, pin-up models appeared in these magazines under the guise of high-art or articles about photography lessons.

Hefner wanted to reclaim the indoors for men. *Playboy's* first issue, published in December 1953, sold over 54,000 of its 70,000 print run.<sup>8</sup> In the magazine's mission statement, Hefner boldly admitted that this periodical was not meant to be a "family magazine." He argued, moreover, that unsuspecting females who picked up the magazine by mistake should pass it along to a man "and get back to your *Ladies' Home Companion*."<sup>9</sup> Eventually the Midwestern man created an empire of "Bunnies" with *Playboy* clubs across the world and even his own late night talk show, "*Playboy's Penthouse*" in 1959.

Cheesecake photographer Lisa Larsen observed in 1950, "The best way to capture a man's imagination, it seems to me, is to picture reality for him, rather than some

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<sup>7</sup> Biographical information from Russell Miller's *Bunny: the Real Story of Playboy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984); Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America; Hugh Hefner: American Playboy*. DVD. Directed by Kevin Burns (Los Angeles, CA: Foxstar Productions, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Hanson, 216.

<sup>9</sup> *Playboy*, "Mission Statement," December 1953, 1.

figment of a dream world.”<sup>10</sup> Hefner wanted to get away from the pin-up traditions found at the big calendar houses like Brown & Bigelow. As Mark Jancovich observes, Hefner worked to “humanize the pin-up concept.”<sup>11</sup> Rather than finding his Playmates in strip clubs and on casting couches like the majority of other men’s magazines, *Playboy*’s creator sought his centerfolds in everyday life. In the magazine’s first few issues, Playmates appeared anonymously. Readers wrote in to the editorial staff begging for names, addresses, marital status, and body proportions of the stars of the centerfold. In May 1954, Hefner relented and began publishing the name of his centerfolds. Joanne Arnold, Miss May, was a model who had previously appeared in the magazine in March for the pictorial, “Sex Sells a Shirt.” Unlike later Playmates, however, Arnold’s name and biographical sketch did not appear next to her centerfold pictorial, but rather in the editorial notes on the magazine’s opening page.

After the decision that Playmates would no longer be nameless bodies in the magazine, the editorial staff strove to assure its readership that potential Playmates did not just exist in the fantasy play-world of Hollywood. For this reason, starting in December 1954 with Terry Ryan, *Playboy* began revealing the name (albeit usually false stage names) of the woman pictured, and listing her occupation and hobbies. Black and white photos that accompanied the centerfold showed the Playmate in every day activities – a format that would be copied by later facsimile magazines. Historian Elizabeth

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<sup>10</sup> Lisa Larsen, “The Woman Behind the Camera,” *Esquire*, May 1950, 50.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Jancovich, “The Politics of *Playboy*: Lifestyle, Sexuality, and Non-conformity in American Cold War Culture,” in *Historicizing Lifestyle: Mediating Taste, Consumption and Identity from the 1900s to 1970s*, ed. David Bell and Joanne Hollows (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Co., 2006), 83.

Fraterrigo observes, “The resulting images suggested that ‘nice’ but somehow sexually self-aware ‘girls’ disrobed for *Playboy’s* cameras, while the accompanying text affirmed that the Playmate existed not in a world apart from the reader, but all around him.”<sup>12</sup>

Although Ryan was not the most attractive of the centerfolds from that year, she became an instant favorite.



*Figure 8. Hugh Hefner's prototype for the Girl-Next-Door, Janet Pilgrim*

After this pictorial, with a few celebrity exceptions like Betty Page and Jayne Mansfield, the magazine’s Playmates were overwhelming average young women. Playmates held various occupations as ordinary as legal secretary or librarian, but the vast majority were dancers, models, or aspiring actresses. In July 1955, *Playboy* looked no further than its own administrative offices to find that month’s Playmate when they photographed Janet Pilgrim, an employee in their circulation department. Pilgrim, “efficient as she is good looking,” quickly won the hearts of the periodical’s readership

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<sup>12</sup> Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America*, 42.

and continued to be featured in centerfolds as well as pictorial stories over the next few years. The accompanying article boasted, “potential Playmates are all around you: the new secretary at your office, the doe-eyed beauty who sat opposite you at lunch yesterday, the girl who sells you shirts and ties at your favorite store.”<sup>13</sup>

The magazine went to great lengths to highlight how one could find his or her own Playmate. In a clearly staged article, magazine photographers met one young woman, Barbara Cameron, while shopping at a record store. After asking her to pose for nude photography, the magazine noted Cameron’s wistful reply, “It would be fun, she admitted, but she couldn’t, really she couldn’t.” Upon turning the page, however, the reader is immediately rewarded with a photograph of Cameron in the buff, apparently having finally surrendered her inhibitions. Moreover, she is pictured in the shower, a towel around her midsection, her breasts bare but not facing the camera, as if the photographers merely followed her home for the impromptu photo shoot.<sup>14</sup> When readers wrote in, skeptical that the magazine had “convinced” Cameron, the editors responded, “Those are the facts, friend. We just happen to be getting good at talking the nicest of girls into posing as Playmates. Any objections?”<sup>15</sup>

*Playboy* prided itself on finding average, wholesome girls to grace its pages, and readers approved of the “freshness” of their models. “Your February Playmate, Cheryl Kubert, would look sexy in a sleeping bag,” one reader applauded. “[Jayne] Mansfield

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<sup>13</sup> *Playboy*, “Playboy’s Office Playmate: Janet Pilgrim, subscription manager,” July 1955, 27.

<sup>14</sup> *Playboy*, “Meet Barbara Cameron,” November 1955, 30.

<sup>15</sup> *Playboy*, “Letters to the Editor,” March 1958.

has to resort to nudity. Please stop featuring big-bosomed, expensive Hollywood types. Give us more of ‘the girl next door’ – like Cheryl.”<sup>16</sup> Because of the “realistic” emphasis on their pin-up models, *Playboy* relayed the belief that real men wanted real women, not Hollywood starlets and perennial pin-up girls. In this way, *Playboy* set itself apart from other men’s magazines, including *Esquire*.

The Girl-Next-Door concept was important not only to male readers who wanted a “Bunny” of their very own, but to women as well. Women, married and single, wrote in to the magazine and submitted personal photos to be a Playmate. Men, similarly, suggested the names of women they knew in their own lives whom they thought would make appropriate centerfolds. If a reader was not convinced that posing nude was proper for an all-American girl, then *Playboy* assured its readers by describing the blessings of Playmate parents. Janet Pilgrim’s mother first objected to her daughter appearing in the magazine; but after seeing the final photo spread, she was taken aback by how beautiful the pictures were and reportedly sent copies of the issue to friends and relatives.<sup>17</sup> Miss January 1957, Elizabeth Ann Roberts, was accompanied by her mother to her scheduled photo shoot. Luckily for the magazine her mother fully approved of the photography when it was later discovered that Liz Roberts was not yet 18 years old.

Hugh Hefner mastered the Girl-Next-Door concept, but he was not the creator. During World War II, no pin-up star received more fan letters from soldiers than Betty Grable. By the end of the war she was Hollywood’s biggest star, earning the largest

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<sup>16</sup> *Playboy*, “Letters to the Editor,” May 1958, 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Playboy*, “December Playmate Janet Pilgrim – What’s Her Parent’s Reaction?” March 1956.

paycheck of any woman in America. But Grable was certainly not the most attractive nor the most sexually explicit of her Hollywood pin-up compatriots. Her popularity was based instead on her wholesomeness and averageness. In fact, the actress became even *more* popular when she wed big band leader Harry James in 1943 and had a child a year later. She was the type of girl that GIs, particularly working-class soldiers, imagined returning home to and marrying.<sup>18</sup> Grable's popularity highlights the anxieties of soldiers abroad. While pin-ups and cheesecake photography provided men with an escape from the horrors of combat, they wanted no reminders that their wives or girlfriends back home might not be faithful. Once GIs returned, however, all of that changed.<sup>19</sup>

#### **“Vital Statistics” - The Most Important Numbers in a Girl’s Life**

After World War II, Louise Paine Benjamin, beauty editor for the *Ladies Home Journal* interviewed returning GIs and asked them “what does your ideal girl look like?” From the respondents, Benjamin created an image of the perfect woman. This type of journalism was popular in the postwar years – creating a *Frankenstein/Weird Science* perfect woman, often from disparate pieces of popular actresses and entertainers. The ideal girl, according to Benjamin’s survey, was 5 feet 5.7 inches tall, with long wavy brown hair, and a slender, but curvaceous figure. Men imagined this woman weighed about 118 pounds, but as the editor noted, “That ‘figure’ may be all right for dream girls,

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Westbrook, “‘I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl that Married Harry James’: American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II,” *American Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Dec 1990): 587-614.

<sup>19</sup> Dian Hanson, *Dian Hanson’s: The History of Men’s Magazines*, Volume I (Los Angeles, CA: Taschen, 2004), 296.

but you'd better allow a 10-pound margin. It *was* curves you said, wasn't it?"<sup>20</sup> Not only was this a "dream girl," however, this was the girl GIs claimed they wanted to marry.

Men appeared to have a very specific idea of what the perfect woman looked like, but were wholly unaware of what women *actually* weighed. Another magazine survey polled college men about the perfect college girl. This ideal was slightly shorter than the GI's dream girl at 5 feet 5 inches, but weighed 118 pounds again with measurements of 34-24-34.5.<sup>21</sup> According to the MetLife height and weight tables from the 1940s, a woman with a *small* frame who stood 5 feet 5 inches should weigh between 126 and 136 pounds. This standard whittled down when actuaries reconfigured the chart in 1959. The disconnect between what men wanted in their ideal partner and what the average woman weighed can be attributed to the kinds of models that appeared in men's periodicals. On average from 1945-1949, pin-up models in men's magazines like *Esquire* stood 5 feet 6.5 inches tall, and weighed 117 pounds with 34.3-23.5-34.9 measurements.<sup>22</sup>

Men's magazines reveal that their readership was more interested in a woman's proportions than her actual weight. The unwritten rule when it came to cover girls and pin-ups was the more exaggerated the bust-to-waist-to-hip measurement, the better. In 1954, the H.W. Gossard Company, manufacturers of women's foundation garments, conducted a study to discover what female body type men preferred in order to fashion

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<sup>20</sup> Louise Paine Benjamin, "The Girl I Would Like to Propose To," *Ladies Home Journal*, June 1946, 179.

<sup>21</sup> Dawn Crowell, "One and a Half Million College Men Can't be Wrong," *Ladies Home Journal*, September 1947, 68-69, 257.

<sup>22</sup> By the early 1950s, *Esquire* no longer listed the measurements of the models in its pages, perhaps as an attempt to separate itself from 'nudey' magazines.

their undergarments with that ideal in mind. Not surprisingly, the men surveyed most desired women with cartoon-like 36-22-36 measurements. Over 75 percent of men under the age of 24 preferred this figure. The study also discovered, however, that the older a man became, the *less* he preferred women with those measurements, perhaps aware of his own limitations. When the Gossard Company probed husbands if they were “satisfied” with their wives’ figure, men with 36-22-36 shaped partners were 100 percent contented. 76 percent of married men were pleased with wives with 35-25-35 dimensions. The quotient of happy husbands dropped to 48 percent when their wives had a 36-29-38.5 figure, however, and only 38 percent of men reported that they were satisfied with wives with 34-24-34 measurements.<sup>23</sup> Ironically 34-24-34 was considered the perfect high-fashion model figure. Women’s magazines highlighted this streamlined, yet curvy figure as being ideally symmetric; one’s waist should be ten inches smaller than the bust and hip.

By the mid-1950s, as large-breasted women became more *en vogue* in Hollywood and in men’s minds, the measurements of cheesecake models became more ample at 37.5-24-36. *Playboy* featured stories about women like June Wilkinson, a British starlet who had garnered the nickname “The Bosom” for her 43-22-36 measurements by the time she was eighteen, but the typical fold-out model had significantly less cartoon-like proportions. *Playboy*’s Playmates were shorter and slimmer than the typical men’s magazine models in the 1950s, averaging just under 5 feet 5 inches and weighing 115.6 pounds, but with similarly exaggerated measurements at 36-23.3-35.4.

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Armstrong, “One Man’s Meat,” *Playboy*, June 1954, 11-12.



Referring to the buxom late-night television star, George S. Schuyler of the *Pittsburgh Courier* wrote, “I fervently hope that the Dagmar revolution is here to stay.”<sup>24</sup> Norman Saunders, an illustrator for the men’s magazine *New Man* recalled a correction his art director had demanded – to make the women in his drawings have larger breasts. When he returned the next day with the “modifications,” his boss asked him to go even larger. Saunders reacted with astonishment: “Holy shit, Louie [Queralt], they don’t get any bigger than that! They’re already the size of watermelons! They don’t make ‘em as big as washtubs!” He recalled Queralt’s eyes lighting up at the unintended suggestion; the art director promptly demanded Saunders readjust the drawing in favor of the “washtub” size.<sup>25</sup>

Men obviously did not universally admire large-chested women. Novelist and sports writer Paul Gallico was particularly critical of the American male fascination with buxom celebrities and how a woman need only this exaggerated anatomy to catapult her to stardom. Another *Esquire* columnist agreed, noting, “a bulbous front will make a star quicker than [Russian ballerina Anna] Pavlova’s face or [Marlene] Dietrich’s pins.”<sup>26</sup> Gallico also lamented how fellow journalists, without fail, could not write a column about these women without at least once emphasizing the “sex-body-shape-hip-wiggle-oo-la-la angle.”<sup>27</sup> Male journalists like Gallico, however, were a minority.

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<sup>24</sup> *Jet*, “Boost for Big Busts,” November 1, 1951, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Adam Parfrey, *It’s a Man’s World: Men’s Adventure Magazines: the Postwar Pulps* (Los Angeles, CA: Feral House, 2003), 46.

<sup>26</sup> Ben Hecht, “Bosoms Away,” *Esquire*, July 1957, 73, 74.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Gallico, “This Man’s World,” *Esquire*, October 1956, 50, 130.

At the height of the country's mammary madness, *Playboy* argued that small-breasted women "had never had it so good." Citing Grace Kelly and Aubrey Hepburn as two of the most popular Hollywood stars and that buxom Jane Russell had yet to win an Oscar, Jay Smith downplayed the importance of breasts. Later in the article, however, Smith contradicted his praise for women with small cup sizes when he claimed it was his "Constitutional right" to date a large-breasted woman. As the Constitution protects the "pursuit of happiness" he noted "we're never happier than when we're pursuing a fully-developed 100% 38-D American girl."<sup>28</sup> One *Playboy* reader wrote in, "Cheryl [Kubert] reminds me of my kid sister and Liz Roberts was just as bad. Let's have more buxom, healthy, sexy females."<sup>29</sup> Data sheets are not available for either model, as *Playboy* did not ask for this information prior to 1959, but their respective centerfolds reveal two young women far more streamlined than the typical 1950s Playmate. Although *Playboy's* readers preferred the Girl-Next-Door look, they favored fleshy, buxom models over more slender pin-ups who reminded them not of the girl-next-door, but of their little sisters.

### **"Spooks" and Dieting Dilemmas**

Although women might have admired the figures of the high-fashion model, men in postwar America did not. Men's magazines referred to matchstick thin models as "spooks," describing them as "chestless, hipless, and sexless to the ordinary man." They were seen as women who deliberately destroyed their curves by wearing undersized bras

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<sup>28</sup> Jay Smith, "The Big Bosom Battle," *Playboy*, September 1955, 26, 42.

<sup>29</sup> *Playboy*, "Letters to the Editor," May 1958, 7.

and living on “coffee, Melba toast and Benzedrine.”<sup>30</sup> Pin-up photographer Lisa Larsen said, “A woman should have firm shoulders, rounded breasts, a slender waist, and legs that remind you of a woman rather than a beanstalk.”<sup>31</sup> Harry Conover, head of the Conover modeling agency popular for Cover Girls, complained that fashion designers were “trying to give America a generation of flat-chested, emaciated, ill-tempered women who will be hard to live with.” Contemporary fashions, he added, favored “women [who] look like matchsticks, thus ruining their health and disposition.” Purportedly Conover allowed his models to eat whatever they wanted.<sup>32</sup> This, however, seems far-fetched because even though Conover’s favored style of models had larger hips and busts than those women found in high-fashion magazines, they also generally had smaller waist measurements that made their silhouettes look more exaggerated.

Women’s fashion magazines urged women to exercise and diet to obtain an ideal form. Men’s magazines, however, lamented that American women were squandering away their femininity with such slenderizing tactics. “Today’s slick chick spends half of her waking hours studying the latest facts on vitamins and calories and the other half in the beauty salon,” one journalist observed, “simply because the scales tipped an extra few ounces the day before. Glamour via agony!”<sup>33</sup> A 1946 survey asked returning GIs if they approved of their significant others’ dieting. Two-thirds of the men accepted their

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<sup>30</sup> Henry Lee, “Sex is Here to Sell,” *Esquire*, March 1952, 72-74.

<sup>31</sup> Lisa Larsen, “The Woman Behind the Camera,” *Esquire*, May 1950, 50.

<sup>32</sup> Gilbert Millstein, “The Modeling Business,” *Life*, March 25, 1946, 113.

<sup>33</sup> *Flirt*, “Corsets Make Curves,” August 1948, 18-19.

partners dieting “if she needs it,” but respondents were decidedly against fad diets.<sup>34</sup>

Calorie-counting, according to men’s magazines, was just one of the reasons why “the female of the species is often a pain in the neck.”<sup>35</sup>

Most men did not necessarily oppose slender-figured women. In a 1951 *McCall's* article, “Do Husbands Like Plump Wives?” men responded with a resounding no.<sup>36</sup> What they rejected was the drastic measures women took to achieve the svelte form. Part of the married woman’s dieting dilemma was how to cook for her family, but watch her own food intake at the same time. When a woman made dinner for her husband, one person had to make concessions – either the man ate an unsatisfying salad, or the wife gorged on meat and potatoes. “The growing fear of slimmer competition while she steadily loses ground in the battle of the bulge may make a jealous shrew of the sweetest tempered wife,” one journalist observed.<sup>37</sup> One *Esquire* study even evinced that heavier women were more happily married than model-thin women.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, a large part of the antipathy towards slenderizing was the belief that women did not diet or exercise to make their partners happy, but rather because their friends were dieting or because they wanted to look like “the women in the ads.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Louise Paine Benjamin, “The Girl I Would Like to Propose To,” *Ladies Home Journal*, June 1946, 179.

<sup>35</sup> J. B. Rice, “Do You Know Your Women?” *Esquire*, March 1948, 41.

<sup>36</sup> *McCall's*, “Do Husbands Like Plump Wives?” March 1951, 6-8.

<sup>37</sup> Rice, “Do You Know Your Women?”, 41.

<sup>38</sup> Herb Graffis, “The Weigh with Women,” *Esquire*, September 1948, 76.

<sup>39</sup> Harry Golden, “Diet Craze and Sugar,” *Jet*, March 7, 1964, 8.

Exasperating men's frustration over dieting wives, the most amply figured pin-up girls and actresses bragged that they ate whatever they wanted. Marilyn Monroe declared that she was "too busy" to diet. To further make other women envious of the blonde sex goddess, she added, "I eat spaghetti and potatoes whenever I feel like it."<sup>40</sup> Sophia Loren also claimed that her figure was all thanks to heaps of pasta. "Everything you are looking at is a result of spaghetti," she proudly declared to *Esquire*. "I grew a whole centimeter last year because of spaghetti."<sup>41</sup> Busty blonde actress and perennial *Playboy* cover girl, Jayne Mansfield, announced that the way to her heart was through her stomach.<sup>42</sup> October 1964's *Playboy* Playmate, Rosemarie Hillcrest (41-25-38), was described as "a big girl, with appetite to match: She revels in foods from which the calorie-conscious would shrink."<sup>43</sup> While their wives and girlfriends were preoccupied with counting calories, men read about actresses and centerfolds who reported that they could eat whatever they wanted without visibly impairing their figures. This was not just blanket adulation for any celebrity, however. Although popular at the box office, Audrey Hepburn was perennially attacked in men's magazines for her too-small bust and for being "abnormally thin."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bennett Cerft, "Try and Stop Me," *Chicago Defender*, July 13, 1959, 5.

<sup>41</sup> *Esquire*, "A Nymph of El Escorial," April 1957, 131.

<sup>42</sup> *Playboy*, "Will Success Spoil Jayne Mansfield?" February 1956, 66.

<sup>43</sup> *Playboy*, "Rosemarie Hillcrest," October 1964, 113.

<sup>44</sup> Robert W. Marks, "The Clarification of Audrey Hepburn," *Esquire*, July 1957, 50-51.



