

Warring Images: The Missing Chapter

A slew of images showing women in uniform or working in defense plants appeared in the pages of the women's magazines during World War II. After having to push for active roles in the Civil War and the Great War, females were actively recruited for jobs that ran nearly the full range of "masculine" employment, civilian and military, during the 1940s. Yet, in spite of the heroic images of women in nontraditional roles, a new genre of titillating sexual images, "pin-ups," also emerged during that decade. Having appeared first in men's magazines like *Esquire* and *Police Gazette*, these pictures were adapted to propagandize the war effort among soldiers. Pin-ups became so popular they eventually made their way into the pages of the women's magazines in ads for everything from face cream to corn removers. Images of women operating heavy machinery or wearing crisp uniforms ran in *Vogue* and *The Ladies' Home Journal*, alongside air-brushed women in scanty clothes and impossible poses.

After the war, popular messages abruptly switched course, emphasizing brides and motherhood instead of strength and independence. Some of the working woman imagery lingered, as did the pin-ups, but a new ethic was firmly on the scene by the end of the decade: the housewife-worship of the 1950s. The shift in imagery was, initially, accompanied by a labor shift. As the story goes, the female workers of the war period were immediately and unfairly displaced at the end of the war so that returning soldiers could have their jobs. Gains made during the war years were, therefore, temporary.

Feminist Historians like Sheila Tobias, Susan Hartmann, and Maureen Honey have explained the defense workers' return to the home by pointing to the shift in popular imagery as a causal factor. Some claim that the war worker imagery was "a lie" to begin with. One argument is that the imagery suggested middle class women were working in the factories, when in fact the defense employees were predominantly working class. Thus, the imagery always contemplated a move by prosperous matrons back to the home, rather than a permanent change in the status of women who needed the work anyway. Another premise is that the war recruitment imagery contained feminine symbolism that intended to remind women of their "true" place all along—thus acting to anticipate their postwar return to home and hearth. Women were duped into working for the war effort for all the wrong reasons (concern for their men, a sense of duty) instead of the right one—an upgrade in the employment level of women as a class. The imagery itself is criticized for its "patriotic shrillness" and the messages for their appeals to fear. One rather extreme essay, by Susan Gubar, argues that pinup imagery was symptomatic of the impulse behind the war: to scare women with threats of violence, to entertain thoughts about violence to women, and to actually do violence to women.

As a whole, these treatments seem to me somewhat forced. They nearly always require that we view major social and economic shifts in a simplistic manner, while ignoring the long-term gains actually begun by women of the 1940s. (While women workers of the 1940s were initially out of work at the end of the war, they had regained full numbers by 1950.) The picture drawn asks us to believe in an efficient and conspiratorial organization of forces against the well-being of American women. Too many liberties are taken in the name of proving that the U. S. government, American businesses, and even ordinary servicemen were out, intentionally and malevolently, to "get" women. Finally, too much rests on the assumption that capitalism "requires" the oppression of women in a way that no other system does.

Women have been oppressed under every type of government and economic system we know, not just American capitalism. Further, as I discussed in the previous chapter, it is impossible to separate economic behavior from other cultural institutions in any society and still have a persuasive explanation for that group's behavior. I will offer here a corrective to the overemphasis on capitalist economics as the main causative factor in women's oppression. I propose that by looking more directly at kinship systems we will better understand how women get trapped in a mesh of work roles and sexual taboos. Economic behavior in this society is profoundly regulated by rules of kinship—and this is even more true in cultures with different modes of production but equally oppressive practices toward women. Thus, I will argue that a full explanation for women's postwar return to home-making must encompass the over-riding phenomenon: the kinship system, having been suspended in the face of a crisis, slammed back into place at the end of the

war, sending women back into roles as wives, mothers, and daughters. While we are exploring the family system, however, I will be emphasizing the benefits as well as the drawbacks of kinship. One really shouldn't have to say this, but membership in a community is important to all human creatures and will have to be accommodated by any feminist solution. To simply toss aside the family as an out-dated stricture leaves important needs, for women and men, unattended.