*Figure 9. Marilyn Monroe lifting barbells. Photography of the Hollywood star actively working on her figure never would have been reprinted in men's magazines.<sup>45</sup>*

Men's magazines were generally uniform in their dismissal of "spooks" and excessive dieting, but they reveal mixed reactions to the fashions that these women wore. Journalists were not blind to the fact that "for centuries, Dame Fashion and Dame Nature have been at odds." Men's periodicals highlighted the concern that fashion, rather than enhancing the feminine figure, often stifled female beauty. And although fashion had its changes, it appeared to some that the female form experienced more alterations than the hemline of a skirt. And in doing so, women "departed completely from their purpose – that of pleasing the male."<sup>46</sup> Similar to their critique of women's diets, men's magazines argued that women dressed to impress other women, not men.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Life* photographer Philippe Halsman captured this image of Monroe in 1952 during an assignment early in her career. The photograph was not included in the article. Instead, a picture of Monroe lounging on an easy chair while listening to records headlines the story, "Hollywood Topic A-Plus: Whole Town's Talking about Marilyn Monroe," *Life*, April 7, 1952, 101-104.

<sup>46</sup> *Beauty Parade*, "Feminine Fashions Through the Ages," March 1946, 22.

Perhaps no single fashion movement received more attention in men's magazines than Dior's "New Look." Part of the disdain for the "New Look" originated in its Parisian roots. Although France was an ally during World War II, American men curled their lips at the idea that American women would continue to look to Paris for the latest designs. One such man who found Dior's design to be absurd argued, "If a model in a picture is wearing a skimpy number with only a ruffle around the back and football shoulder pads to keep her from looking like an upright roll of roofing paper, the American male observer decides that France needs fats and starches by next plane."<sup>48</sup> But while men valued the full bust, thin waist, and healthy hip measurements that the "New Look" provoked, the long skirt hemline that went along with Dior's fashion was not appreciated. "[I]t is good to welcome back the hand-span waist, the stiff corset that imparts those hour-glass curves," *Beauty Parade* addressed, but noted that these "blessings" had come with a longer hemline.<sup>49</sup> "There Ought to be a Law" against long skirts another story bemoaned.<sup>50</sup>

While men's magazines generally favored the "New Look's" emphasis on curves, they re-imaged a world of short skirts in an almost prophetic way. As early as October 1948, both *Beauty Parade* and *Flirt's* columns predicted the miniskirt, the leg-baring fashion that gained widespread popularity in the late 1960s. A pin-up model wearing a

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<sup>47</sup> Herb Graffis, "For Whom the Belle Dresses," *Esquire*, March 1948, 69.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>49</sup> *Beauty Parade*, "Will This Be Next?" December 1948, 58-59.

<sup>50</sup> *Beauty Parade*, "There Ought to Be a Law," July 1949, 21.

tight dress with a miniscule skirt was pictured in one photo-essay. Her skirt hemline is so high, her garters and the tops of her stockings are visible. Mimicking a political platform, a list of demands is numbered: “1. Up with long skirts! 2. Freedom of the sees! 3. America must outstrip all others! 4. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!” The platform ends with a play on words, and Christian Dior’s tag-line, “Remember – the longer the skirt, the shorter the Look!”<sup>51</sup> Despite the ebbs and flows of feminine fashion, men’s magazines in the postwar period reveal that men did not stray from what they considered ideal – a slightly voluptuous figure, streamlined, yet with full curves and shapely legs from ankle to thigh.<sup>52</sup>



Figure 10. “The New, New, New Look,” *Flirt Magazine* – October 1948

<sup>51</sup> *Flirt*, “The New, New, New, New Look!” October 1948, 25; *Beauty Parade*, “Will This Be Next?” December 1948, 58-59.

<sup>52</sup> *Beauty Parade*, “Feminine Fashions Through the Ages,” March 1946, 22.



### Faking It

Excessive dieting and the sheep-like following of the newest fashions irked men because it also reminded them of how inauthentic the female form could be. While society and heterosexual norms pressured couples to wed at earlier ages than ever before in the postwar years, men's magazines adopted a misogynistic strain in regards to marriage. Men believed they were being duped: trapped into marriage and tricked into relationships with women who not only faked their personalities, but faked what their bodies actually looked like. One journalist estimated that the average male in 1947 spent 10 days, 5 hours, and 40 minutes a year on grooming and working out. He estimated that women, however, spent over two months out of the year on cosmetic maintenance.<sup>53</sup> Another author noted that women spent half a billion dollars on foundation garments "to encase their bodies and contour them to designs most pleasing to the male vision."<sup>54</sup> Undergarment fashions reflected anxieties about the female form. Foundation garments not only contained women's sexuality, but they also physically manipulated female bodies into ideal shapes.

In a photo essay in *Flirt* magazine, one writer encouraged his readers to compare their partners with "the perfect lady," all the while making public that everything on a woman's body can be artificial and manufactured from her hair to her toes. A pin-up girl is pictured; next to each of her body parts the magazine labeled to whom the admirer could attribute her "perfection." Purposely misspelling cosmetic companies and other fashion industry giants, the accompanying photo notes that her eyes are courtesy of

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<sup>53</sup> Walter Sorell, "Beauty is her Duty," *Esquire*, September 1947, 53.

<sup>54</sup> Herb Graffis, "Figures about Females," *Esquire*, February 1951, 75.

“Maybellinsky,” her complexion is by “Max Wacktor,” and her large breasts by “Seks 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue.” One author noted that the only body parts on a woman that were immune to this kind of forgery were legs and feet. “That’s why men are so rude in staring at women’s legs,” he observes. “They know they’ve got something there. Something that is unfakable [sic].”<sup>55</sup> When insurance agencies like Lloyds of London began insuring women’s body parts in the postwar years, it only exaggerated ideas of women as an ensemble of interchangeable body parts. Betty Grable most famously had her legs insured for \$1 million dollars, while topless dancer Carol Doda insured her silicone-injected breasts for \$1.5 million.

Although men might have desired women with large breasts, the idea of falsies or other methods of breast augmentation was met with much criticism and dismay. “What nature has forgotten they stuff with cotton,” observed one man. “If anybody is entitled to squawk it’s not the under-endowed girl but the poor guy who married one of them and then discovers that he’s been short changed.”<sup>56</sup> When Junie Sterling meets her employer, Mr. Belton, in Rea Michael’s pulp story *Two-Way Street* (1964), Belton immediately questions the story’s heroine about the genuineness of her chest:

“Are those for real?” he asked, staring at her breasts.

She blushed. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean those breastworks. You fill that brassiere of yourn [sic] with foam rubber and the like or the genuine article?”

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<sup>55</sup> Stuart Cloete, “The High Cost of Loving,” *Esquire*, October 1957, 57, 149.

<sup>56</sup> Jay Smith, “The Big Bosom Battle,” *Playboy*, September 1955, 26, 42.

“Nothing about me is false, Mr. Belton.”

He emitted a loud whoop and slapped his knee. “That’s what I like, a gal who gives it to me straight.” He leaned farther forward. “Some of them Hollywood gals is all the product of make-believe. Some of ‘em even been operated on and plastic put inside of them to make them bigger.” He grinned. “You ever grab a-hold of a handful of plastic?”<sup>57</sup>

Advancing technologies created increasing ways for women to present their bodies as “better” than they actually were. With the growing number of women pursuing breast alterations, one *Chicago Defender* journalist lamented that women were becoming “hunk[s] of plastic.” “Pity the falsie specialist,” he bemoaned, “and the other unsuspecting. Wonder when somebody will discover a substitute for brains?”<sup>58</sup> While men complained about fake breasts, however, journalist Betty South argued that American men had done it to themselves. “If you think you’re sick of reading about and looking at falsies,” she ranted, “you can be sure that we are. Our torsos are used to sell everything from twenty-five-cent mystery stories about horses to movies dealing with the French Foreign Legion.” South argued that if Americans stopped buying commercial items in which breasts were used in the advertising, the country would suffer from a financial crash.<sup>59</sup>

Surprisingly, *Playboy* discouraged one woman from getting silicone injections to increase her breast size. In March 1970, Miss P. K. from San Francisco wrote to “The Playboy Advisor,” asking if she should pursue plastic surgery to inflate her bust measurements. She noted that, “Though my bust measurement is only 32, in good looks,

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<sup>57</sup> Rea Michaels, *Two-Way Street* (New York: Domino Books, 1964), 11.

<sup>58</sup> *Chicago Defender*, “The Wimmin’, God Bless ‘Em,” February 14, 1953, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Betty South, “The Trouble with Women is Men,” *Esquire*, April 1952, 31, 128-9.

personality and sex appeal, I seem to be doing OK.” Her worry, however, was that her boyfriend was “strictly a ‘what’s up front’ type” and that she feared losing him. *Playboy* responded with a surprising answer of “No,” and noted that the FDA had yet to approve liquid silicone injections. In fact, the agency had banned the hospital-grade injections since 1965. The magazine added, “In any event, it’s unlikely he would chuck your good looks, personality and sex appeal just for a larger chest.”<sup>60</sup> This was not the last of the plastic surgery questions in *Playboy*. A few months later in August, another reader pointed out that there were ways to enlarge the bust through surgery without the direct silicone injections. *Playboy* acknowledged other kinds of mamaplasty augmentation such as silicone implants, but once again pointed out that liquid silicone injections had not yet been approved by the FDA except for experimental purposes.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps this worry about plastic surgery did have to do with the young woman’s overall health, but one can also image the fear of inauthenticity came into *Playboy*’s response as well.

### **Twiggy versus the Swimsuit Model**

Breasts never went out of vogue, despite small-busted fashion models and the continued popularity of the gamine Audrey Hepburn. The breast-size of *Playboy* centerfolds was smaller during the late 1960s than in previous years, but flat-chested models did not take over the glossy pages of the men’s magazines as they had done in women’s fashion periodicals. On average, *Playmates* between 1965 and 1970 had a 35.7 inch bust, a full inch smaller than the magazine’s chestiest five-year period –1955 to

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<sup>60</sup> *Playboy*, “The Playboy Advisor,” March 1970, 47.

<sup>61</sup> *Playboy*, “The Playboy Advisor,” August 1970, 37.

1959 – when the average Playmate bust was 36.8 inches. But women with the largest breasts during the late 1950s typically were actresses like Jayne Mansfield (40-21-32) or often-utilized pin-up models like Eve Meyer or Marguerite Empey instead of Hefner’s Girl-Next-Door types. Even if models had more modest measurements than in previous years, *Playboy* erased any evidence that their current models did not “measure-up” to centerfolds from the magazine’s earliest years. The accompanying text with the Playmates fold-out picture did not mention a model’s proportions in the late 1960s unless she had at least a 36-inch bust. Data sheets reveal, however, that those Playmates whose “vital statistics” were not documented in the magazine had breast measurements of 34 and 35 inches. Even at these more moderate measurements, however, Playmate bust-size easily exceeded those of 1960s fashion models.

While men continued to eroticize large-breasted women, even into the late 1960s, the fashion world promoted a different extreme ideal – an androgynous, slender silhouette whose breasts were minimized. At least one scholar has called this period a time of “aesthetic disjunction.”<sup>62</sup> High-fashion models had always been slender in order to better highlight the clothes they were paid to wear, but Twiggy and other similar, shapeless models now appeared even in non-fashion magazines. At the same time, men’s magazines continued to herald shapely, curved femininity as the ideal. The Twiggy couture movement could be interpreted as merely a return to Flapper fashions of the 1920s, but unlike the ‘Twenties, it is clear that the majority of American men did not want to see high-fashion models like Twiggy, Penelope Tree, or Jean Shrimpton as

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<sup>62</sup> Harold Koda, *Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

centerfolds. Calling Twiggy “a fad” and the voluptuous Sophia Loren, “eternal,” one *True* journalist noted, “Give the average man a choice and he’ll take Sophia Loren over Twiggy every time.”<sup>63</sup> While American women whittled away at their hips and thighs in order to look like the women (girls) in their magazines, men continued to admire pin-up models that unabashedly revealed their rounded curves. *Sports Illustrated* is further evidence of this.

*Sports Illustrated* published their first “Swimsuit Issue” on January 20, 1964. Sandwiched between articles on fishing, boating, and where to go on vacation, the editor’s original “excuse” for its inclusion was a preview of the latest fashion in sporty swimwear. Every year, the Swimsuit Issue struck up animated conversations in the Letters to the Editor section. Men and women wrote in to the magazine both complaining about and praising the new winter feature. Some claimed the inclusion of the swimsuit models was unnecessary; the magazine was a sports periodical, not a “girlie picture” magazine. Other readers, resembling the “Dear Playboy,” reader responses, wrote in to the magazine, requesting more personal information about the models in the swimsuits.

Jules Campbell, fashion writer for the sporting magazine, was in charge of choosing the models for the swimsuit issues. Similar to Hugh Hefner, the fashion editor embraced the “Girl-Next-Door” philosophy when vetting models. “I just look for a girl who seems the type my husband would like,” Campbell explained. “The girl,” she continued, “has to look healthy, has to be the kind men turn around to stare at, has to have visible spirit and should be athletic.”<sup>64</sup> Although the swimsuit column featured the

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<sup>63</sup> Ralph Lee Smith, “All the Twiggies Want to be Sophia,” *True*, November 1967, 58.

<sup>64</sup> Garry Valk, “Letter from the Publisher,” *Sports Illustrated*, January 16, 1967, 4.

latest resort and beachwear, she chose models too fleshy for the typical fashion magazine. “I always used California girls in the early days,” she said. “They were bigger, healthier and more natural.”<sup>65</sup> Campbell also printed the models’ names with their photos – a rare practice in fashion modeling, but not for pin-up art.

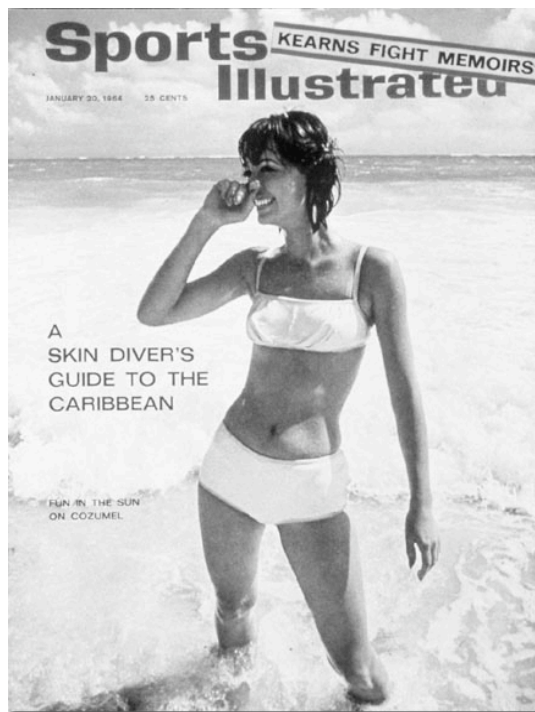


Figure 11. Cover of first Sports Illustrated Magazine Swimsuit Issue, 1964

In 1969, when the swimsuit models strayed from the “healthy California look,” the readers took note. One reader observed, “With this latest issue *SI* seems to have abandoned this formula in favor of a style and format more suited to *Vogue*, and I believe I am not alone in asking you to return to the ‘fundamentalism’ that made the first issues

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<sup>65</sup> Sarah Ballard, “From Baja with Love,” *Sports Illustrated*, February 7, 1989 <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1068176/2/index.htm> (last accessed 4 March 2011).

so appealing.”<sup>66</sup> In later issues, *Sports Illustrated* returned to its previous “formula” due to the requests of like-minded readers. From Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy* Playmates to *Sports Illustrated*’s swimsuit models, men’s magazines continued to profit so long as they recognized the kind of woman American men most desired. A tension existed, more so than at any other time in the nineteenth and twentieth century between what men wanted and the idyllic figure highlighted in women’s magazines. Perhaps never again would both American men and women agree on what constituted femininity and physical beauty; certainly not in the same way that Marilyn Monroe and her blonde, busty counterparts had influenced the country a decade earlier.

### Conclusions

Women looked to magazines for advice about everything from cooking recipes, to housekeeping tips, to relationship advice. Their fashion and lifestyle magazines similarly provided instruction on how to diet, exercise, and dress in order to find and keep a husband. Men’s magazines, rather than serving as a “How To” guide for masculinity, often simply complained about the opposite sex or heralded the newest Hollywood starlet. Magazines like *Esquire* and *Playboy*, and in some ways *Sports Illustrated*, suggested ways in which a man might reclaim manliness, but certainly not with the same aggressiveness as women’s magazines promoted femininity.

When the topics covered in men and women’s magazines overlapped, they exposed a surprising disconnect in discourse. While women’s magazines urged their readers to exercise and diet to obtain an ideal form, their male-aimed counterparts lamented that American women were squandering away their femininity with such

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<sup>66</sup> *Sports Illustrated*, “The 19<sup>th</sup> Hole: Readers Take Over,” January 28, 1969, 28.



activities. Men did not necessarily object to slender wives and girlfriends; more often they simply opposed the extreme dieting and other techniques their partners subjected themselves to for the sake of fashion and beauty. They interpreted women's desire to be thinner not as a way to please men, but as a way to compete with other women.

Moreover, while high-fashion magazines published the newest fashion lines shown in Paris every spring, men's magazines bemoaned how women blindly followed trends set by foreign cultural tastemakers. Women and men's magazines did more than promote contradictory messages about dieting and high-fashion models, however; they displayed a paradox more complex than simply a gender binary. "High-fashion" during these years was the product of male designers, and "anti-spook" journalism – columns in men's magazines that rallied against the popularity of ultra-thin fashion models – exposed a power struggle between two groups of men – the international fashion houses of designers like Christian Dior and the home-grown preferences of American men. Similarly, Twiggy and her multiple facsimiles did little to impress American men. They found few things appealing about the flat-chested, androgynous pixie model and begrudged her influence on American fashionability. For men, the importance of high-fashion models stopped at the newsstands; they desired the Girl-Next-Door.

## CHAPTER 5

### (BIG AND) BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL:

#### BODY IMAGE AND EXPANDED BEAUTY IDEALS

*I want a big fat mama  
I want a big fat mama  
I want a big fat mama  
With the meat shaking  
On her bones*

- Lucky Millinder, "Big Fat Mama"

In a widely covered media event, advocates for women's liberation protested the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City on September 7, 1968. The day was filled with guerilla theatre skits, protest placards, lobbying the pageant's contestants, and the disposal of "oppressive" female accoutrements like bras, high-heels, and women's magazines into a "Freedom Trash Can." In a press release advertising the demonstration, organizers chose the Miss America pageant as the site for the protest because the event created "an image that oppresses women in every area in which it purports to represent us."<sup>1</sup> At the end of the rally, a sheep was crowned Miss America, symbolizing the protesters' belief that the antiquated pageant was little more than a cattle auction.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "No More Miss America! Ten Points of Protest," in *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Random House, 1970), 521.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the pageant and its protest see Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 184-187; Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3-18; and Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 173-179, 283.

At the same time that white women decried Atlantic City's Miss America pageant, a few blocks away at the Ritz Carlton Hotel, Philadelphian Saura Williams accepted the title of Miss Black America. At 5 feet 4 inches and weighing 125 pounds, *Seventeen* magazine would have described the beauty queen's build as "stocky."<sup>3</sup> Williams, the contest's first winner, was from a middle-class family and had worked to integrate businesses in her college town of Prince Anne, Maryland. In front of an audience of around 300 people, Williams outperformed the seven other contestants. Her talent was an original African-inspired dance and she styled her hair in an Afro. "It was like an impossible dream coming true," she recalled. "For years I'd been brainwashed into thinking that beauty consisted of straight hair, a thin, straight nose and thin lips. The contest proved what I'd recently learned – black is beautiful."<sup>4</sup>

The pageant's creator, J. Morris Anderson, produced the Miss Black America Pageant to protest the absence of African American women in Atlantic City's televised event. The contest did not start until midnight on September 8th, in fact, because Anderson hoped media from the white pageant would stop by afterwards. The alternative pageant capped what had become a growing rejection of white beauty standards. Two years earlier in June of 1966, Diana Smith graced the cover of *Ebony* magazine. Her presence signaled the first appearance of an Afro on the cover of the middle-class African American publication. The cover story read, "The Natural Look: New Mode for Black

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<sup>3</sup> *Seventeen*, "Size-Wise Diet," May 1969, 144.

<sup>4</sup> *Seventeen*, "Face to Face with Miss Black America," March 1969, 151.

Women.” Smith was neither a celebrity nor a model, yet she held the coveted space where black entertainers like Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge previously appeared. As a twenty-year-old civil rights worker, Smith symbolized not only 1960s political activism, but also an ideal where “natural” trumped white America’s beauty standards.