Kinship Rules

Like other manifestations of human culture, kinship rules vary wildly from place to place, but they generally govern who may marry whom, who may (or may not) have sex with whom, rules of inheritance, terms of lineage, and membership in clans. Kinship rules also govern both labor specialization and consumption ethics. Every society divides labor by sex, though what tasks are considered "women's work" varies. The important thing, for our purposes, is that the resulting gender specializations usually make the combination of a man and a woman the smallest economically viable unit. For example, if men hunt and women gather, then a woman must exchange what she has gathered with a man in order to assemble a complete diet. And a man must do the same. Orders of kinship further govern what one may eat from another household's provisions. If a man kills a large animal, he must share it not only with his wife and children, but with her kin and his. Who eats which part of the animal and in what order is determined by each family member's relationship to the lucky hunter.

Marriage usually occurs as an extended negotiation between two clans, in which the exchanges of bride and dowry are reciprocated by promises of support that extend far into the future and apply not only to the woman and her children but to her other kin, as well. In most cultures, marriage is not only an exchange of commodities at the time it occurs, but affects the exchange of commodities between two families thus united for an indefinite period of time and in infinite ways. One of the best reasons to step back and view economics as the total picture of exchange, including favors and services as well as goods, is that it allows us to see quite clearly that women are traded—as wives, prostitutes, and laborers—in most places.

Because marital ties involve long-term obligations of the husband to the wife's kin, as well as creating future clans through children, men are as implicated in the marital exchange as are women. They, too, are commodities. Men, however, are usually in control of the exchange process, which means they get to choose when and with whom they will exchange themselves. Thus, women's oppression stems not from the fact that they are exchanged, but from kinship systems that award men the rights to exchange women, but do not allow women the right to give themselves. Since both the exchange system and the kinship system govern important areas of rights and privilege, any organization that uses women as gifts, but gives control of their exchange to men, results in the subordination of women as a class.

When a society is so fundamentally organized along lines of biological sex (and, again, this is a characteristic of virtually every known society, not just the capitalist ones), there arises a practical need to mark the differences between the sexes. Thus is created biology's social manifestation, "gender," in which women are expected to have, wear, and exhibit certain "feminine" attributes, while men are expected to show "masculine" characteristics along the same dimensions. The concrete attributes we normally consider "feminine" mark, but do not cause, the sex-based nature of the social organization. Insofar as clothing is representative of the underlying system, however, women expropriating men's clothing would be a potential transgression against that system. Similarly, women doing men's work, women engaging in market behavior in a traditionally "masculine" way, and women consuming "masculine" goods (smoking cigars, buying pornography) are a challenge. Anything that destabilizes the marks of gender is a potential threat to its continuance. This is why cross-dressing and other "gender-bending" activities are often harshly punished.

What is "feminine" or "masculine" takes varied forms, but femininity nearly always requires sexual passivity. It's not difficult to see why. If the system demands heterosexual unions (one male and one female being the basic economic unit) and gives the right to control matrimony to males, then the female libido becomes a potential threat to the entire order. Sexually aggressive women, women who insist on choosing

their own mates, women who are lesbians, or who exhibit any sexual behavior except that sanctioned for females (that is, heterosexual marriage as permitted by male kin) are a far more direct threat to the system than women who do men's work or wear men's clothes. This is why most societies have strong mechanisms to control female sexual behavior.

When the survival of the group is at risk—as in war—loosening of restrictions might be allowed to facilitate crisis response. Changes in the roles might even be demanded. Here, we will investigate two different models of behavior that challenged the American cultural system, but were tolerated during the crisis response: women who did men's work and sexually transgressive women. In both cases, wearing men's clothing was part of the picture, but so was wearing extremely feminine clothing.

Women Wear the Pants

One of the oddities of the war years is that the official campaign to recruit female defense workers was left to an ad hoc coalition of advertising agencies, rather than being administered by the government itself. Ad agencies approached the government as early as the spring of 1940, offering to help with propaganda in support of the Allies, but bureaucrats hesitated to get their hands dirty working with people who made ads. So, the advertising agencies formed their own committee in November 1941 and called it the “War Advertising Council.” When Pearl Harbor suddenly put the nation at war a few weeks later, the ad people were ready to move. Recruitment ads appeared by March, 1942.