Cosmetics industry giant Helena Rubenstein was quoted to have famously said, “there are no ugly women, only lazy ones.” According to this, any woman who worked at it, could achieve beauty. But what Rubenstein ignored was whiteness. Black scholar Maxine Leeds Craig notes that not only did black women experience unequal access to education, housing, and job opportunities, they also “bore the shame of being women in unacceptable bodies.”<sup>5</sup> Historians recently have begun to articulate the impact of the Black Power movement on civil rights and America as a whole. Emerging scholarship on the “Black is Beautiful” phenomenon describes this assertion of racial pride exhibited by African American men and women rejecting white ideals of style, beauty, and personal identity. However, historians have awarded the 1960s and the 1970s with the most scholarly attention. While this is an important first step, the “Black is Beautiful” movement cannot be understood without first acknowledging the seeds of this discontent and alienation.

In earlier periods, American beauty standards were set by Europeans, despite the diversity of the population. For instance, Havelock Ellis, an influential British sexologist at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, argued that a scientifically objective chain of beauty ran parallel to Darwin’s evolutionary chain of being. According to Ellis,

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<sup>5</sup> Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?*, 24-25.

white Anglo-Saxon women presented the mostly highly evolved end of the beauty scale while women of color occupied a space at the opposite end of the spectrum.<sup>6</sup> However, in the twenty years separating World War II and Diana Smith's cover story, the African American community did not passively accept white America's standards of beauty.

Black women did not universally conform and desire lightened skin, relaxed hair, and the body of Marilyn Monroe. Rather than yielding to narrow ideals of fashion, body, and cosmetic culture, African American women and men broadened the definition of female beauty. The rejection of white beauty standards demonstrated that the black middle class sought to create a unique identity even prior to "Black Power" in the mid-1960s, particularly if discontent can be found within the generally conservative middle-class readership of *Ebony* magazine in addition to more liberal black periodicals. African Americans spoke out rather than hiding safely in the middle class.

The black middle class has always held a unique position in American society. Because of the economic uniformity of black society immediately after Emancipation, status groups based on community positions rather than wealth emerged. These status distinctions were based on characteristics such as manners and morals and connections to white ancestry rather than socio-economic class.<sup>7</sup> In the early 1900s, a new black middle class emerged due to white America's reluctance to provide basic services to its African

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<sup>6</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, vol. 4: Sexual Selection in Man* (Philadelphia, PA: F. A. Davis, 1905), 158.

<sup>7</sup> Bart Landry, *The New Black Middle Class* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 22-29.

American population. Occupations such as insurance providers, dentists, undertakers, realtors, and doctors formed the core of this growing minority class.<sup>8</sup> One scholar, denouncing E. Franklin Frazier's scathing attack on the black middle class, contends that because of this socioeconomic diversity, the importance of status factors such as skin color and social links with whites declined.<sup>9</sup> In the immediate postwar period, the black middle class expanded along with civil rights legislation that opened up additional occupations to black men and women as well as the new postwar affluence and consumption patterns. Indeed this new black middle class doubled in size by the 1960s.<sup>10</sup>

### **Black Periodicals and Their Readers**

Magazines were consumed by members of a growing black middle class who, like their white counterparts, looked to cultural tools such as periodicals to guide them through their newly acquired social mobility. At the epicenter of the growing black periodical industry was John H. Johnson. Originally from rural Arkansas, Johnson migrated to Chicago with his family in his early teens. After graduating from high school with high honors, he found employment at the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company with the plan to go to college after saving enough money. Early in 1942, Johnson's employer and mentor, Harry H. Pace, asked his ambitious pupil to compile information

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Pattillo-McCoy. *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 17. Pattillo-McCoy challenges E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1957). Frazier's hypothesis that the black middle class mirrors white middle class and has no cultural roots in either the black or white world has been widely contested in recent scholarship.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 3.

about current events in the black world from various newspapers and other media sources. Pace and his family were passing for white in the Chicago suburbs, but the insurance company president wanted to keep abreast of the happenings in the black community. This experience inspired Johnson to create a magazine that would similarly enlighten the entire African American community. Later in the year, with a \$500 loan from Citizen's Loan Corporation, with his mother's new furniture as collateral and the partnership of *Chicago Defender* editor Ben Burns, Johnson purchased \$500 worth of stamps and sent a letter to 20,000 African American households, inquiring if they were interested in subscribing to a new black magazine. The resulting periodical, *Negro Digest*, consisted of a compilation of intellectual articles on race and black history.<sup>11</sup>

Recognizing that Henry Luce's *Life* magazine was the only other periodical selling as much as *Negro Digest* in the black community, Johnson soon entertained the idea of creating a "lighter" publication. By creating *Ebony*, a magazine similar to *Life*, Johnson acknowledged that America was a two-society nation – one white and one black.<sup>12</sup> The magazine's mission statement made no apologies for its purpose: "As you can gather, we're rather jolly folks, we *Ebony* editors. We like to look at the zesty side of life...not enough is said about all the swell things we Negroes can do and will accomplish. *Ebony* will try to mirror the happier side of Negro life."<sup>13</sup> The magazine's

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<sup>11</sup> John H. Johnson, *Surviving Against the Odds* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), 123.

<sup>12</sup> Korey Bowers Brown, "Ideals, Images, Identity: Ebony Magazine in an Age of Black Power, 1965-1970." MA thesis. Vanderbilt University, 2000, 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ebony*, "Mission statement," November 1945, 1.

first issue in November of 1945 contained columns on race, youth, personalities, culture, entertainment, and humor.<sup>14</sup>

Print advertisements for consumer products were visibly absent from this first issue. Early in the magazine's life, Johnson avoided printing small advertisements; he wanted to attract national companies who would buy four-color advertisements like those in *Life* or *Look* magazine. At least one *Ebony* reader, Beulah Harris, appreciated the lack of hair straightening and skin lightening products in the first issue: "*Ebony* is a live, real life magazine that we need, want and have been longing for. Please keep it clean like it is. We do not want advertisements of how to get white. We are beautiful as a race as we are – we only need more intelligence and more race pride."<sup>15</sup> Johnson could hold out for only so long, however. Despite selling over 100,000 copies of each issue in the early months, the success and cheap production costs of *Negro Digest* was the only thing keeping the more expensive entertainment magazine afloat. In May 1946, *Ebony* printed its first advertisement. An exotic woman with a low cut sarong, holding onto a bamboo curtain was pictured. Her dark, long, black hair hung loose and flowing and a fully bloomed flower perched behind one ear. The advertisement enticed readers to purchase "Murray's Pomade and Murray's Hair Glo" for "Natural Beauty." The product promised "natural" hair that clearly did not occur naturally for African American women.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For more on the early years of *Ebony*, see Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 129-177.

<sup>15</sup> *Ebony*, "Letters and Pictures to the Editor," January 1946, 51.

<sup>16</sup> *Ebony*, Advertisement, May 1946, 1.



Almost universally, black women in America straightened their hair during the late 1940s through the early 1960s. At least one author has argued that hair straightening had become, not the “damaging influence of a white beauty standard,” but rather a coming of age ritual for young girls.<sup>17</sup> Within the black community, straight hair was not only the preferred look, but also a marker of one’s position in society. Relaxed hair represented wealth, education, and access to society. But despite the association with middle-class mores, many readers acknowledged the hypocrisy of *Ebony*’s editorial policy to include articles on racial pride and yet sold advertising space to “whitening” products. One mother wrote in, “With a daughter approaching her teens, I’ve become very conscious of this especially when she asks, ‘Is it true, blondes have more fun?’”<sup>18</sup>

The hue of one’s skin could also be a factor in determining beauty for black females. Although John H. Johnson accepted advertisements for skin bleaching products, his editorial rant in May 1946 declared:

Beauty is skin deep – and that goes for brown as well as white skin. You’d never think it, though, to look at the billboards, magazines, and pinup posters of America. Cheesecake...is all white. But the Petty girl notwithstanding, Negro girls are beautiful too. And despite the fact that Miss America contests hang out “for whites only” signs, there are thousands of Negro girls lovely enough to compete with the best of white America in pulchritude.<sup>19</sup>

While the editor admonished white beauty standards, the inclusion of advertisements for products like Nadinola Bleach Cream (“Give Romance a Chance! Don’t let a dull, dark

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<sup>17</sup> Susanna Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 129.

<sup>18</sup> *Ebony*, “Letters to the Editor,” January 1966, 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ebony*, “Backstage,” May 1946, 4.

complexion deprive you of popularity!”), negated the solidarity of the magazine’s message.<sup>20</sup> *Ebony*’s readership was not blind to or accepting of these mixed messages. Multiple letters to the magazine throughout the postwar period mirrored the concerns of one reader: “How can you, *Ebony*, sacrifice our integrity and hypocritically continue to proudly devote pages to colored women...and at the same time sell space to a product which forwards the opinion that success comes with fair skin?”<sup>21</sup> Although advertisements for skin bleachers and hair straighteners had appeared in black periodicals since the mid-nineteenth century, the readership of *Ebony* in the postwar period rebelled, protesting their inclusion.

*Ebony* provides a window to black ideals and diversity because the magazine highlighted black women and their bodies. Despite the “lighter” tone of the magazine, many readers felt that the inclusion of “cheesecake” photography was unnecessary and “revolting.” An early example of the complex issues regarding standards of beauty and morality was coverage of the “Miss Fine Brown Frame” beauty pageant in 1947. In a win for race pride, Evelyn Sanders, the darkest contestant, took the grand prize. Sanders made her own revealing bikini for the contest, fearing that the pageant “would be won by some nearly-Caucasian face atop a light brown frame.” The judges started to crown a light-skinned girl, but the audience disagreed, and according to the article in *Ebony*, let the judging panel know that “for once, white standards of beauty would not be forced

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<sup>20</sup> *Ebony*, Advertisement, November 1959, 39.

<sup>21</sup> *Ebony*, “Letters to the Editor,” May 1948, 8.

upon them.” The judges then compromised, giving Sanders the cash and the light-skinned girl the title. But when “[f]ists shot up threateningly from the audience,” Sanders was crowned the queen.<sup>22</sup>

One on hand, the story revealed the rejection of white standards of beauty – instead of allowing a light-complexioned contestant to win the pageant, the audience demanded that Sanders, the beauty hopeful with the darkest skin, be awarded the title. Light-skinned African American women far outnumbered their darker complexioned sisters in beauty contests. But with measurements of 35-23-36, Sanders fell well within the white ideal. In the accompanying photo her measurements were printed next to each appropriate body part, just as in white publications, and her head was cropped out of the photograph. Mrs. Pauline Thomas of Detroit agreed with other readers, calling the pictorial a “disgrace to the magazine” and insisted that Sanders could have put on a pair of shorts.<sup>23</sup> *Ebony* did not hide readers’ dissatisfaction with the pictorial, and in later volumes cut back on cheesecake photography. Instead, Johnson created a number of other periodicals such as *Jet* (1951) and the short-lived *Tan Confessions* (1950-1952) where pin-up photography occupied a more prominent position, although neither magazine was as commercially successful as *Ebony*.

The presence of “cheesecake” in black periodicals was important despite the grumblings of *Ebony*’s readership. Joanne Meyerowitz argues that rather than objectifying women for the sake of the male viewer, black models in mainstream

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<sup>22</sup> *Ebony*, “Miss Fine Brown Frame: Darkest Girl in Contest Wins First Prize,” May 1947, 47.

<sup>23</sup> *Ebony*, “Letters to the Editor,” August 1947, 4.

magazines were ammunition against racist and classist beauty ideals.<sup>24</sup> Marjorie Byer agrees, noting that black “pin-up” girls and pageant winners demonstrated to white America that African American women were beautiful too.<sup>25</sup> A number of African American co-eds found themselves celebrated in the pages of black magazines in the postwar years for winning mixed beauty pageants. Chicago’s Clarice C. Davis at the University of Illinois reigned as the very first African American Homecoming Queen in the Big Ten Conference in 1951. Davis was voted the winner by her classmates over eight other contestants, both white and black.<sup>26</sup> And in August 1964, Patricia Evans placed first at the Miss America Modeling Contest and became the first black model to appear in *Seventeen* magazine.<sup>27</sup>

Minority models found little room in men’s magazines in the postwar period. Black men wanted to see women of color celebrated on the glossy page, but most “girlie” magazines failed to hire women of color beyond a few token “exotic” models who could pass for a number of races or ethnicities depending on the costume. In August 1964, a reader bemoaned the lack of diversity amongst *Playboy* Playmates with a poem:

Hey great  
Forward looking  
*Playboy* magazine;

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<sup>24</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, “Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth Century U.S.,” *Journal of Women’s History* 8 (1996): 20.

<sup>25</sup> Marjorie Lee Bryer, “Pinups, *Playboy*, Pageants and Racial Politics, 1945-1966,” PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> *Jet*, “Queen of Illini,” November 22, 1951, 33.

<sup>27</sup> *Ebony*, “Teen-age Beauty with Brains,” August 1964, 77-78.

Hey iconoclastic  
 Philosopher of  
 The modern age;  
 Hey value examiner  
 For the American  
 People  
 Why does foldout  
 Beauty come in  
 But one color? Eh?<sup>28</sup>

Women of color, ironically, began appearing in *Playboy* in that same issue, albeit a decade after the periodical's introductory issue. China Lee, a 5 feet 4 inch "training Bunny" at the Chicago Playboy Club with 35-22-35 measurements, became the first woman of color to appear in the coveted Playmate section.<sup>29</sup> The popularity of the Asian-American bunny was publicized when Lee was voted a finalist for the Playmate of the Year competition.

In March 1965, Hugh Hefner introduced his first African American Playmate, Jennifer Jackson of Chicago. Jackson's twin sister, Gloria Johnson, was the first African American "Bunny" at the Chicago Playboy Club. Jackson was significantly taller and heavier than other playmates at 5 feet 8 and a half inches, weighing 130 pounds, with "vital statistics" of 36-23-36. Not once did the accompanying article mention her race although it was apparent from reader response that they did not need to see her skin-color labeled to recognize her "otherness." The response to Jackson's inclusion was mixed: many applauded Hefner and his magazine for once again being so forward-thinking while others actually *mailed back* the centerfold from their copy of the March issue. One such

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<sup>28</sup> *Playboy*, "Dear Playboy," August 1964, 9.

reader who returned the pull-out section noted, “we entreat you to return to your time-tested format of Playmate selection, which is more in line with the thinking of the vast majority of your readers.”<sup>30</sup> Another African-American centerfold would not appear again until October 1969. The failure of Hefner and other men’s magazine editors to insert diversity into the pages of their magazines made public that if men wanted to see women of color in print, they would have to publish their own magazines.

The attempt to sate black male readers was *Duke* magazine. Published out of Chicago in 1957, the city that gave birth to *Playboy* magazine a few years earlier, *Duke* was the first and last attempt at a *Playboy/Esquire*-esque periodical for and by African American men. The next mainstream magazine geared toward black men was *Players* in November 1973, although the periodical came from the white publishers of *Adam*. *Duke* reflected the desire, rather than the reality of black men in the 1950s – flashy cars, expansive wardrobes, and “damn near white” girlfriends.<sup>31</sup> In its pilot issue in June 1957, *Duke* editor Dan Burley had this to say about the publication’s mission:

*Duke* will strive to cater to the sophisticated, urbane tastes of our Ivy-minded males who have advanced fully enough so that virility is more than a word and adult truly connotes manhood in all its glories. We have no causes and no axes to grind except to bring moments of pleasure to he-men and their female friends of like mind with an amusing, delightful package of assorted goodies, ranging from top-notch fiction to the pinup ladies placed on display in our “Duchess of the Month” department each issue.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Playboy*, “Dear Playboy,” May 1964, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Dian Hanson, *Dian Hansen’s The History of Men’s Magazines*, Volume II (Los Angeles, CA: Taschen, 2004), 388, 392.

<sup>32</sup> *Duke*, “Duke Debut,” June 1957, 2.

Mirroring *Playboy's* mission statement a few years earlier, *Duke* strove to appeal to an educated black readership with a balance of girl-next-door centerfolds, urbanity, sexuality, and humor.

The flagship issue featured fiction from well-respected authors like Chester Himes, Erskine Caldwell, and Langston Hughes with humor from others like Geo S. Schuyler and Ray Bradbury. Sandwiched between works of fiction and cartoons was the centerfold pin-up girl – the only page of the magazine printed in color – featuring the “Duchess of the Month.” If Playboys had Playmates, then Dukes had Duchesses. “Every Duke to the royal manor born most certainly deserves and delights in a duchess,” the text that accompanied the first fold-out announced. The original “Duchess” was Eleanor Crews of Chicago who, during the day, was employed as an insurance company underwriter. Later Duchesses were mostly models and aspiring actresses. Crew and her other Duchess counterparts were generally very light skinned, not unusual for African American models at the time. Like the majority of *Playboy* centerfolds, Crews was not entirely nude, but instead wears a terrycloth towel draped over her lower torso, hiding her from the camera’s view, and a strategically placed arm covers her bare breasts.

Black and white photos depicted everyday activities in the same format as *Playboy's* centerfolds. But the descriptions that accompanied that month’s “Duchess” and even the name itself suggested an untouchableness. Unlike the Playmates who appeared eager for “play,” their African American doppelgangers posed more of a challenge. Crews enjoyed oil painting and “reading deep stuff like Edgar Allen Poe and Leo Tolstoy.” Her profile portrayed a woman who did it all; not only did she have a steady

job, but she was a talented enough dancer to have once been an instructor, and took classes at the Art Institute of Chicago to learn more about painting with oils.<sup>33</sup>

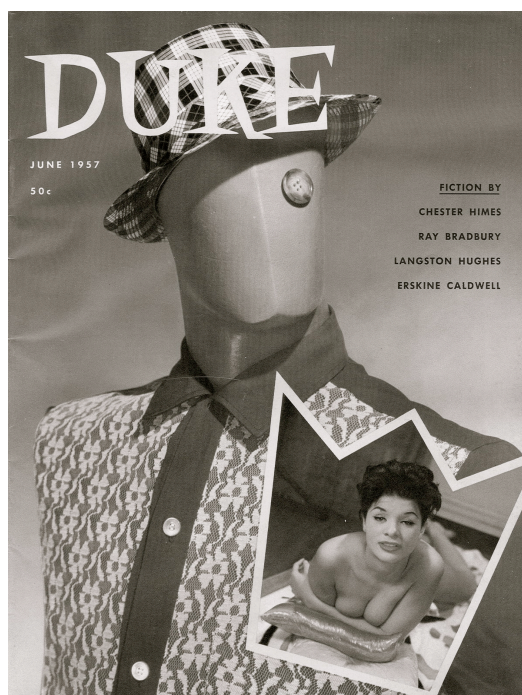


Figure 12. Duke Magazine cover, June 1957

Another Duchess, Dorothy Peterson, was a dancer and singer with plans to tour with Duke Ellington. A former model, Peterson also attended classes at the University of Southern California where she studied psychology.<sup>34</sup> Maxine Chancellor, the July 1957 Duchess, was also a model and aspiring actress, but as the accompanying text noted, “she’s no ordinary, humdrum girl, but a cultured charmer” who enjoyed spending time at art galleries and bookstores.<sup>35</sup> Although a number of *Playboy* Playmates were college students and one was even working towards a Masters Degree, more typical were women

<sup>33</sup> *Duke*, “Introducing the Duchess of the Month,” June 1957, 34.

<sup>34</sup> *Duke*, “Duchess of the Month,” September 1957, 34.

<sup>35</sup> *Duke*, “Duchess of the Month,” July 1957, 32-33.



like June 1956's Playmate, Gloria Walker, who loved puppies and pigeons and people.<sup>36</sup>

While Hefner continued to portray his centerfolds as physically and intellectually accessible, *Duke* readers were hard pressed to win the attentions of this kind of royal woman. *Duke* folded after only a six-issue run. The black middle class remained a relatively small group in the 1950s and despite the success of *Ebony*, the failure of *Duke* magazine demonstrated that a mass market of affluent African American male consumers was still in the future.

Although many popular men's magazines like *Playboy* purportedly featured the girl-next-door in their centerfolds, African American models better bodily matched the realities of the average American women. Typical *Playboy* centerfolds had larger breasts, thinner waists, and more slender hips than the black models featured in African American periodicals. Compared to other men's magazines primarily aimed at a white audience, the Duchesses in *Duke* measured up more modestly at 34.5-22.5-35. The average measurements for women in men's pin-up magazines between 1955 and 1959 were 37.5-24-36, and in *Playboy* specifically, statistics for centerfold Playmates averaged 36.78-23-35.2 in those same years. Duchesses were even less chesty than the models who appeared in Johnson's *Jet* magazine at 35-23-35.7 during that five-year-span.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Playboy*, "Miss June," June 1956.

<sup>37</sup> Based on the average for every measurement mentioned in the magazines between 1945 and 1970.

### **Hollywood, the Fashion Industry, and Expanded Beauty Ideals**

While Hollywood and women's magazines helped shaped American ideals of bodily perfection, the movie-making industry had less of an influence on African American women's body image. Unlike their white counterparts, the most popular celebrities in the black community were largely singers, rather than actresses. The most famous crossover stars, Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge, both curvy yet slender actresses, first gained fame as jazz singers. When black scholar Maxine Leeds Craig surveyed African American women and asked if they had identified with any celebrities growing up in postwar America, her interviewees noted they had not identified with any celebrity, but found Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge, and Diahann Carroll to be the most beautiful.<sup>38</sup> Hollywood at this time was not yet ready to embrace black actresses for parts beyond maids, jungle roles, or chorus girl bit parts.<sup>39</sup> "I suppose everybody in America, especially girls, dreams about the movies and Hollywood," one hopeful black starlet told *Ebony*. "And the way the stars get discovered...Lana Turner was sipping a malted on a high stool. Yes, it might even happen to you – except if you're colored!"<sup>40</sup>

Despite the lack of opportunities for African American starlets in the movies, however, black periodicals held an optimistic attitude about black women's chances as models. While John Powers had a reputation in the white model industry for only

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<sup>38</sup> Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?*, 30.

<sup>39</sup> *Jet*, "Hollywood's Unknown Negro Beauties," November 22, 1951, 59.

<sup>40</sup> *Ebony*, "I Tried To Crash the Movies," August 1946, 6.

employing willowy waifs, in an *Ebony* article he declared, “There is no set formula for female beauty, no rigid rules to follow in determining who is beautiful and who is not.”<sup>41</sup> African American literature noted that the well-rounded and curved figure was regaining popularity in the fashion industry, whereas white periodicals continually warned that fashion magazines only photographed rail-thin beauties.<sup>42</sup>

In 1946, Ed Brandford and Barbara Watson founded the first black modeling agency, New York’s Brandford Modeling School. Watson considered the “perfect figure model” to have a 34” to 36” bust and 34” hips, but noted that a few of the top fashion photographers were asking for taller models with wider hips and larger breasts. “Slowly, but surely,” she declared, “the rounded figure is coming back into vogue.”<sup>43</sup> Ophelia DeVore of New York’s Del Marco Model Agency looked for models with pin-up and cover girl measurements of 34” or 36” bust, 22” waist, and 35” or 36” hips. She noted that while high-fashion magazines went for a more slender look, publications like *Seventeen* looked for models with “fuller figures.” Cordie Smith, Chicago’s most photographed black model had measurements of 35.5-25-35.5, and she weighed 130 pounds in 1955.<sup>44</sup> Although the lean figure was still the rage for high-fashion modeling,

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<sup>41</sup> John Powers, “The Most Beautiful Negro Women in America,” *Ebony*, November 1949, 44.

<sup>42</sup> *Jet*, “What is the Perfect Figure?” June 26, 1952, 32-38.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

models with more shapely silhouettes won beauty contests, pin-up prizes, and earned employment as chorine girls.<sup>45</sup>

One way to obtain the perfect figure was through exercise. While mainstream (white) magazines were largely silent about celebrity exercise regimes, black periodicals assured readers that their favorite star's fitness was the product of rigorous effort. Even in the fantasy play-world of Hollywood, "alluring movie queens have to bend over backwards to maintain those out-of-the-world shapes." Dorothy Dandridge reported she maintained her 36-24-36.5, 5 feet, 5 and a half inch, 110 to 115 pound frame by going to the gym. She remarked it was a "sin" for a woman not to preserve her figure for as long as she could.<sup>46</sup> To protect one's femininity, however, a woman had to balance the amount and intensity of her athletic activities. Historian Susan K. Cahn argues that black and white female athletes were celebrated for their athletic prowess, but only if they exuded traditional female beauty ideals.<sup>47</sup> Cahn focuses on female track-and-field stars in her analysis of African American athletes in the postwar period; because of this narrow scope, she overly simplifies the ambiguous role of the black female athlete. If one casts a wider scope, a more ambiguous interpretation exists for African American women. African American periodicals celebrated black women's achievements in masculine sports like roller derby and wrestling with far less discussion of femininity than their white media counterparts.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>46</sup> *Ebony*, "Film Formula for Glamour," June 1948, 32.

<sup>47</sup> Susan, K. Cahn, *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sports* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Throughout the 1950s, African American women made up more than two-thirds of American women competing in track-and-field events.<sup>48</sup> More than any other sport, track garnered a “masculine” reputation; the 1950s Olympic committee even considered eliminating track events that were not considered “feminine.” African American women’s achievements in track reinforced the stereotype that black women were less womanly than their white counterparts. As Cahn observes, athletics could “affirm the dignity and capabilities of African American womanhood,” but it could also play into stereotypes of black women as animalistic, primal, and mannish.<sup>49</sup> *Ebony* attempted to counteract stereotypes of black female athletes. One 1955 article noted that track-and-field was slowly gaining more acceptance due to the international fame of many of the black female competitors. Moreover, fewer girls avoided the sport for fear of it making them “masculine freaks” and as the article boasted, boys learned that a girl track star “can be as feminine as the china-doll type.” Frances Kaszubski, an Amateur Athletic Union official who supervised the American girls at the Pan-American games, additionally argued, “If more girls knew how to run...fewer of them would be so awkward.”<sup>50</sup> In this way, *Ebony* advertised that participation in track-and-field would not threaten a woman’s femininity, but rather could potentially add grace and poise.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>50</sup> *Ebony*, “Fastest Women in the World: Fleet Track Lassies Win Fame at Mexico’s Pan-American Games,” May 1955, 27.

Most white media ignored female black track stars despite heralding their male counterparts as the answer to the Russians.<sup>51</sup> The only female African American athlete to appear regularly in the white press was tennis champion Althea Gibson, whom one magazine described as “lanky” and as playing “with the slam-bang determination she once used fighting kids in Harlem.”<sup>52</sup> Track speedster Wilma Rudolph appeared sporadically in *Life* magazine after her Olympic success in the 1960s. She was called “lissome” compared to her “hardy” Soviet competitors.<sup>53</sup> Cahn notes that athletes of all ages and races received the most media praise when they met popular beauty ideals.<sup>54</sup> However, while Althea Gibson became the most popular black female athlete in the white press, she was certainly not heralded as being a beauty queen.

Despite the black press’s concerns regarding track-and-field, they did not appear dedicated to portraying other sports’ athletes as overtly feminine. Periodicals highlighted the achievements of female athletes in high-contact activities as varied as judo, wrestling, high diving, and speed skating. The mother of speed skating star, Gayle Ann Fannin, told *Ebony*, “when I realized she was determined to race, I gave up my dream of dainty, pretty costumes, stuck her in dungarees and told her to forget how she looked.”<sup>55</sup> Female wrestling was an odd voyeuristic phenomenon popular in both black and white magazines

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<sup>51</sup> *Life*, “The U.S. Picks a Strong Olympic Team,” July 19, 1948, 17-25.

<sup>52</sup> *Life*, “New Tennis Threat,” April 3, 1950, 32.

<sup>53</sup> *Life*, “Olympian Quintessence,” September 19, 1960, 115.

<sup>54</sup> Cahn, *Coming On Strong*, 136-137.

<sup>55</sup> *Ebony*, “Speed Skater: St. John’s University Co-ed Seeks Olympic Fame in 1964,” December 1962, 119.

in the postwar period. Magazine stories noted that while the majority of women spent hours perfecting glamour “in an effort to land a husband,” the wrestling rings around the country were filling with a new kind of woman who, forsaking femininity, spent her time building muscles instead.<sup>56</sup> Even roller derby garnered attention. Although one headline noted that derby star, Quintina Cosby, “add[ed] glamour to rough, grueling indoor sport,” the photo essay pulled no punches, showing Cosby in various action poses, blocking, pushing, tripping, and tackling other players. The article continued, describing her as “[u]nusually strong and possess[ing] of real stamina” and that she had trained her body to take the “jolting body checks” common in the sport. Cosby’s coaches ranked her higher than most of the boys skating in New York’s Junior Roller Derby.<sup>57</sup>

Gloria Jean Thompson, a 25-year-old female boxer, appeared in a number of black periodicals. Purportedly she avoided marriage because it would not only interfere with her career, but she was afraid “if I was married and my husband fouled up, I would hit him just like I do another fighter.”<sup>58</sup> However, to avoid rumors about her private life, Thompson never wore pants in public.<sup>59</sup> Baseball player Toni Stone became the first female to play on a professional baseball team in the Negro American League in 1953. She was effective at the plate, “swinging a man-sized bat,” and her speed matched and surpassed many of her teammates, beating out many bunts. Her teammates, while

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<sup>56</sup> *Jet*, “Lady Wrestlers,” February 21, 1952, 57-58.

<sup>57</sup> *Ebony*, “Roller Derby Star,” May 1954, 56-57.

<sup>58</sup> *Ebony*, “Lady Boxer: Husky Gloria Thompson” March 1949, 32.

<sup>59</sup> *Jet*, “The Truth About Women Athletes,” August 5, 1954, 58.

acknowledging her gender, treated her no differently from the other players.<sup>60</sup> When Toni Stone appeared at a public event wearing a pink flowered dress, one on-looker marveled “I thought she’d be chewing tobacco and swearing like a man.”<sup>61</sup> Although black periodicals published articles checking the femininity of track-and-field athletes, participants in other sports who appeared in the same magazines did not attract the same public relations feminine check-ups. Stars in even the most high-contact sports like martial arts, boxing, and wrestling were celebrated for their physical prowess with little concern about defending their femininity or physical beauty.

Besides exercise and athletics, those who did not have an ideal shape could also subject themselves to rigorous diets. Similar to white periodicals, magazines like *Jet* and *Ebony* reported on the diet plans of celebrities. Lena Horne reportedly avoided foreign foods “because of tendency to be hippy.”<sup>62</sup> A chorus girl in three Broadway shows, Carmen Alexander, also worried about her hips. When she worked in an office, a girdle could handle the problem areas, but as a chorus girl, hiding her hips was not an option.<sup>63</sup> Not all stars’ diets were regimented or successful. Internationally famous entertainer Josephine Baker told *Ebony* that she never monitored her food intake, but when she noticed her dresses getting too tight, she went on a diet of nothing but carrots. Dinah Washington, blues singer, reportedly lost 35 pounds in 6 weeks with pills and injections

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<sup>60</sup> *Ebony*, “Lady Ball Player,” July 1953, 48.

<sup>61</sup> *Jet*, “The Truth About Women Athletes,” August 5, 1954, 56.

<sup>62</sup> *Ebony*, “Meet the Real Lena Horne,” November 1947, 11.

<sup>63</sup> *Ebony*, “I Tried Crashing the Movies,” February 1946, 22.



from her doctor; the rest of the time she ate whatever she wanted, including pig's feet. Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson ballooned from 120 to 230 pounds because she could not resist her own cooking, and operatic singer Marian Anderson admitted she failed to follow her own diet prescription of avoiding bread, potatoes, and desserts.<sup>64</sup>

In 1956, the *Chicago Defender* posted the daily column, "The Housewives Corner," featuring two women who planned on losing a pound a day through dieting. Mrs. Beatrice Mendenhall and her friend Mrs. Marian Mims, whose combined weight totaled over 600 pounds, posted their weekly diets and their progress in the column.<sup>65</sup> The friends began with a "conditioning" diet for two weeks, to ready their body for the rigid diet of 750 calories a day that would follow. At the start of their third week, they began their goal of losing a pound of flesh a day. Cognizant that slender-seeking women reading the column would also have a family to feed, the *Defender* listed a meal for the family and one for the dieter in each article. Details such as this could not be found in the typical high-fashion magazine. Moreover, they paid special attention to these diets being both economical and practical, and listed different lunch options for both working women and for housewives. In late August, Mrs. Mims and Mrs. Mendenhall abandoned their original diets and went on strictly liquid diets; at each meal they were allowed 2 ounces of orange juice and 4 ounces of skim milk.<sup>66</sup> Although the *Defender* religiously updated

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<sup>64</sup> *Ebony*, "Diets of the Stars: Wealthy or Poor, Famous or Unknown, Everybody is Trying to Lose Weight," May 1960, 106-110.

<sup>65</sup> *Chicago Defender*, "Get on the Mark! Diet With a Fat Girl and Lose Pound a Day!" June 12, 1956, 14.

the dieters' progress throughout the numerous months of their efforts, no article capstoned their experience. Perhaps they died of hunger.

Black periodicals pointed out that dieting was dangerous in ways ignored by white magazines until the diet pill scare in the late 1960s. Magazines and newspapers aimed at black audiences were more cautionary than white women's magazines in regards to the potential dangers of dieting. Horror stories about fad diets warned dieting African-American women to maintain balanced diets and to be realistic about monthly weight-loss goals. A once-beautiful model, readers were warned, had wasted away to a human skeleton of 78 pounds after embarking on a fad diet of lemon juice, hot water, cola drinks, and an occasional hot dog.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, standardized height and weight tables were not always appropriate guides, and black women were cautioned against a "mechanical approach" to dieting. Dr. Hilde Bruch, a specialist in obesity, warned that some overweight people should avoid dieting altogether. "There are many people whose well-being is affected," he argued in *Jet* magazine, "if they try to push their weight below a certain level which may be somewhat higher than that of the standard tables."<sup>68</sup>

If black was beautiful in the 1960s, with the community re-appropriating what was considered "bad" hair and "the wrong" skin color, was fat beautiful, too? In 1962, 23.5 percent of white women were 20 percent or more over the ideal weight for their

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<sup>66</sup> *Chicago Defender*, "Stay With It If You Want to Win: Keep on Liquids," August 16, 1956, 16.

<sup>67</sup> *Jet*, "Is Dieting Dangerous?" March 11, 1954, 30.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

frame-height-age compared to 41.7 percent of black women.<sup>69</sup> Era Bell Thompson points out that food was a status symbol for black America “after generations of living on crumbs from the Big Table.” Moreover, Soul Food is deep fried and strongly seasoned. The journalist created her own tongue-in-cheek “Soul Food Diet” in the pages of *Ebony* in the style of diets found in white women’s magazines:

Breakfast: 1/2 cup pot liquor concentrate. 1 toasted cornbread stick  
 Lunch: dandelion green sandwich. 1 cup watermelon juice  
 Dinner: choice of 2 steamed chicken necks or 1 small pig’s foot. 9 black-eyed peas cooked in clear water.  
 Dessert: 1 slice bread soaked in diet sorghum

Thompson, in an attempt to ascertain if she was overweight, also gave herself the “obesity test” similar to one that had appeared in *Seventeen* magazine in May 1969. *Seventeen*’s self-examination encouraged young women to (1) look in the mirror and discern which areas needed toning and (2) pinch your body. If more than an inch of flesh resulted between the forefinger and thumb, “you’re probably too fat.”<sup>70</sup> Performing the self-test, Thompson declared, “One look in the mirror...should have eliminated the other two tests.”

Thompson momentarily bemoaned that someone as industrious as herself, having worked her way through college cleaning houses, should certainly have the stamina to rid herself of a bulbous middle. But the pursuit of a slender figure is not altogether simply a matter of willpower. Economics and racial discrimination have a role to play as well.

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<sup>69</sup> Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 133.

<sup>70</sup> Alice Lake, “Obesity: Rate Your Weight,” *Seventeen*, May 1969, 187.

Referring to elitist “fat farms” like Elizabeth Arden’s “Main Chance” diet camp, Thompson observes, “Neither can I afford, nor would I likely be accepted by a 600-calorie, \$100-a-day fat farm even if its gymnasium has wall-to-wall carpeting and a swimming pool filled with fat-free milk.”<sup>71</sup> After dismissing exercise and diet drinks like Sego or Metrecal, Thompson decided to diet. She calculated that by cutting 500 to 1,000 calories from her daily food regime, she could slim down to an appropriate 120 pounds – appropriate for her height and build according to insurance tables.

Thompson began her diet in earnest, counting her calories for each meal. By the time she finished her calculations, however, her meal was cold and unappetizing. When she was five pounds lighter, a neighbor brought over a chocolate cake and Thompson suddenly found herself six pounds heavier than her pre-diet weight. “[I]t will take 42 days of sheer torture and determination to undo the damage [of the cake],” she reported. “In the meantime, I will wear clothes two sizes too large, and friends will grudgingly say, “My, how you’ve lost!”<sup>72</sup> Letters to the magazine revealed the gratefulness of *Ebony*’s female readers for the change-of-pace story. Calling the story “marvelous,” one reader noted the timeliness of the article and its subject material. Another joked, “I never realized anyone could draw such perfect pictures of me without seeing me... it is so nice to know we Big Fat Mamas are still being recognized.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 124-130.

<sup>73</sup> *Ebony*, “Letters to the Editor,” October 1968, 24-25.



Figure 13. *Ebony Magazine's "Lady Fat"*<sup>74</sup>

Black professionals mirrored their white counterparts in terms of mass consumption patterns and the Protestant work ethic, but they joined the black working class in a cross-socioeconomic appreciation for a wide array of body types. Beauty had little to do with size or weight. Instead, middle-class black women were encouraged to “exemplify domesticity,” remain feminine, and present themselves as respectable.<sup>75</sup> *Ebony* annually published its “Best Dressed Women in America” list, which highlighted African American women of different ages and sizes. To be featured in this coveted column required only a generous and conservative wardrobe. This mind-set and acceptance of many body types contrasts sharply, however, with middle-class attitudes about hair. Scholars of black history note the significance of straightened hair as a marker of one’s position in society.<sup>76</sup> The flat-ironed look required frequent visits to beauty

<sup>74</sup> Era Bell Thompson, “How to lose weight without half trying,” *Ebony*, July 1968, 124

<sup>75</sup> Monika N. Gosin, “The Politics of African-American Women’s Beauty in *Ebony Magazine*: the 1960’s and 1970’s.” MA essay, University of California, San Diego, 2004, 125.

salons and dedicated upkeep. During the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, careful grooming was an important part of the middle-class strategy. Susannah Walker notes that photographs of African American protestors reveal carefully dressed and coifed women with straightened hair.<sup>77</sup> When Afros became popular among the youth and the working class in the late 1960s, this trend horrified middle-class blacks. Weight, by contrast, never evoked the class or generational divides as attitudes about black women's hair.

Despite concerns about dieting, foundation garments, and exercise, black periodicals celebrated women who embraced their larger frames – not every woman had to be “the perfect 36” to be heralded as a success. In this way, postwar African American men and women broadened beauty ideals. One *Jet* article boldly declared that fat women were better lovers than their skinny sisters. Dr. Julian Lewis of Chicago proclaimed, “Fat women are fat because they do not restrain themselves in the things that give them pleasure. The overeating that fattens them,” he continued, “shows a lack of inhibitions and above average sexual proclivities naturally follow.”<sup>78</sup> The article noted that despite the popularity of “pocket-size[d]” women, larger women rarely had trouble finding husbands, reasoning that men preferred to come home from work and be “mothered” by a filled-out mate.

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<sup>76</sup> Ayana D. Byrd and Loris L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 47.

<sup>77</sup> Walker, 145.

<sup>78</sup> *Jet*, “Why Fat Women are Better Lovers,” December 23, 1953, 20-22.

“[S]lenderness in itself is no criterion for success in a woman’s world,” *Jet* magazine articulated, noting that this was particularly true for female musicians. Gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson observed, “My work for the Lord is more important than reducing. I was born big and fat for a purpose and there is no need for me to try and look different now.”<sup>79</sup> One blues singer, Big Maybell, noted, “I’m not worried about gaining weight – I don’t want to lose a pound. I think I’m prettiest when I’m fat.”<sup>80</sup> The Peters Sisters, a singing trio weighing in at over 800 pounds joked in their act about riding in small elevators or tipping over small European taxis.<sup>81</sup> Supremes singer, Mary Wilson, did not shy away from publicizing her curves either. “Already considered quite voluptuous,” *Ebony* reported, “she wants to add few pounds for insurance.”<sup>82</sup>

Another singer, Ruth Brown, described as “a visual as well as vocal delight” and who apparently had the best voice since Sarah Vaughan, used her size 16 figure to “put all the oomph” into her soulful ballads.<sup>83</sup> And swing singer June Richmond, at 270 pounds, noted that her weight was part of her “professional personality.” Photos showed Richmond consuming a large breakfast in bed, but also discussed her success – the popular singer owned a \$40,000 home in Hollywood where she lived with her two daughters.<sup>84</sup> Not only were these plus-sized women professionally successful, numerous

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<sup>79</sup> *Jet*, “Famous Fat Women,” May 8, 1952, 56-63.

<sup>80</sup> *Ebony*, “Big Maybell: Three Hundred Pounds of Rhythm and Blues,” February 1955, 104.

<sup>81</sup> *Ebony*, “The Biggest Act in Show Business,” February 1951, 87-90.

<sup>82</sup> *Ebony*, “The Supremes Make it Big,” June 1965, 87.

<sup>83</sup> *Jet*, “Ruth Brown: Best Voice Since Vaughan,” January 31, 1952, 64.

articles charted their personal happiness with marriages and maintaining a family. This positive attitude toward weight contrasted sharply with a *Life* magazine article chronicling the singing group the Mamas and the Papas. Despite contributing Cass Elliott's powerful contralto to her near 200-pound frame, the *Life* story described Elliott as "hefty" with a "full-moon face" while identifying her co-"Mama," Michelle Phillips, as "model-looking." The article also noted Elliott's diet of eating only a head of lettuce a day in the hopes of losing weight.<sup>85</sup>

In addition to celebrating weighty celebrities, fashion columns in black periodicals reflected more sympathy for plus-size women than mainstream white magazines. "Styles for the Not-So-Thin" highlighted a new fashion line for women under 5 feet 5 inches tall, with well-rounded hips and busts, and less visible waistlines. This new line created a less exaggerated silhouette, both fashionable and flattering, while Christian Dior's "New Look" made these women look "short, squat, and dumpy."<sup>86</sup> When the House of Dior introduced the "Flat Look" in the mid-1950s, *Jet* magazine declared the fashion house had "uncorked what was perhaps the greatest controversy since the U.S. atom-bombed Nagasaki."<sup>87</sup> Although equally unpopular in the white and black community, the shapeless silhouette was once again introduced in 1960. Yves Saint-Laurent, top designer for Dior called his design the "Silhouette of the Future." At least in

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<sup>84</sup> *Ebony*, "June is Busting Out All Over," September 1946, 46-47.

<sup>85</sup> *Life* "These are the Mamas," September 30, 1966, 77.

<sup>86</sup> *Ebony*, "Styles for the Not-So-Thin," September 1948, 52.

<sup>87</sup> *Jet*, "Will Dior's Bustline Be a Bust?" October 14, 1954, 38.



the black community in the 1960s, the bust flattening, knee-revealing fashion was considered unflattering. One Howard University student, Sheila Gregory, observed, “I should think that for slender women of slight build, Dior’s new look would be very attractive. I don’t think, however, that it would be becoming to me.”<sup>88</sup> Black journalists predicted the style would “fall as flat as the fashions.”<sup>89</sup>

Rather than looking to Paris for the newest fashions, more popular fashion trends in black women’s magazines were those that could be flattering to a variety of body types. Moreover, *Ebony* employed “plus-size” models in their nationally touring fashion troupe. One of the touring models, Michelle Zeno, was 193 pounds and 5 feet 10 inches tall. A 1955 article about beachwear found styles that every woman could comfortably wear whether very tall, very slender, or too fleshy. The article noted that suits could be found to “hide a multiple of faults” like flower-printed beachwear with small skirts or one-piece suits to hide “too much tummy.” The author cautioned readers that scant bathing suits should only be worn by those with near-perfect figures so “consider your assets before investing in an all-revealing bikini suit.”<sup>90</sup>

Another column highlighted a summer swimwear collection in which “even the less-than-Venus girl can arrange to exude boat-loads of beguilement by strolling surf-side.” This “Covered Up” collection concealed a bit more skin, hid the midriff, and added

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<sup>88</sup> William Boone, “Will New ‘Flat Look’ Last Long?” *Jet*, April 7, 1960, 42.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>90</sup> *Jet*, “Bathing Suits Every Woman Can Wear,” July 7, 1955, 38-41.

an extra inch to pant legs.<sup>91</sup> White women's magazines exhibited minimal sympathy for heavier women when compared with the articles in the black press. *Life* highlighted a fashion-friendly clothing line, but only for adolescent girls. Designer Emily Wilkens used black fabric and stripes to "elongate chunky young figures" and created styles "designed to flatten-embarrassing adolescent curves." As the text indicates however, this was not the ideal figure with which white teenage girls should be satisfied.<sup>92</sup>

And while the white fashion world became obsessed with the lanky model, Twiggy in the mid-1960s, the black press found her laughable. The *Chicago Defender* joked that whenever Great Britain faced a financial crisis, they called an emergency meeting to create a scheme to siphon money from the former colonies. "All we have to do, gentlemen, is go into one of the Cockney districts and pick out a teenage girl who is flat-chested, bird-legged and looks under-nourished. Then we tell the Ameddicans [sic] that this girl is the world's most sought after fashion model...I recommend calling her either 'The Splinter' or 'Twiggy.'"<sup>93</sup> Another columnist noted, "We'd hate to break anybody's baloon [sic], but British model Twiggy's appeal comes from the fact that she knows she's ugly. If a Soul Sister looked anything like Twiggy, she'd be in a whole world of trouble – and we mean trouble."<sup>94</sup> The urgency for extreme slenderness never

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<sup>91</sup> *Ebony*, "Covered Up," February 1964, 107.

<sup>92</sup> *Life*, "New Young Styles: Emily Wilkens' Spring Designs are Kind to Plump Teen-agers," March 18, 1946, 87.

<sup>93</sup> Dick West, "England Extracts Colonial Money," *Chicago Defender*, April 5, 1967, 14.

<sup>94</sup> Ole Nosey, "Everybody Goes When the Wagon Comes," *Chicago Defender*, April 3, 1967, 14.

resonated in the African American community. The ultra-thin fashion model of the 1960s was a white body issue.

### **Conclusions**

Black women sought magazines like *Ebony*, *Jet*, and others that spoke to their lived experiences. Black beauty queens and magazine pin-up girls showed white America that black was beautiful, too. And because the average African American cover girl weighed more and had broader measurements than the typical white model, magazines fêted a more realistic body type. More importantly, unlike their white counterparts, black periodicals showed an open celebration of plus-size models, celebrities, and female athletes who did not conform to or fit white ideals of acceptable femininity.

Social historian Peter Stearns argues that African Americans had a wider view of beautiful women because (1) God does not make mistakes, and (2) priority was given to dealing with race issues over size. Stearns traces the roots of these beliefs to African matriarchies and attitudes about working women during Reconstruction. “Unlike their white counterparts,” he argues, “most black women have always worked, even when married; and in some physical labor, size was a positive advantage, associated with strength, not fat.”<sup>95</sup> Although convincing, Stearns cannot explain why plus-size women continued to be celebrated in the postwar years. The success ethic of the new black middle class, as promoted by John H. Johnson and *Ebony*, suggests that to be associated with this socio-economic level, the (male) breadwinner needed an ample salary. Black

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<sup>95</sup> Stearns, *Fat History*, 90-92.

men took pride in the fact that their wives need not financially contribute to maintain their middle-class status. If body size was associated with strength and work, it would be more logical then that small, frail black women were seen as the ideal body type in the years after World War II.

Naomi Wolf's "Beauty Myth" similarly cannot explain this phenomenon.<sup>96</sup> Wolf argues that in eras when women realize more political and economic gains, beauty ideals become more rigid and unattainable. She observes that as women demand more public recognition, smaller body types become *en vogue* so women literally take up less space. While the beginning of the second wave of feminism coincides with the popularity of thin fashion models like Twiggy and Penelope Tree, the same does not apply for black women and the civil rights movement. Black America's newspapers and magazines, in fact, discouraged women from mimicking the hyper-thin look and warned readers about the dangers of excessive dieting and unhealthy food habits. Current scholarship takes for granted that the Black Power movement created racial pride within the African American community and invented the rejection of white beauty ideals. The study of black periodicals in the postwar era reveals that even before the first black activists thrust their clenched fists into the air, African American women cried for beauty standards that were realistic, attainable, and truly representative of the person they saw in the mirror.

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<sup>96</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing, 1991), 272.

## CHAPTER 6

### LESBIAN BODY IMAGE AND THE BUTCH/FEMME DICHOTOMY

*It's kinda mixed-up at first, but you get the hang of it. Like there's girls that're butch. I mean, they wish they could be a guy and they treat you as they were a guy, on'y better. And there's fems, like me. See, like one is the guy and one is the girl.*

- Della Martin, *Twilight Girl*

In Della Martin's postwar pulp, *Twilight Girl*, supporting-character Violet tries to explain the butch/femme dichotomy of the lesbian community to the protagonist, Lorraine "Lon" Harris. As she describes it, lesbians in postwar America identified in one of two ways – "butch" women dressed and acted in a more masculine style while "femmes" concerned themselves with all the trappings of femininity. Stepping beyond the gendered labels of "butch" and "femme" alienated women from the lesbian community and branded them with the label "kiki." Lesbians who were not clearly butch or femme were especially unwelcomed the distinct working-class bar of dichotomized butch and femme lesbians. This blue-collared lesbian culture navigated ways to publicly socialize and create intimate relationships without threatening lesbians' ability to earn a living.<sup>1</sup> Part of the rejection of "kiki" lesbians originated from fear. A woman who was not clearly butch or femme was always suspect. Many feared she was an undercover police officer unfamiliar with unwritten rules.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Myers, Jennifer Taub, Jessica F. Morris, Esther D. Rothblum, "Beauty Mandates and the Appearance Obsession: Are Lesbians Any Better Off?" in *Looking Queer: Body Image and Identity in Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transgender Communities*, ed. Dawn Atkins (New York: Haworth, 1998), 20.

The butch/femme dichotomy of the postwar years has been severely scrutinized. Lesbian feminists writing in the 1980s and 1990s dismissed the pre-Stonewall community as little more than an embarrassment because of this perceived binary role-playing.<sup>2</sup> Even contemporaries frowned at what they interpreted as heterosexual pantomime. Although butch women were criticized for their rejection of femininity, even femmes could not avoid judgment. Ann Aldrich protested that femmes were “a caricature of womanliness.” She continued, “Fems try very hard to look, act, and be ladies, but they never quite succeed.”<sup>3</sup> Violet, the brash femme who introduces Lon Harris to the underground lesbian world in *Twilight Girl*, embodies Aldrich’s “caricature.” The hamburger stand waitress talks in an affected manner, wears too much pancake make-up and violet perfume, dyes her hair purple, and squeezes her round body into toreador pants, tight sweaters, and gold lamé high-heels. Corporeal feminist Judith Butler later described this as gender performativity, assigning an assumed “heteronormativity” to the body.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, scholars have examined postwar lesbians in more detail, often celebrating the roots of the queer community. Most of this scholarship, however, highlights the importance of butch lesbians in community-building because of their visual

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<sup>2</sup> For a critique of butch/femme identity as mimicking heterosexuality see Lillian Faderman *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendships Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981), Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 11-48; Elizabeth Wilson, *Hidden Agendas: Theory, Politics, and Experience in the Women’s Movement* (London: Tavistock, 1986), 169-182.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Aldrich, *We Walk Alone* (New York: Fawcett, 1956), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

difference.<sup>5</sup> Unlike a femme who easily “passed” among heterosexual society, when looking at a butch lesbian, few questioned her sexuality. By contrast, femmes remain criticized and overlooked for being the less bodily and fashionably radical of the postwar pair. One scholar laments that femmes “seem to be wearing the clothes of the enemy. Makeup, high heels, skirts, revealing clothes, even certain ways of holding the body are read as capitulation to patriarchal control of women’s bodies.”<sup>6</sup> What was originally a postwar survival mechanism, passing as straight (feminine) in order to keep one’s job and to avoid discrimination, became a rigid community role and expectation.



*Figure 14. Butch and femme bar patrons*

Did these women adopt a hyper-feminine image to better “pass” in society or perhaps to attract other female lovers? Lesbian pulp fiction and other prescriptive

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<sup>5</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1992); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993). Faderman argues that lesbians identified in this way simply because they had no other models, and that 1950s gender roles proved so pervasive that they permeated even lesbian relationship dynamics. Kennedy and Davis’ work examines butch-femme image and culture during the 1950s through the lens of committed relationships. However, the authors give more attention to butch lesbians because they argue that it is their visibility that plays a critical factor in the creation of a working-class lesbian community.

<sup>6</sup> Joan Nestle, “The Femme Question,” in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle, (Boston, Mass: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1992), 140-142.

literature reveals how lesbians, both femme and butch, felt about their bodies.

Previous scholarship largely focuses on butch culture, privileging the masculine attitude and attire; the femme experience remains largely unexplored.<sup>7</sup> An investigation of the lesbian community, using queer literature of the era, reveals that while femme lesbians mimicked mainstream body ideals, clinging to femininity and other heterosexual images had more to do with the fear of discovery and discrimination than body dysmorphia.

Similar to the African American postwar community, mass media and its messages about body and beauty ideals did not impact queer women in the same way as their heterosexual counterparts.

### **Creating a(n) (Invisible) Community**

World War II was a watershed moment for the gay and lesbian community. Mobilizing for the world conflict transplanted an entire generation of young Americans who might otherwise have moved seamlessly from their parents' homes to a house with a husband or wife. The war years separated American men and women, throwing wartime participants and volunteers into single-sex environments where emotions that were previously dormant bloomed. At the end of the global conflict, many gays and lesbians remained in cities where queer establishments flourished rather than returning to their childhood towns. But as same-sex subcultures became more visible in the 1950s and 1960s, more and more penalties were instituted to punish the "Lavender Threat."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For more on butch dress and mannerisms see Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, especially chapter 5.

<sup>8</sup> For works regarding the growing same-sex community in the postwar years see Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2000); John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*



Lesbians, as well as gay men, faced deep scrutiny in this postwar period where gender roles became uncharacteristically rigid in hopes to “return to normalcy” after the disequilibrium of World War II.

Masculine-looking and behaving women were deemed particularly dangerous in postwar America due to anxieties that GIs would return to a country that no longer required them. Not only were women taking their jobs, now they were taking their girlfriends as well. The specter of masculinity within a woman alarmed men. In the summer of 1954, “butch” haircuts had become fashionable and practical due to sweltering weather.<sup>9</sup> Although the style looked feminine, it dismayed many males. Letters to *Life* magazine’s editor asked, “What’s next? Mustaches?” Another disenchanted reader charged, “First we lose our pants, then shirts, along with cuff links, tie bars and ties. Now women are invading the realm of the male haircut. It is high time we males put our foot down in an effort to keep our females looking feminine.”<sup>10</sup> The stereotype and fear of mannish women crossed racial lines as well. A 1954 article titled “Women Who Fall for Lesbians” appeared in the black periodical, *Jet* magazine. The story told the tale of a “masculine-looking freshman coed, who walked with a swaggering gait,” seducing another first-year coed “[d]uring the man-shortage years of World War

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(Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988); John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1992); David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbian in the Federal Government* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*.

<sup>9</sup> *Life*, “Feminine Butch Cut,” July 19, 1954, 68.

<sup>10</sup> *Life*, “Letters to the Editor,” August 9, 1954, 4.

II.” The article continued, noting that many of these women had all the physical attractiveness with which to attract a man, yet they choose instead to be connected to lesbians for a thrill or as a result of “neurotic tendencies.”<sup>11</sup>

To combat the negative stereotypes about mannish lesbians, the editors and authors of a number of queer periodicals and books worked to convince mainstream America that the difference between heterosexual and homosexual women was limited. Donald Webster Cory’s *The Lesbian in America* (1964) argued that bodily, a lesbian looked like every other woman. Cory, a gay sociologist who previously authored *The Homosexual in America* (1951), pointed out that although some lesbians preferred tailored suits rather than dresses, “these are characteristics shared with many millions of women whose femininity is beyond question.”<sup>12</sup> Cory describes one of his lesbian interviewees as “neither big-boned nor muscular, does not cut her hair shorter than do other girls, never fails to pluck her eyebrows, or to put on a normal supply of lipstick, powder, perfume, and other make-up.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, even when discussing a woman who self-identifies as butch, the sociologist depicted her as “shapely as any woman...with all the curves that have come to be associated with Hollywood pin-up girls.” She lacked neither bust nor “womanly hips,” Cory concluded, and her limbs did not reveal any “remarkable muscularity.”<sup>14</sup> Cory’s goal was to show mainstream America that there was nothing deviant about lesbianism. Yet, by depicting queer women as undetectable amongst

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<sup>11</sup> *Jet*, “Women Who Fall for Lesbian,” February 26, 1954, 20-22.

<sup>12</sup> Donald Webster Cory, *The Lesbian in America* (New York: Macfadden-Bartell, 1964), 22-23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

straight Americans, he fed the era's belief that homosexuals were an invisible, internal menace.

The Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian-rights organization in the country, frequently argued that femininity was a lesbian's best weapon against discrimination. In the introductory years of the *Ladder*, the DOB's literary magazine, butch culture came under attack. One woman wrote to the magazine's editors, saying, "the kids in fly-front pants and with the butch haircuts and mannish manner are the worst publicity we can get." Del Martin, the president of the DOB replied, "Very true. Our organization has already touched on that matter and has converted a few to remembering that they are women first...so their attire should be that which society will accept."<sup>15</sup> Another early publication that took offense to lesbians being less-than-feminine was Lisa Ben's *Vice Versa*, the very first lesbian publication, written and edited entirely by Ben (pseudonym of Edith Eyde) in the late 1940s. The modest publication mirrored the DOB's attitude shunning masculine-appearing lesbians. In a poem, Ben writes, "How willingly we go with tresses shorn/ And beauty masked in graceless, drab attire/ A roses' loveliness is to admire;/ Who'd cut the bloom and thus expose the thorn?"<sup>16</sup> Rather than celebrating butch culture for rejecting heteronormativity, the middle-class sensibilities of *The Ladder* and *Vice Versa* urged readers to behave and fashion themselves in a feminine manner. In their view, femininity not only served to "disguise" lesbianism, but it also made the untraditional sexuality more palatable.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Ladder* 1, no. 2 (November 1956), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Ben, quoted in Rodger Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Boston, Mass: Faber and Faber, 1995), 10.

During the 1960s, *The Ladder* placed photographs of lesbians on the cover of the middle-class magazine. What was previously a simple line drawing of cartoon figures climbing up a ladder, now showed the smiling faces of feminine women. Barbara Gittings, the editor of the magazine during this time, explained the change. “Heterosexuals,” she said, “as well as many lesbians themselves had weird ideas of what most lesbians looked like. We wanted to show everyone that lesbians were normal, happy, wholesome women – every mother’s ‘dream daughter.’”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps most succinctly, Ann Aldrich attempted to put to rest the negative stereotypes of lesbians. In her first of what I refer to as “first-hand observation” books, *We Walk Alone* (1955), she claims, “There is no definition, no formula, no pattern that will accurately characterize the female homosexual. She is any woman.”<sup>18</sup> Despite these attempts, however, the fear and stereotype of mannish, aggressive lesbians ruled straight America’s perceptions.

### **The Social Construction of Lesbian Bodies**

If lesbianism was “disguised” in postwar America, where did such women find or learn more about same-sex relationships? How did lesbian women know that they were not alone in their romantic and erotic feelings for other women? Those that lived in major cities might stumble upon a gay bar or an issue of *The Ladder*, but for isolated women, little guidance existed. In 1961, Yvonne Keller went to a library in Washington D.C. to research lesbianism. She recalls her experience: “The books on such a subject, I was told by indignant, terrified librarians unable to say aloud the word homosexual, were

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<sup>17</sup> Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Ann Aldrich, *We Walk Alone* (1955), 6.

locked away...Only professors, doctors, psychiatrists, and lawyers for the criminally insane could see them, check them out, hold them in their hands.”<sup>19</sup> Even if a woman found a text on homosexuality, from sensational journalism to clinical investigations, she “learned” that lesbians were “deviants,” “mannish,” and “neurotic.” Paperback editions of works by Kinsey and Freud were available by the mid-1950s, but these scientific and clinical works certainly did not provide a sympathetic view of the adult lesbian. Kinsey’s studies on female sexuality highlighted the widespread nature of same-sex activity, but they nonetheless concluded that serial lesbianism constituted a tiny minority of the population. In the publishing world of fiction, novels with lesbian characters had existed since the late-nineteenth century, but authors portrayed these women as the *femme fatales*, predatory monsters, or man-hating spinsters.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, beyond Radcliff Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), lesbians’ bookshelves were virtually empty for most of the twentieth century.

In the decades immediately following World War II, however, the publication world witnessed the largest number of lesbian-themed novels to that point. Starting with Tereska Torres’ *Women’s Barracks* (1950), works featuring lesbian characters in same-sex environments flooded the paperback market. But this period also was a particularly oppressive time for lesbians and gay men in America, reflected in all-female institutions like prisons, sororities, and military barracks found within fiction. In 1964, Marion

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<sup>19</sup>Yvonne Keller, “Was It Right To Love Her Brother’s Wife So Passionately?: Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005): 401.

<sup>20</sup>Bonnie Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction, 1969 – 1989* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1990), 5.

Zimmer Bradley observed that “morbid curiosity about the lesbian – built up by expose-type journalism and fed by the secrecy of the more discreet lesbians – has reached an all-time high.”<sup>21</sup> Because of the taboo nature of same-sex relationships in post-World War II America, the pulps found an eager audience among straight men, lesbians, and curious women.

The text between the paperback covers mattered in lesbian commercial novels.<sup>22</sup> Just as women’s magazines instructed heterosexual women how to be feminine – how to be women – the pulps acted as “How-To Guides” for novice lesbians. These were not the *Kama Sutra* of lesbian love-play, however; as others have noted, lesbian erotic writing at this time was nearly as generic and formulaic as the plotlines themselves.<sup>23</sup> Instead, in a culture where homosexuality was hidden and demonized, lesbian pulps became a resource for women searching for an identity.

Although the first lesbian novel was published in 1950, the latter half of the decade and the early 1960s is remembered as “the golden age” of the lesbian pulps. According to Gene Damon, the literary reviewer for *The Ladder*, 30 lesbian titles were printed in 1958, 52 new novels dealing with lesbianism appeared in 1959, and another 75

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<sup>21</sup> Marion Zimmer Bradley, “Lesbian Stereotypes in the Commercial Novel,” *The Ladder* 8, no. 12 (1964), 14.

<sup>22</sup> In recent decades, academics have worked to eradicate the lowbrow stigma associated with “trashy romance novels.” Janice Radway’s important study of heterosexual pulp romance, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), argues that romance novels were important because they afforded readers a break from the demanding and emotionally draining occupation of housewife and mother. For Radway, it does not matter *what* women were reading; instead of focusing on the content of novels, she privileges the personal time housewives experienced while reading.

<sup>23</sup> Gabriele Griffin, *Heavenly Love?: Lesbian Images in Twentieth-Century Women’s Writing* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 142-145.

new books were published in 1960.<sup>24</sup> Not only were mass numbers of lesbian-themed novels written, but they were also widely consumed as well. By 1975, Torres' *Women's Barracks* had sold 2.5 million copies and was the 244<sup>th</sup> best-selling novel in the country.<sup>25</sup> Vin Packer's *Spring Fire* (1952), the first lesbian novel written consciously to compete with *Women's Barracks*, sold more than 1.5 million copies. Reed Marr's *Women Without Men* (1957) was one of the ten best paperback sellers of the year among all publishing companies, and Ann Bannon's *Odd Girl Out* was Fawcett Gold Medal's second-best seller the same year.<sup>26</sup>

These sales statistics, however, represent just the surface of the reach and impact of lesbian pulp fiction; most compilations only consider bookstore purchases, omitting the grocery stores, train stations, and newsstands where the postwar pulps were most easily found.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, these figures ignore the inter-community sharing of books. Notes scribbled on the inside of pulp covers – “Thought you might like this: Pass it on when you’ve finished” – indicate that such works did not sit idly on bookshelves after being read once. The lesbian commercial novel became property of not just one individual, but of a local community of women.

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<sup>24</sup> Gene Damon, “Lesbian Literature in 1959,” *The Ladder* 4, no. 5 (February 1960): 14-15; Damon, “Lesbian Literature in 1960,” *The Ladder* 5, no. 7 (April 1961): 15.

<sup>25</sup> Yvonne Keller, “Was It Right To Love Her Brother’s Wife So Passionately?: Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005): 389.

<sup>26</sup> Gene Damon, “The Lesbian Paperback,” *The Ladder* 13, nos. 9-10 (June-July 1969): 20-23.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Stryker, *Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2001), 49.

In the postwar period, critics writing for mainstream periodicals like the *New York Times* or *Saturday Review* largely ignored lesbian romance fiction. But the pulps mattered, particularly during this era. Susan Stryker observes that “paperbacks were the transitory and transportable artifacts of an increasingly mobile and uprooted society...they were produced for a culture accustomed to ease and hooked on speed.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, lesbian romance fiction transcended socio-economic status. Because these paperbacks were priced at less than a dollar, coupled with their formulaic and “low-brow” content, they were available to a working-class audience. However, it is clear that the Daughters of Bilitis, whose membership was largely ensconced in the middle class, were voracious readers of lesbian pulps.<sup>29</sup>

Ann Bannon, one of the most respected lesbian pulp authors of the postwar period, argued that to lesbians in the 1950s, the pulps were a “miracle.” Suddenly, “you had a name, an identity, and a community of unknown sisters.”<sup>30</sup> And although the majority of lesbian characters in these commercial novels are subjected to “unhappy” endings – most marry a man, go crazy, or kill themselves by the end of the novel – the pulps stood out as a hopeful medium. To unsatisfied wives living in the suburbs, to young college girls crushing on their dormitory roommates, the pulps provided proof that they were not alone. Similar to the awakening disgruntled housewives experienced

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>29</sup> Gene Damon (Barbara Grier) wrote a literature review about the latest lesbian paperback novels in every issue of *The Ladder*. Her articles highlighted works with the most accurate or sympathetic portrayal of lesbianism. *The Ladder* also reviewed nonfiction works that addressed lesbianism. Ann Aldrich’s (Marijane Meaker) series of first-hand accounts were brutally attacked by the Daughters of Bilitis for their unflattering portrayal of lesbians and charged Aldrich, herself a lesbian, with self-hatred.

<sup>30</sup> Ann Bannon, introduction to Ann Aldrich, *We Walk Alone* (1955), reprint, i.



reading *The Feminine Mystique* in the mid-1960s, the pulps spoke to women who questioned their sexuality in an era where the specter of homosexuality produced Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch-hunts, raids on gay bars, and self-loathing.

Gay women worked to hide their sexuality from public view, but lesbian romance fiction was not hard to find. Although the illustrations of scantily clad women and equally suggestive titles were aimed to attract a male audience, women readers could read the titles and see the girls on the covers, and know exactly what kind of book it was. Women checked their courage, tried to disguise their literary purchases under a pile of goods of which they had no need, and purchased these novels despite the knowing smirk of the cashier.<sup>31</sup> The typical commercial lesbian novel cover depicts two women, sometimes a man as well if the story was a love triangle. The "butch" woman of the duo is very feminine, but with short, often dark hair. She can be seen wearing formfitting slacks or dressed in tailored women's blouses and a pencil-line skirt to signify that she is the more masculine of the pair. The "femme" on the covers is often in lingerie, her long golden hair and low-cut blouse unbuttoned to reveal as much cleavage as censors would allow.

Ann Bannon recalls of the women on the covers of her novels: "[she] could easily have walked off those pulp covers and onto the pages of Harper's Bazaar to see the 'New Look.' Many could have graced the ladies' undies section of Sears, Roebuck catalog just as they were...they bore scant resemblance to the girls I had written about."<sup>32</sup> But even

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<sup>31</sup> Bannon, introduction to *Odd Girl Out* (San Francisco, CA: Cleis, 2002), viii.

<sup>32</sup> Ann Bannon, introduction to Jayne Zimet's *Strange Sisters: the Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction, 1949-1969* (New York: Viking Studio, 1999), 9.

though their editors and publishing houses had control over the cover images, the story endings, and even the actual titles of the novels, Bannon continues, “we were trying to be honest *between* the covers...we were speaking to an audience of women who were starved for connections with others, who thought they were uniquely alone with emotions they couldn’t explain and couldn’t find mirrored in their own worlds.”<sup>33</sup>



Figure 15. Typical lesbian pulp fiction cover - Artemis Smith, *The Third Sex* (1959)

Novice lesbians wrote to pulp authors like Bannon as if she was the lesbian-version of advice columnist Ann Landers. They asked where and how to find other women like themselves, they shared their own Coming Out stories, and they expressed their gratitude for exposing the underground world of lesbianism that reassured them that they were not alone. Bannon recalls, “I would have been very surprised if I had had any

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<sup>33</sup> Italics original, Bannon, Intro to Zimet, 15.

idea that I was in a sense writing a social history. But I think that's what the pulp fiction gave us...it's a snapshot of what we were and where we got started."<sup>34</sup>

But the pulps did not just simply reveal lesbian life as it existed; the authors helped *create* lesbian identity.<sup>35</sup> Lesbian authors often appear as characters in the pages of the commercial novel as harbingers of information.<sup>36</sup> For example, Nina Spicer, a fictional pulp author is a key character in *Journey to a Woman* (1960), the fifth novel in Ann Bannon's celebrated Beebo Brinker Chronicles. Spicer introduces the story's protagonist, Beth, to Greenwich Village and the lesbian world to help Beth track down her college roommate and first lover, Laura.

Even the books themselves appeared prescriptively in the narration. In Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), the story's heroine relocates to New York City because she read "in some trashy book" that the Village was the "hub of homosexuality."<sup>37</sup> In Paula Christian's *Love Is Where You Find It* (1961), Dee Sanders keeps her lesbianism hidden for fear of losing her job. She comes home to find that her secretary, Karen, who is residing with her, is reading the lesbian fiction she forgot was on her bookshelves. Knowing that her sexuality has been exposed, Dee attempts to discredit the novels:

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Ann Bannon, "The Power of Literacy," *In the Life* original release (webcast) date March 3, 2006. <http://www.inthelifetv.org/html/episodes/19.html> (last accessed 5 March 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Diane Hamer, "'I Am a Woman': Ann Bannon and the Writing of Lesbian Identity in the 1950s," in *Lesbian and Gay Writing: An Anthology of Critical Essays*, ed. Mark Lilly (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990), 51.

<sup>36</sup> Jennifer Worley, "The Mid-century Pulp Novel and the Imagining of Lesbian Community," in *Invisible Suburbs: Recovering Protest Fiction in the 1950s United States* ed. Josh Luke (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2008), 111.

<sup>37</sup> Rita Mae Brown, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), 138.

“I’m afraid,” she said slowly after a prolonged and pregnant silence, “that those novels are not very indicative of anything but a desire to exploit for money.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Karen said carefully. “I learned a great deal from them.”

“Like what?” She knew she shouldn’t have had the second drink.

“Like, this sort of thing is not nearly so shocking or rare as I had thought.”<sup>38</sup>

After her exposure to lesbian romance fiction, Karen, a girl whom Dee never believed harbored same-sex tendencies, admits to being attracted to her employer and the two begin an obsessively intense relationship.

By the end of the 1960s, the “golden age” of the women-written pulps had passed, only to be replaced with male penned, formulaic novels. The majority of the lesbian pulps were written by men who, according to Susan Stryker, “had never knowingly seen a lesbian, much less spoken to one or given any serious thought to in their lives.”<sup>39</sup> A large number of male authors used feminine or gender-neutral pseudonyms to appear more authentic. For example, Hugo Award-winning writer and publisher Richard E. Geis wrote under the name Peggy Swenson, and Jill Emerson was really crime author Lawrence Block. In general, male authors described their female heroines in very explicit details. Their tragic lesbian figures are less the characters one would expect to find at a working-class lesbian bar and instead resemble wayward Hollywood starlets. Dale Greggson, author of *The Flesh Surrenders* (1965), describes his main character, Flame Tremont as:

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<sup>38</sup> Paula Christian, *Love Is Where You Find It* (New York: Avon, 1961), 283.

<sup>39</sup> Stryker, *Queer Pulp*, 61.

five-feet-five and she held herself like a beauty queen. She was wearing a white bathing suit that was molded to her slender, full-busted figure. Her long red hair had been carefully arranged. Her eyes were green and there was a devil-may-care look on her near-perfect face. Best of all, her golden arms and legs were not thick and muscle-bound the way the limbs of so many women wrestlers are, but were beautifully proportioned and had an athletic grace.<sup>40</sup>

Another of Greggsen's characters, Dottie Harris, the heroine in *Dark Triangle* (1965) is described with similar anatomical detail: "Her legs were slim, shapely, yet strong-looking. Her hips were slender and her small, round rear was held high and tight. While her breasts were not large, they were well-shaped and stood out firmly under the leotard."<sup>41</sup> Marion Zimmer Bradley – herself a pulp writer under the pen names Miriam Gardner, Lee Chapman, and Morgan Ives – objected to these male-authored paperbacks because she argued, "in nine cases out of ten, the lesbians portrayed have no existence outside fiction...the man reading these books gets a completely false idea of what lesbianism is, or what lesbians may be like." She lamented that in these pulps, the lead female is "invariably pictured as being over-sexed, attractive to men, and usually a sexy tease." While she did not deny that many lesbians were feminine in appearance and behavior, Zimmer Bradley observed that most lesbians did not dress provocatively or to attract the male gaze. Moreover, she argued, the characters in these books did not even represent the "so-called normal woman," let alone a lesbian.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Dale Greggsen, *The Flesh Surrenders* (New York: Domino Books, 1965), 5.

<sup>41</sup> Greggsen, *Dark Triangle* (New York: Domino Books, 1965), 11.

<sup>42</sup> Marion Zimmer Bradley, "Lesbian Stereotypes in the Commercial Novel," *The Ladder* 8, no. 12 (September 1964), 14-16.

Valerie Taylor, another popular pulp author, wrote a satire of the male-written lesbian pulps for *The Ladder* in 1967. Her article, “The ‘Realistic’ Novel” reads like author notes for a work in progress. She states that the plot lines could suffice as the sequel to “virtually any gay novel written by a man.” Her main character, Broccoli Cavendish, has just run away from her roommate, Precious Signoret who is “[o]utwardly feminine, with a size 44 bust and an inexhaustible supply of black nylon lingerie.” Taylor notes that Precious is really butch, despite her feminine appearance, and exclaims, “I am the man!” when they make love. By the end of the story, however, Broccoli decides that she is really not a lesbian, wants to marry a man, and leaves Precious in order to lead a “normal life.”<sup>43</sup> While the ending of the story is not unusual for a lesbian pulp, regardless of the author’s gender, the description of the characters is typical for a male writer.

Male authors had their own lurid ideas about what a lesbian looked like in the 1950s and 1960s, but addressing how postwar men wrote about lesbians would have to take into account issues such as the postwar crisis in masculinity.<sup>44</sup> Female-authored lesbian pulps, however, offered an alternative view of sexuality, beauty, and body image. Some of the real-life lesbian authors included: Ann Bannon, Paula Christian, March Hastings, Della Martin, Rea Michaels, Claire Morgan, Randy Salem, Artemis Smith, and Valerie Taylor. The majority of these women writers certainly took care to describe their

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<sup>43</sup> Valerie Taylor, “The ‘Realistic’ Novel,” *The Ladder* 11, no. 7 (May 1967), 5-6.

<sup>44</sup> For works addressing the postwar “crisis in masculinity” see Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis in Masculinity* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor, 1987); James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

own heroines and the secondary female characters that they found attractive, but there is an authenticity to their descriptions that make the characters in these novels more believable and more attainable than a *Playboy* centerfold.

The focus on characters' bodies in female-authored novels is subtler than in the male fiction. The heroine is drawn in by another woman's face, her eyes, and the way she carries herself. Tereska Torres' *Women's Barracks* (1950) describes one character as: "tall and extremely blonde...Her nose was fairly long, but quite narrow and very slightly arched, giving her an air of distinction...The woman had such a marvelous scent! And in passing, she threw Ursula a smile that was as perfumed as the woman herself."<sup>45</sup> The heroine, herself a self-identified lesbian or perhaps just a woman with curious leanings, looks for signs that other feminine women may share her lesbian desires. These subtle markers in the novels are far more telling indicators than the size and positioning of a woman's breasts or the swell at her hips.

This is not to say that female authors did not take care to describe the bodies of their heroines or the secondary female characters. But while male authors described their characters as the second-coming of Marilyn Monroe, the most prolific and respected female authors more often described heroines who better resembled the actress Grace Kelly – a slender, willowy woman, sophisticated and graceful. In the early novels of writers like Claire Morgan and Valerie Taylor, their lesbians are often slim, even some of the more masculine women. Morgan's *The Price of Salt* (1952) was the first pulp to

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<sup>45</sup> Tereska Torres, *Women's Barracks* (New York: Gold Medal, 1950), quoted in Katherine Forrest, *Lesbian Pulp Fiction: the Sexually Intrepid World of Lesbian Paperback Novels, 1950 – 1965* (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press, 2005), 3.

contain a sympathetic portrayal of lesbianism, in which the female characters involved do not go crazy, die, or end up marrying men at the end of the story. The main character, Therese (Terry) Belivet works at a department store in the toy department. She sees a shopper and is instantly smitten: “She was tall and fair, her long figure graceful in the loose fur coat that she held open with a hand on her waist. Her eyes were gray, colorless, yet dominant as light or fire....Her eyebrows were blond, curving around the bend of her forehead. Her mouth was as wise as her eyes, Therese thought, and her voice was like her coat, rich and supple and somehow full of secrets”<sup>46</sup> This mystery shopper soon becomes Terry’s lover.

### **Lesbian Body Image**

Lesbians in postwar America were certainly not blind to mainstream feminine body ideals. Some, in fact, took offense at the suggestion that they or their partner’s figures might not “stack up.” In a description of North Beach, the Greenwich Village of San Francisco, *Pageant* magazine contributor Daniel Dixon described *The Ladder*’s editor, Phyllis Lyon, as being “burly.” Coming to her partner’s rescue, Del Martin responded, “WE DO HEARTILY DENY THAT PHYLLIS LYON IS BURLY.” Referring to Funk & Wagnall’s College Standard Dictionary, Martin notes that “burly” is defined as “Large of body; bulky; stout; lusty.” The President of the DOB continues, “Those who have made the personal acquaintance of Phyllis Lyon would hardly call her large of body, bulky or stout. She has a trim figure – 34 bust, 24 waist (may be slightly

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<sup>46</sup> Claire Morgan, *The Price of Salt* (New York: Bantam Books, 1952), 27.



larger after recent Holiday parties) and 36 hips – considered by many as ‘very nice.’

Is our editor burly? We think not!”<sup>47</sup>

Lesbian pulp fiction similarly reveals that authors were aware of the two competing figure ideals of the svelte high-fashion mannequin and curvy pin-up model. In Paula Christian’s *This Side of Love* (1963), her series’ heroine, Val MacGregor, is proud of her figure. She had been a “fat, awkward kid” in her youth, but had grown into her body. “It wasn’t tall and wispy like the magazine models had; but there was no denying it was a woman’s figure.”<sup>48</sup> When Laura and Beth meet in the opening pages of Ann Bannon’s first novel, *Odd Girl Out* (1957), Laura admires her new college roommate, noting that she finds Beth attractive, but not model attractive. “She had a well-modeled, sensitive face with features not bonily chic like those of a mannequin...She wasn’t fashionably pretty but her beauty was healthy and real and her good nature showed in her face.”<sup>49</sup> Rea Michael’s heroine, Libby Michaels, laments while studying her body in a mirror, that she will never be a model because her breasts and hips are too big. Her potential employer, Joanne Miller, who wants her to be a model at her agency agrees: “Perhaps you’re right. At least as far high fashion is concerned.” Miller assures her, however, that many different shapes of women are needed as mannequin models in New York.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Del Martin, “Is Our Editor Burly?” *The Ladder* 2, no. 4 (January 1958), 16-17. Capitalization and underlining original.

<sup>48</sup> Paula Christian, *This Side of Love* (New York: Avon Books, 1963), 19.

<sup>49</sup> Ann Bannon, *Odd Girl Out* (New York: Gold Medal, 1957), 2.

<sup>50</sup> Rea Michaels, *Libby* (New York: Domino Books, 1965), 17.

Similar scenes like Libby Michaels' mirror lament appear in an overwhelming majority of female-written work wherein the main character stands before her reflection after bathing and scrutinizes her naked form. The scene gives the author the opportunity to physically describe her heroine, but it also offers a gateway into the internal musings of lesbians and their level of comfort or discomfort regarding the shape of their bodies. Subtle differences appear between the private musings of the heterosexual and homosexual female characters as they gaze upon their reflection. For straight women, most lament that their figure is not shaped the way they want it to be – buxom, shapely characters desire to lose weight while model-thin women bemoan their small breasts or boyish hips. For the lesbian characters, however, their worries focus more on their unaccepted sexuality.

In Valerie Taylor's *The Girls in 3-B* (1959), all three roommates are disappointed with their bodies. Pat, an attractive, curvy woman tackles one diet after another in order to become slender and elegant like the woman to whom her employer is engaged. While scrutinizing her body in a mirror, she loathes what she sees: "Chunky peasant, she thought, wanting to be slender and fine-traced and elegant. She hated her solid frame and big capable hands and feet."<sup>51</sup> The second roommate in Taylor's story, Annice, is a woman with a slender figure. Although her roommate Pat is envious of her figure, Annice is embarrassed that she is not as voluptuous and chesty as the women whom her boyfriend stares at on the street.

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<sup>51</sup> Valerie Taylor, *The Girls in 3-B* (New York: Gold Medal, 1959), 79.

The final roommate, Barby, is Valerie Taylor's lesbian character. Of the three main women in the story, her body is described as being the most fashionably ideal, but Barby is dissatisfied with her curvaceous form; she blames her naturally provocative figure for the unwanted advances she faces from numerous male characters in the novel. In the same way, Ann Bannon's self-loathing Laura, although described as having a high-fashion figure, is equally disappointed with her body. While looking at herself in a mirror, Laura observes that she had never liked her appearance. "She was not lush and ripe and sweet-scented," she silently regrets. "On the contrary, she was firm and flat everywhere, with long limbs and fine bones."<sup>52</sup> Part of femme characters' lack of body-esteem can be attributed to body ideals of the era, but more often their dissatisfaction with their own reflection stems from the negative stereotype that lesbians were uniformly mannish in appearance and behavior.

Lesbian protagonists struggle with their unexpected emotions for other women because they do not "look" gay. Throughout the Beebo Brinker series, Laura cannot accept her lesbianism because when she inspects her reflection, she sees a feminine face and figure staring back at her. As she examines herself in a mirror in *Odd Girl Out*, she muses:

She had breasts and full hips like other girls. She wore lipstick and curled her hair...everything was feminine...She thought that homosexual women were great strong creatures in slacks with brush cuts and deep voices...She looked back at herself...and she thought, 'I don't want to be a boy. I don't want to be like them. But if I'm a girl why do I love a girl? What's wrong with me?'<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ann Bannon, *I Am a Woman* (New York: Gold Medal, 1959), 21.

<sup>53</sup> Bannon, *Odd Girl Out*, (New York: Gold Medal, 1957), 68-69.

With their outwardly feminine appearance, femmes in the novels are often in denial or believe themselves to be sick or neurotic. Kate Wood in Valerie Taylor's *A World Without Men* inspects her reflection and anxiously wonders if other people can tell she is a lesbian just from her appearance: "I look all right, she thought. Good hips, a woman's bosom. I look like other people, she reassured herself for the hundredth time."<sup>54</sup> Even Ann Bannon's iconic butch character Beebo Brinker, who has come to terms with her sexuality, wonders why feminine-appearing women could be gay, too. She asks her friend Jack, "Why does she love other girls, when she's just as womanly and perfumed as the girl who goes for me? I used to think that all homosexual girls were three-quarters boy."<sup>55</sup> Lesbian romance fiction helped highlight the diversity of the community, counteracting the negative stereotype that portrayed all lesbians as mannish.

While femmes in these stories worry if they look like other women, butch lesbians take pride in the fact that they do not. In Ann Bannon's *Journey to a Woman* (1960), Beth, although neither easily labeled femme nor butch, is proud of her strength. Because of her strength, she stops the tormented and neurotic Vega Purgis when she tries to throw herself out an open window. Beth lifts Vega and observes, "She was surprised at how slight the burden was. Beth was a big girl and she was strong, and she had always been proud of these unfeminine qualities in herself."<sup>56</sup> Beebo Brinker, after years of being ashamed of her sturdy, boyish figure, suddenly is proud of her body when she goes to a

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<sup>54</sup> Valerie Taylor, *A World Without Men* (New York: Midwood Tower, 1963), 93.

<sup>55</sup> Bannon, *Beebo Brinker* (New York: Gold Medal, 1962), 52.

<sup>56</sup> Bannon, *Journey to a Woman* (New York: Gold Medal, 1960), 72.

lesbian club for the first time. The author describes how, “a new feeling gripped her” when Beebo meets a table of femme women. “For the first time in her life she was proud of her size, proud of her strength, even proud of her oddly boyish face.”<sup>57</sup> Moreover, for butch women, because of their bodies, others identify and label their queerness before they even put a label to it. In Vin Packer’s *Spring Fire*, Lena admires the reserved strength in Susan Mitchell’s form long before they become lovers; Jack immediately recognizes Beebo Brinker’s queerness when he meets her for the first time; and in Della Martin’s *Twilight Girls*, Violet recognizes Lon Harris as a baby butch before Lon even knows what the words mean. Butch women in the pulps more easily accept their sexuality because they “look” like lesbians.

Although butch characters have more bodily self-confidence than the femmes, nearly all women in the pulps feel insecurities about their breasts. Femmes are unsure how they compare to other women; butch women worry because they have breasts. Breast size posed problems for butch identity. For Lon Harris, the teenaged lesbian in *Twilight Girl*, her breasts are a reminder that as a girl, she would never be good enough for her father’s approval. After the birth of her brother, Eddie Junior, she feels her father’s paternal attention slipping and in reaction, she tries to be more athletic, more tomboyish. Della Martin writes, “the gentle swelling under the smudged T-shirt proclaimed the odds insurmountable, the competition too heartlessly stacked against her.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Bannon, *Beebo Brinker*, 40.

<sup>58</sup> Della Martin, *Twilight Girl* (1961), 17.

Women who identified as femme often revealed feelings of inadequacy about their cup size or remorse that their bust is too large. Carolyn Weber, the main character in March Hastings' *The Unashamed* (1960), despises her breasts because "They were the kind men whistle at and women abhor owning, pendulous and full, and just too damn heavy to carry around. She had permanent grooves in her shoulders from bra straps."<sup>59</sup> In Ann Bannon's *Odd Girl Out* (1957), Laura is ashamed of her lack of bust and is horrified when, Emmy, a girl in Laura's sorority suggests she use "falsies." Laura tries to conceal the presence of her breasts as well as hide their size. Bannon writes, "She wished that they were more glamorous, more obviously *there*. In their present shape they seemed only an afterthought."<sup>60</sup> But Laura is not discouraged about her small breasts because she desires looking like a "Sweater Girl"; her lack of breasts is tied up with insecurities about not being a real woman. Without large breasts, Laura fears her queerness is written on her body.

### **Clothing Makes the (Wo)man**

Clothing played a large role in creating one's femme or butch image. In the working-class and middle-class communities, the femme image did not differ significantly from that of mainstream fashion. The invention of fibers like Nylon and Dacron for stockings, and Orlon and Banlon for inexpensive, form-fitting sweaters, helped femmes as well as straight women copy the "Sweater Girl" look popularized by

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<sup>59</sup> March Hastings, *The Unashamed* (New York: Midwood Books, 1960), 8.

<sup>60</sup> Bannon, *Odd Girl Out* (1957), 19.

Hollywood stars like Marilyn Monroe, Jane Russell, or Lana Turner.<sup>61</sup> In the working-class world of butch and femme lesbians, it was not just the more feminine lesbians who cared about their looks or the way they dressed, however. In *Twilight Girls*, Lon becomes butch through the purchase of a new wardrobe, along with the adaptation of certain gestures and vocabulary. “Clothes,” she soon learns, “and the male swagger with which they were worn, established a competitive camaraderie with the other butches.”<sup>62</sup>

Butches did not simply wear men’s clothing, however. Because of the pointed cup of popular bras like Maidenform, some women altered their bras to avoid the pointed look. Little Gerry, a full-bosomed butch remembers jokingly, “Butches have all the cleavage and they don’t even want it.”<sup>63</sup> To create a more masculine silhouette, butch lesbians bound their breasts using binders, strips of cloth, or Ace bandages wrapped tightly around their chest, effectively flattening salient evidence of their womanhood. Ann Aldrich scathingly observes that butch women bound their breasts to hide this “disfiguration...the dyke hates to be reminded that she is a woman.”<sup>64</sup> But flattening one’s breasts did not mean these women wanted to be men; women in the 1920s, after all, had done the same thing. A flattened chest was a statement; it was part of the butch uniform. Moreover, binding one’s breasts also made men’s shirts fit better. It served not

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<sup>61</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 162.

<sup>62</sup> Martin, *Twilight Girls*, 52.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 161.

<sup>64</sup> Ann Aldrich, *We, Too, Must Love* (Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett Publications, 1958), 25.

only esthetics, but a safety function as well. One woman, Stormy, remembered, “It was easier to walk down the street if at first glance, people thought you were a man.”<sup>65</sup>

But lesbian identity was more than the clothes worn or the way a woman styled her hair. *The Ladder’s* cartoonist in the early 1960s, Domino, repeatedly satirized how clothing could not make one either butch or femme. Instead, as the cartoons show, the shape of one’s body played far more of a role. The caption of a February 1962 cartoon read, “Oh, I always wear skirts and blouses in public so people won’t suspect that I’m gay...” The woman pictured is wearing a knee-length pencil skirt, three-quarter length button up collared blouse, and heavy, lace up shoes that look more like male lifts than a woman’s dress shoe. While the clothing (sans the shoes) could be seen as the femme uniform, the woman’s body gives her away. Her form is stereotypically butch: her body is curveless and stout. Beneath her blouse, her breasts slightly sag as if without the support of a bra. Her legs are thick and little distinguishes her waist from her wide hips. Moreover, her short, cropped hair is slicked back on the sides. Her face is without makeup, her lips twisted in a grimace, one eyebrow arched, looking like a sneer. Her hands on her hips give her a very aggressive, challenging stance.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Davis and Kennedy, *Boots of Leather*, 178.

<sup>66</sup> Cartoon by Domino *The Ladder* 6, no. 5 (February 1962), 11.



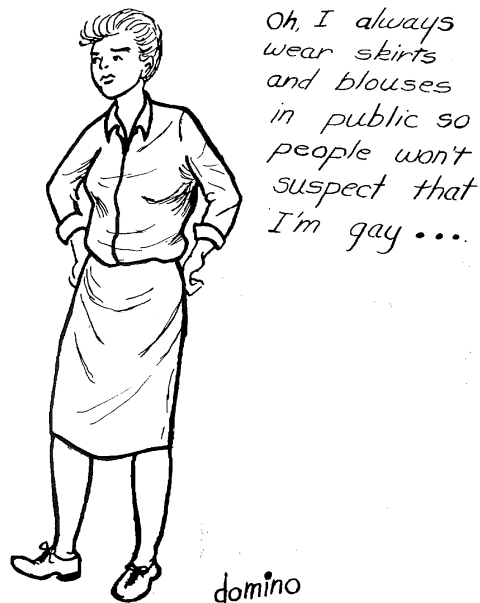
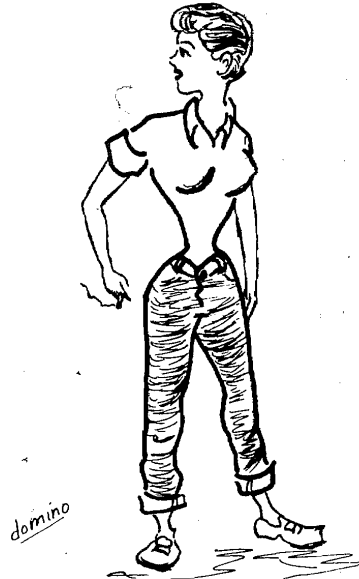


Figure 16. Comic by Domino, *The Ladder* – February 1962

Similarly, in April of that same year, Domino satirized a femme attempting to appear butch. The caption reads “Well, of course I’m butch – What do I look like!” Rather than having the same body as the woman from the February cartoon, this woman is wholly feminine beyond her clothing. Her face and profile are angular and delicate. Her mouth is clearly lipsticked and her nose is dainty and upturned. Her hair is shortly shorn, but is clearly styled, opposed to the roughly drawn hair of the butch woman in the February cartoon. Although she wears “men’s clothing,” her thin, yet curved figure is on display. Her thin arms stick out from the men’s shirt, and she holds a cigarette in one hand. Her slender thighs and calves are encased in fly-front slacks, rolled at the bottom cuffs to show flat loafers. Her collared short-sleeved men’s shirt hugs her impressive

curves. Her waist is comically cinched, making her large balloon-shaped breasts even more exaggerated.



*Figure 17. "Well, of course I'm butch – What do I look like!"  
Comic by Domino, The Ladder – April 1962*

In Artemis Smith's *The Third Sex* (1959), the main character Joan meets up with her friend Gig at a gay bar. Throughout the story, the protagonist hesitates to label herself as either femme or butch, abhorring that she has to make a choice. Noticing that Joan is dressed in pants instead of her usual dress or skirt, Gig reveals her surprise:

"Say, what's the bit? I thought you were femme."

"I prefer slacks," Joan said, capriciously sipping her drink. "You don't look like you belong in a skirt."

The two characters present a paradox of the butch/femme dichotomy. Joan revolts against the "rule" that only butches could wear pants in public. Although Joan is the more physically feminine of the pair, it is Gig who is in a dress. Gig defends herself, noting that the clothes are part of her office's uniform; her employers don't want her to look

“too obvious.”<sup>67</sup> Wearing a skirt could not turn a masculine lesbian like Gig into a “femme” just as Joan donning pants did not make her “butch.” But this did not mean that there was no flexibility when it came to the butch/femme dichotomy.

### **The Malleability of Butch and Femme Identity**

Ann Bannon is often considered the apex of pulp writers with her Beebo Brinker being perhaps *the* most famous of all lesbian characters. The author’s three major reoccurring characters, Laura, Beth, and Beebo represent the spectrum of lesbian identity – femme to butch – and highlight the malleability of those labels. But although Beebo Brinker has attracted the most scholarly attention because of her butch identity, Beth Ayers is a far more complex individual. Not only does her sexual-orientation flip-flop throughout the six-book series, but so does her identity as a femme or butch lesbian. In this way, characters in lesbian romance fiction challenge contemporary ideas about the rigidity of butch/femme culture of the 1950s and 1960s.

Beth Ayers complicates the postwar “rule” that declared a lesbian must be either a masculine butch or a feminine femme. These disparate labels become even more complex when applied to physical appearance and sexual aggression. Appearance-wise, Beth cannot be easily labeled based on her physical build alone. When Laura first meets her in college, she admires Beth’s figure, but also observes the strength and firmness of her legs while other girls were rounder and softer, as though Beth was a dancer. However, Beth is feminine enough to be a figure model, which is the pretense for which she finds time to visit Vega, a woman after whom she lusts while still being married. And

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<sup>67</sup> Artemis Smith, *The Third Sex* (New York: Beacon Books, 1959), 33.

despite this model femininity, Nina Spicer, a woman Beth meets while exploring Greenwich Village, tells Beth she could be butch if she “let herself go.”

Although identifying as butch or femme was important in working-class bar culture, the labels had less importance in private spaces or the bedroom. Daniel Webster Cory notes, “They view it, not as a lack of identity, but affirmation of versatility. ‘In bed, the difference between femme and butch disappears,’ they will say. ‘There everybody is ki-ki.’”<sup>68</sup> In *Twilight Girl*, Lon overhears a similar conversation at a lesbian club: “Was she butch or fem? Christ, I couldn’t tell! Smorgasbord. By the time she went home I wasn’t sure which I was!”<sup>69</sup> One femme lesbian rejected the idea that lesbians rejected their “femaleness.” She notes, “What lesbians reject is their *femininity*, in the sense that feminist Germaine Greer defines it, as meaning ‘without libido, and therefore incomplete, subhuman’ – their passivity, a result of deeply engrained enculturation, a condition that makes of women female eunuchs.”<sup>70</sup> Although it was assumed that butch women were the sexual aggressors and their femme partners more passive, these roles are often reversed in lesbian romance fiction. In Vin Packer’s *Spring Fire*, even though Susan Mitchell is more masculine in appearance, her lover, Lena, is more sexually experienced and aggressive. Even a character as outwardly feminine as Bannon’s Laura becomes the sexual aggressor with all of her partners, except for Beebo and Beth. The latter is

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<sup>68</sup> Webster Cory, *The Lesbian in America* (1964), 83.

<sup>69</sup> Martin, *Twilight Girl* (1961), 30.

<sup>70</sup> Dolores Klaich, *Woman + Woman: Attitudes Toward Lesbianism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 238.

similarly complicated because with all of her sexual partners, except for Beebo, she is the aggressor.

Although a lesbian might identify as “femme” with one partner, she could identify as “butch” with another and visa versa. This can be seen in a number of questionnaires exploring lesbian identity as well as in the pulps. In June 1958, the Daughters of Bilitis sent out 500 4-page questionnaires to their readers. Of considerable interest to the group was a question that asked: “In your homosexual relationship(s) do you consider yourself predominantly feminine, masculine, or neither?” Participants responded nearly equally between all three categories. Additionally, more than one respondent indicated that her identity as “masculine” or “feminine” depended on the type of partner with whom she was coupled. Those who responded “neither,” identified both “masculine” and “feminine” elements in themselves.<sup>71</sup>

Dr. Virginia Armon conducted a similar study and posted her findings in *One Institute Quarterly: Homophile Studies*. She noted that her own subjects were of similar backgrounds as the readership of *The Ladder*, describing the women as a “group of urban background, high educational level, predominantly professional and ‘white collar.’” In her group of thirty lesbians, seventeen identified as masculine, eight as feminine, and five as neither. However, those that identified as butch noted they had not always identified in this way, particularly earlier in their life when they were “more unsure of themselves.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> “DOB Questionnaire Reveals Some Facts,” *The Ladder* 3, no. 12 September 1957, 25.

<sup>72</sup> Virginia Armon, “Some Facts about Lesbians,” *One Institute Quarterly: Homophile Studies* 2, no. 4 (1959), 111-112.

The pulps and postwar lesbian identity studies muddy the definitions of “femme” and “butch.” Moreover, they reveal that these terms were not as fixed or rigid as has been previously argued. In this way, masculinity and femininity were fluid personality traits that evolved overtime just as easily as one changed their clothes or the style of their hair.

The end of the 1960s brought the Stonewall Rebellion and the start of a women’s liberation movement, enticing a number of lesbians to no longer hide their sexuality behind skirts, bras, and girdles. And while many white American women now chiseled away the curves they had once so proudly displayed in order to mimic high-fashion models in the late 1960s, a different kind of body ideal transformation occurred in the lesbian community. Short hair, flannel shirts, workmen’s boots, blue jeans, and the absence of jewelry and makeup became the new uniform for lesbians as butch/femme identity was forced underground in favor of more androgynous styles. Ironically, this same androgynous look was celebrated in high-fashion magazines as the lines between lesbian fashionability and mainstream ideals blurred.

Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) highlights this change. An older lesbian approaches the protagonist, Molly Bolt, in a lesbian bar and asks if she’s butch or femme. Instead of self-labeling, Molly rejects the postwar gender dichotomy. “What’s the point of being a lesbian,” she asks, “if a woman is going to look and act like an imitation man?” Molly deflects her potential suitor’s advances, and the aging lesbian complains, “What’s this world coming to when you can’t tell the butches from the femmes?”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Rita Mae Brown, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (New York: Bantam, 1973), 147.

Although contemptuous of the older generation's role-playing, works like *Rubyfruit Jungle* reflected the new identity consciousness of gay women in the 1970s.

### Conclusions

Lesbians were certainly exposed to women's magazines, Hollywood press, and other forms of mass media that influenced the way they felt about their bodies. Queer fiction and homosexual periodicals reveal that lesbians were very aware of mainstream body ideals, particularly the competing figures of the high-fashion model and the pin-up star. In some ways, particularly among middle-class women who feared discrimination and dismissal from employment, lesbians were even *more* sensitive to changing fads and fashion to better hide their sexuality. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, butch lesbians created a unique identity defined by a denial of femininity and mainstream body ideals. In the working-class bars and in the pages of lesbian pulp fiction, butch women appeared more confident and physically explicit about their sexuality and showed pride in their body inversion. Thereafter, butch identity enjoyed a privileged position, and as a result, their more feminine counterparts appear less bodily radical. Femmes adhered to mainstream feminine identity and guarded their sexuality, not because fashion magazines were so persuasive. Instead, fear of detection and the resulting discrimination fueled their body anxieties. Straight women and femme lesbians might have resembled each other in body and fashion ideals, but the motivations for doing so were rarely analogous. Lesbian body image in the postwar years demonstrated that media prescriptions did not affect all women equally.

Postwar lesbian fiction is not without its flaws. The majority of protagonists run from their sexuality and end up with a man or in an asylum by the end of the story. Even fiction penned by lesbians themselves was often homophobic and formulaic. The pulps have been overlooked because of this. But lesbian romance fiction was important. Today, the lesbian commercial novel challenges the rigidity of the postwar butch/femme paradigm. Women-authored pulps show that one did not have to be butch or femme at all times, but rather that these were identities that could change overtime.

More importantly, however, the pulps challenged the prevailing stereotype that most lesbians idealized masculine bodies. Feminine women who found themselves attracted to their college roommate, best friend, or female colleague were fraught with anxiety about these emotions because they did not “look” like a lesbian. Female-authored queer fiction revealed an “invisible” community of femme lesbians. Writers helped assure their readers that lesbians could be just as feminine as the so-called “normal” girl because the majority of their characters are described as outwardly “undetectable.” One grateful woman wrote to Ann Aldrich, “I learned from reading your book that I’m not the only lesbian who wears a skirt. At first I thought all the others looked like men, and I was glad to know there are some like me, feminine women...I try to hold my head up, knowing I’m not really alone as long as there are other women in the same boat.”<sup>74</sup> For women learning what it meant to be gay in post-World War II America, lesbian pulps acted as prescriptive literature and reassured them that they were not alone.

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<sup>74</sup> Ann Aldrich, *Carol in a Thousand Cities* (Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett Publications, 1960), 250.



They revealed, moreover, that even feminine women could desire other women, helping to eradicate harmful depictions about what lesbians were like.

## CONCLUSION

### THE YEAR OF THE AIRBRUSH AND OTHER PHOTOSHOP DISASTERS

*Nothing tastes as good as being skinny feels.*

- Kate Moss

In September 2010, CBS broadcasting premiered the pilot episode of their new Monday sitcom, *Mike & Molly*. The program's premise revolves around two blue-collar workers, Mike Briggs, a Chicago police officer, and Molly Flynn, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. The main characters become acquainted at an Overeaters Anonymous meeting and proceed to date. The sitcom was picked up by CBS for a full-season run after it averaged 12.27 million viewers in its first few weeks, heralding it as the season's top new comedy on network television.<sup>1</sup> Praise and critics for the plus-size featuring program surfaced nearly as soon as the show premiered. While many applauded CBS for featuring two plus-sized actors as the program's main characters, criticism centered on the show's writing. Although a sitcom, the writers continue to rely on an alarming number of fat jokes. Other programs feature plus-sized actors without continued reference to their weight. Despite CBS's attempts to do something brave, so far the program has fallen short of critical success because of its reliance on the main characters' size. Despite this, however, viewership continues to be high.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Seidman, "CBS Gives Full Season Pickups to All New Series," *TV By the Numbers*, October 21, 2010, <http://tvbythenumbers.com/2010/10/21/cbs-gives-full-season-pickups-to-all-new-series-hawaii-five-0-defenders-blue-bloods-mike-molly-my-dad-says/69152> (last accessed 5 March 2011).

A different kind of criticism for *Mike & Molly* came from Maura Kelly, a blogger for *Marie Claire* magazine. Commenting on a recent CNN article that questioned if the intimacy between Mike and Molly made watchers uncomfortable, Kelly responded affirmatively:

I think I'd be grossed out if I had to watch two characters with rolls and rolls of fat kissing each other ... because I'd be grossed out if I had to watch them doing anything. To be brutally honest, even in real life, I find it aesthetically displeasing to watch a very, very fat person simply walk across a room — just like I'd find it distressing if I saw a very drunk person stumbling across a bar or a heroin addict slumping in a chair.<sup>2</sup>

Kelly claimed that since the program features two main characters who are both plus-sized actors, the show promotes “obesity.” She ended the piece with some basic diet and exercise suggestions to all the “fatties” out there reading her blog, as if imparting wisdom nuggets to which Fat America had never been exposed. The response to the article was immediate. After getting flamed on nearly every website with a conscience, Kelly apologized in a post for her “insensitivity” to the issue. She explained her bias as being negatively influenced by her own struggles with anorexia and the desire to be thin.

Kelly’s original blog was hardly surprising considering the history of American body ideals. What was alarming was that *Marie Claire*, a women’s magazine that described itself as progress (its motto is “More Than a Pretty Face”), allowed the author to post an op-ed piece filled with such blatantly discriminatory and insulting rhetoric. CeCe Olisa, author of “The Big Girl Blog,” tweeted that reading the article made her feel

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<sup>2</sup> Maura Kelly, “Should Fatties Get a Room? (Even On TV?)” *Marie Claire*, October 25, 2010, <http://www.marieclaire.com/sex-love/dating-blog/overweight-couples-on-television> (last accessed 25 October 2010).

like she had caught her best friend talking about her behind her back.<sup>3</sup> In a whirlwind of damage control, *Marie Claire* countered the Kelly blog with a number of “love your body” opinion pieces. However, Joanna Coles, editor-in-chief for the magazine, continued to defend Kelly as a “provocative” writer, and noted she was “excited and moved” by the over 28,000 emails the magazine received in the span of a few days regarding the Kelly post.<sup>4</sup> If this op-ed blog was written about any other under-represented group, Maura Kelly would have been immediately fired.

The fat community, however, is not recognized as a minority group. Consequently, Kelly was not fired from *Marie Claire*. In 2010, Michigan's civil rights employment law was the only one in the country that explicitly states “weight” as a factor upon which employers cannot take action.<sup>5</sup> Instead of being acknowledged as underrepresented, fat is seen as *ugly* and holds negative connotations about the personality of that person. The myths and stereotypes are numerous and damaging. Fat people are lazy. Fat people are stupid. But perhaps the most dangerous myth is that Fat kills. In 2004, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that more than 400,000 Americans die of “overweight” and “obesity” every year. The number was so alarmingly large that the CDC estimated it would soon surpass smoking as the leading

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<sup>3</sup> CeCe Olisa, “The Big Girl Blog on *Marie Claire*,” *The Big Girl Blog*, October 29, 2010, <http://www.thebiggirlblog.com/2010/10/thebiggirlblog-marie-claire/> (last accessed 30 October 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Leah Chernikoff, “*Marie Claire* EIC Joanna Coles Responds to Controversial Fatist Blog Post,” *Fashionista*, October 26, 2010, <http://fashionista.com/2010/10/exclusive-marie-claire-eic-joanna-coles-responds-to-controversial-fatist-blog-post/> (last accessed 27 October 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Jun, “Hooters Official Disputes Two Suits Claiming Weight Discrimination,” *Detroit News*, June 2, 2010, <http://www.callsam.com/bernstein-media-center/richard-bernstein-news-fighting-for-justice/victim-of-weight-discrimination-sues-hooters-restaurants/hooters-official-disputes-two-suits-claiming-weight-discrimination> (last accessed 5 March 2011).

cause of preventable deaths.<sup>6</sup> America suddenly had an “obesity epidemic.” Pundits, borrowing language from the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, called fatness the “terrorism from within” and declared a “war on fat.” A year later, a federal report announced that the original CDC findings were inflated and their methodology was flawed. The updated report dropped the 400,000 fat deaths to only 26,000 victims.<sup>7</sup> Few took note of the federal report, however, and continued to cling to the original 400,000 deaths figure.

Although concerns for “obese” or “overweight” Americans appear altruistic on the surface, the assault against fat has less to do with concerns about health and than with greed and consumerism. The two major organizations for “obesity” research, the North American Association for the Study of Obesity and the American Obesity Association all have financial connections to pharmaceutical or weight-loss companies.<sup>8</sup> As “Health At Every Size” activist Laura Bacon observes, studies such as the CDC’s “obesity” death report “gives us permission to call our fear of fat a health concern, rather than naming it as the cultural oppression it is.”<sup>9</sup> It’s not fat that’s killing people; it’s discrimination. “Overweight” and “obese” individuals are routinely denied insurance coverage solely based on their weight instead of more telling factors such as tobacco and alcohol use or

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<sup>6</sup> Ali H. Mokdad et al., “Actual Cases of Death in the United States, 2000,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 291 (2004): 1238-45.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine M. Flegal et al., “Excess Deaths Associated with Underweight, Overweight, and Obesity,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 293, no. 15 (2005): 1861-67.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Bacon, *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2008), 148.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar levels. Independently funded studies show that 91 percent of what accounts for “health” has nothing to do with Body Mass Index (BMI), the updated version of Dublin’s actuary height and weight tables.<sup>10</sup> Weight is just a number on a scale – a number, we are told, that is tied to our self-worth.

Agencies like the CDC regularly publish reports revealing how Americans are significantly heavier today than they were in decades past. One recent study revealed that the average woman in 1960 was 5 feet 3 inches tall and weighed 140.2 pounds. In 2002, the typical American woman had grown an inch, but now weighed 24 pounds more than her 1960s counterpart. The average white woman weighed 161.7 pounds while the average black woman weighed 182.4 pounds.<sup>11</sup> While data such as this is used to convince Americans to stop eating fast food and to exercise more regularly, what is more significant is that while the average American becomes heavier, the average fashion model becomes slimmer.

In 1947, the average model stood 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighed 125 pounds. In 1975, she had grown to 5 feet 7 inches and weighed only 118 pounds. Today, the typical fashion model weighs 117 pounds and stands 5 feet 11 inches. Most models are skinnier than 98 percent of American women.<sup>12</sup> This is a reflection that not only is the average woman becoming heavier, but that the gap between ideals and reality is also widening.

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<sup>10</sup> Deb Burgard, “What is ‘Health at Every Size’?” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Ester Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 43.

<sup>11</sup> Cynthia Ogden, Cheryl D. Fryar, Margaret D. Carroll, and Katherine M. Flegal, “Mean Body Weight, Height, and Body Mass Index, United States 1960-2002,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Vital and Health Statistics* No. 347 (October 27, 2004), 1-18.

<sup>12</sup> National Eating Disorders Association, <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/information-resources/general-information.php#facts-statistics> (last accessed 1 March 2011).

This does little to motivate the typical woman to cut back on calories and take the stairs instead of the elevator. Instead, these weight discrepancies urge women to crash diet, to starve themselves, and creates negative body esteem. Although the average American has changed in size since the 1960s, we have not changed in one aspect – we still want results fast and with little effort. Americans spend over \$40 billion on dieting and diet-related products each year. Women surveyed at one college campus reported that 91 percent attempted to control their weight at some point through dieting; 22 percent admitted they dieted “often” or “always.” Americans do not suffer from an “obesity epidemic.” They suffer from a weight-loss crisis. This is obviously not just an adult-onset craze, however. Over one-half of teenage girls use unhealthy weight control behaviors such as skipping meals, fasting, smoking cigarettes, taking laxatives, or vomiting. Among 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade girls, 42 percent reportedly wish they were thinner, and 81 percent of 10-year-old girls fear becoming fat.<sup>13</sup> When I first met my 10-year-old neighbor, a precocious girl who loves to play soccer, she revealed to me that she worries about the “fullness” of her face.

Americans dangerously attach labels like “lazy,” “sloppy,” and “ugly,” to people of size, but the quality and worth of a woman should not be predicated on her jean size. As Laura Bacon observes, “All that can be determined by judging people based on their weight is one’s own level of prejudice.”<sup>14</sup> Conversely, thinness is privileged. Slenderness is not just considered aesthetically pleasing; it suggests character traits about that person.

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<sup>13</sup> Statistics according to studies cited by the National Eating Disorders Association <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/index.php> (last accessed 11 May 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Bacon, 152.

Thinness is disciplined, affluent, and accomplished. Moreover, healthy food is more expensive than foods high in sugars and fats. Producers charge more for the low-calorie/low-fat product than the “regular” manufactured goods. Food products are not priced per calorie, but instead take advantage of the pocketbooks of those desiring to cut back and slim down.

In American culture, not even Hooters waitresses are immune from critiques concerning their figures. In May 2010, *The Detroit News* broke the story of a 20-year-old Hooters waitress who was told to lose weight or risk losing her job. Cassie Smith, a resident of a Detroit suburb, dutifully wore the regulation Hooters uniform of tiny white tank top and mini orange shorts over her 5 feet 8 inch, 132 pound frame. The corporation, however, told her that she was too heavy even though she claimed she was currently 10 pounds lighter than when she was originally hired in 2008. Smith was offered a free gym membership with a thirty-day timeline to show “improvement” on her weight; she resigned instead and sued the company. When questioned by the media, Alex Aleshire, Public Relations Manager for the Atlanta-based Hooters of America argued, “We will say that our practice of upholding an image standard based on appearance, attitude and fitness for Hooters Girls is both legal and fair. It is not unlike the standard used by the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders or the Radio City Music Hall Rocketters.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine Jun, “Roseville woman says Hooters put her on probation for weight gain,” *The Detroit News* May 19, 2010 <http://detnews.com/article/20100519/METRO03/5190346/1014/rss03> (last accessed 20 May 2010).



Today's ideal female body shape seems to be a bizarre mash-up of male desire and skinny androgyny – no hips, slender waist, and a large bust. Breast implants were the top cosmetic surgery for women in 2006 with 383,885 reported procedures. Lipoplasty came in second with 350,420 patients. Women constituted 92 percent of the 11.5 million plastic surgeries performed in 2006. Little has changed from the postwar boom in surgeries. Women in their thirties with children and women in their early twenties continue to make up the two largest populations of patients who seek breast augmentation surgery. The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery focuses on the psychological needs of their patients noting that larger, more shapely breasts help aid women's low self-esteem, self-consciousness, and clothing fit.<sup>16</sup> The most popular implant today is a 300 cc implant (C cup), and the price of surgery ranges between \$5,000 and \$10,000 based on geographic location, with silicone implants costing more than saline.<sup>17</sup> The FDA temporarily banned silicone implants from 1992 to 2006, but allowed producers to put the implants back on the market after studies failed to provide a link between the medical-grade liquid filling and diseases like cancer or lupus. Questions continue to remain unanswered about the effects of silicone leakage in the body and the typical timetable for when the implants break. Public Citizen, a consumer protection group, has long opposed silicone implants calling them, “a terrible reminder of the double

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<sup>16</sup> American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. “Breast Augmentation.” <http://www.surgery.org/consumers/procedures/breast/breast-augmentation> (last accessed 4 March 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Cosmeticsurg: The Science of Beauty. “Breast Augmentation Procedure,” <http://www.cosmeticsurg.net/procedures/Breast-Augmentation.php> (last accessed 4 March 2011).

standard for women versus men." The FDA has yet to approve silicone-gel testicular implants for men due to inadequate testing.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Minority Body**

The spectrum of body types highlighted within the postwar African American community and lesbian butch/femme culture provides evidence that white, hegemonic media does not affect all women in the same ways. Both communities had periodicals and literatures that disseminated a different message than mainstream media. Magazines like *Ebony*, *Jet*, and other popular black periodicals highlighted the monetary and familial success of fat women. Moreover, the typical pin-up model in these magazines weighed more than the typical mannequin who appeared in white women's and men's magazines. Similarly, while lesbians read white women's magazines, lesbian pulp fiction prescribed a different ideal in the form of the butch lesbian. On the surface femme women closely followed fashion and body ideals of mainstream media, but their motivations differed from heterosexual women. More often, their body anxieties originated not from low body-esteem; instead, they looked to women's and fashion magazines in order to better blend in for fear of discrimination.

Women of every age, race, class, and sexual orientation are bombarded with messages about obtaining the perfect body, that one can never be too thin. Today, however, African American women are fatter than European American women, and lesbians weigh more than heterosexual women.<sup>19</sup> Straight women statistically outnumber

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<sup>18</sup> CNN Health, "FDA Allows Silicone Breast Implants Back on the Market," November 17, 2006. [http://articles.cnn.com/2006-11-17/health/implants\\_1\\_implants-rupture-inamed-and-mentor-silicone?s=PM:HEALTH](http://articles.cnn.com/2006-11-17/health/implants_1_implants-rupture-inamed-and-mentor-silicone?s=PM:HEALTH) (last accessed 4 March 2011).

lesbians amongst those diagnosed with eating disorders and lesbians disproportionately support fat activism. A study of 24 lesbians and 20 bisexual women revealed that the lesbians had higher self-esteem, less inclination to binge eat, and were more confident in their body appearance than the bisexual women.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that lesbians have a more positive relationship with food and their bodies. But, as Becky Thompson discovered, lesbians are not immune to binge-eating and fasting strategies. Their purpose for doing so, however, differs from heterosexual women.<sup>21</sup> Laura S. Brown notes that fat oppression and homophobia are often linked. Lesbians have been taught that their gayness is wrong in the same way that fatness is wrong. Women who struggle with their sexuality, those who suffer from internalized homophobia, begin to oppress themselves with unhealthy diet strategies and negative body image.<sup>22</sup>

Some studies, similarly to this project, suggest that African American women have a higher level of body esteem and celebrate a variety of body types, more so than white society.<sup>23</sup> In present times, however, this may reflect economic, rather than cultural

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<sup>19</sup> Bianca D. M. Wilson, "Widening the Dialogue to Narrow the Gap in Health Disparities: Approaches to Fat Black Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Health Promotion," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Ester Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 55.

<sup>20</sup> Allison M. Kase, "Lesbian and Bisexual Women: Attitudes, Behaviors, and Self-esteem Related to Self-Image, Weight, and Eating," MA Thesis, Loyola University Chicago, 1996.

<sup>21</sup> Becky W. Thompson, *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

<sup>22</sup> Laura S. Brown, "Lesbians, Weight, and Eating. New Analysis and Perspectives," in *Lesbian Psychologies: Explorations and Challenges*, ed. The Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 294-296.

<sup>23</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997), 119.

differences. *Essence*, a magazine that like *Ebony* during the postwar years caters to a middle-class reading audience, regularly prints stories on body anxiety and the prevalence of eating disorders. Moreover, contemporary studies of black women in college sororities reveal this population is not “culturally protected” from negative body esteem.<sup>24</sup> As the economic gap between white and black America narrows, so has white beauty culture become more relevant among women of color. This is not to argue that being “overweight” or “obese” is desirable or even culturally accepted in the black community. Rather a delicate balance exists between having curves and being “matronly” as the film *Precious* or the stereotype of “the Mammy” – the desexualized black woman – indicates. In general, both black and lesbian women have a more positive relationship with their bodies and with food. But cultural stigmas associated with fatness continue to seep into these two minority populations.

### **The Solution?**

In 2009, the United Kingdom banned a photoshopped advertisement for Proctor and Gamble’s Olay Definity “eye illuminator.” In the advertisement, none other than Twiggy Lawson (Leslie Hornby) appears for the age-defying product. The supermodel’s face appears flawless, taut, and decades younger than her nearly sixty years. Jo Swinson, the Scottish Liberal Democrat MP, collected over 700 complaints about the aggressive photoshopping of the model’s wrinkles. Proctor and Gamble, Lmt. denied altering the photo, claiming that Twiggy was a “beautiful woman” and that alterations were against policies. In their ruling, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) agreed that the

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<sup>24</sup> Robin A. Selzer, “The Experience and Meaning of Body Image: Hearing the Voices of African American Sorority Women,” (PhD diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2006).

advertisement was “socially irresponsible” and the cosmetics giant withdrew the advertisement.<sup>25</sup> Banning airbrushed advertisements, particularly in magazines aimed at young women 16 and younger, has become a focus for the British Liberal Democratic party. A similar reaction has yet to hit political consciousness in the United States. It is difficult enough when high-fashion models and celebrities, whose job is to be slender can be digitally whittled away, cellulose and other bodily imperfections erased with the click of a mouse. Digitally enhanced advertising creates unrealistic and unhealthy models for women of all ages. Some countries (although not the United States) now require BMI requirements for fashion models, which is a hopeful step in the right direction, but obviously is not the solution to our cultural obsession with slenderness.

Joan Jacobs Blumberg’s *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* nostalgically laments, “In the twentieth century, the body has become the central personal project of American girls. This priority makes girls today different from their Victorian counterparts. ... before the twentieth century, girls simply did not organize their thinking about themselves around their bodies.”<sup>26</sup> It is not the purpose of this work to be nostalgic about the 1950s – a time when women were encouraged to have more meat on their bones. Women were still pressured about idyllic shapes; it was just a different kind of ideal than that which women desire today. Instead, what I hope this history provides its reader is the call for self-reflection.

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<sup>25</sup> *BBC News*, “Airbrushed Twiggy photo ‘misleading,’” December 16, 2009, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/8415176.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/8415176.stm) (last accessed 5 March 2011).

<sup>26</sup> Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 97.

A look back to a not-so-distant past reveals an American history where slenderness has been *en vogue* for only a short span of time. Throughout the country's history, a variety of body shapes were deemed beautiful. Only with the widespread nature of mass media and the democratization of fashion did a more psychologically coercive and monolithic ideal of feminine perfection rule. The principle source of our belief that thin is better and healthier has been life insurance companies, specifically MetLife, with the collusion of the medical field. Not until the 1980s did other large-scale and long-term studies that compared weight to mortality surface, and none of them reported that thinner is healthier.<sup>27</sup> By misguidedly equating health with weight and size, Americans have embraced the "thin ideal."

The desire to be "10-pounds thinner" is unlikely to vanish anytime soon, but Americans need to understand why so many feel the need to diet and vigorously exercise. Why do American women aspire to look like the celebrities on the cover of glossy magazines? Why are super-thin fashion models more popular and better paid than "plus-size" models? More than two-thirds of women between the ages of 18 and 25 would rather be mean or stupid than fat, and over 50 percent claim they would rather be hit by a truck than be fat.<sup>28</sup> Statistics such as these are simply ridiculous and altogether horrifying. Celebrating good health and longevity should become priorities rather than mimicking the too-thin woman on the cover of the magazine to fit a socially constructed aesthetic.

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<sup>27</sup> Roberta Pollack Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1989), 280.

<sup>28</sup> Deborah L. Rhode, "The Injustice of Appearance," *Stanford Law Review* 61, no. 5 (March 2009), 1040.

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