The government remained squeamish about using the media for propaganda for nearly two years into the war. (This squeamishness is rather puzzling, since the government made extensive use of advertising and public relations in World War I.) The Office of War Information was formed in the summer of 1942, but an elaborate pretense was kept up in which the government hid its propaganda activities from the public. Eventually, the OWI directed the effort by issuing advisories to existing trade groups, like the Magazine Bureau, or by working with and through coalitions (such as the War Advertising Council) formed for the purpose. As it turned out, the War Advertising Council took on the primary responsibility for propaganda that encouraged women to apply for defense jobs, as they had been doing for the duration of the war. Because they were having to work through their normal channels—rather than through government edict—the Council necessarily relied on the voluntary efforts of their clients. Thus, the campaign to recruit female workers was not the result of an well-orchestrated, well-funded government and business conspiracy, but was left to volunteerism and happenstance.

The only major collaboration between the War Advertising Council and the government took place in early 1944—about eighteen months before the end of the war. Until 1944, therefore, all the ads that used images of either defense workers or women in military uniform also include some attempt to sell a product. The prominence of the selling message varies a great deal, as does the nature of the war message and the treatment of work versus marriage. Predictably, feminists object to advertisers using the war to “manipulate” women into buying their products. Because they were not supported by the government in this endeavor, however, advertisers had to use their own paid space to deliver the defense message. So, the advertisers were not using the war effort to advertise the things they produced, but the very opposite—they were using their advertising to produce the war effort. Perhaps for this reason, the number of ads containing war imagery or messages is surprisingly small. Over the entire course of the war, the Ladies Home Journal included an average of six ads per month with some kind of war imagery. Vogue ran an average of four per issue. Both of these magazines reached a peak in the frequency of war imagery in the winter of 1942/1943, before the Office of War Information had engaged the War Advertising Council with the “War of Women” effort. So, when you actually go back and read these magazines, the recruitment imagery seems less impactful than the histories might lead you to expect, in addition to having a considerably less coherent ideology than is usually described.

The women's recruitment effort at the War Advertising Council was led by Helen Lansdowne Resor. Probably because of this association, the advertisers managed by J. Walter Thompson are the ones we see most consistently delivering a war message. The Ponds ad in Figure 1 is a good example. This long-time

JWT client had begun a new campaign just before the war. ‘She’s Engaged! She’s Lovely! She Uses Pond’s!’” showed aristocratic brides who used Ponds, along with pictures of their rings and gowns. The campaign was adapted, beginning in early 1942, by using engaged defense workers. Throughout the campaign, the fiancés are enlisted men and the engagement rings are often hand-me-downs (though vague reference is sometimes made to an “old name”). So, the class status of the women in the Pond’s war campaign is considerably downscale of the Ponds tradition: if anything, the bandana and clothing suggest this woman is working class. The overall framework here is an appeal to matrimony, which would make this Ponds campaign one of those that recruited women to work, but reminded them of their “true” destiny. Knowing what we do about the feminist politics of Helen Resor, however, it is rather more difficult to imagine that she would have maliciously tried to trick women into war work while inculcating traditional values just for the sake of keeping women down. As with other criticism of advertising, our willingness to believe in such wicked conspirators relies heavily on our not knowing anything about who is behind the campaigns. In this case, a little cautious trust may be justified: long after the war workers had supposedly gone home, the Pond’s ads contained insets of women still doing work they had started during the war.

The kerchief-and-overalls uniform came to typify the genre of images the War Advertising Council produced—now known by the mythical name, “Rosie the Riveter.” Rosie was never any one picture or character, though some images of her are more famous than others (Figure 2). Instead, like Uncle Sam, Rosie was an archetype who showed up in many pictures, movies, songs, and books. In spite of the prevalence of this archetype, Maureen Honey argues that advertisers depicted defense workers as middle class women, which, she says, was “a lie,” since the bulk of the war workers came from working class women who changed jobs in order to get more pay. Yet, in every identifiable appearance of a “Rosie” character, the clothing she wears (overalls or a worksuit and usually a bandana or snood) would have marked her as working class, regardless of her true status. The Gossard ad in Figure 3, which essentially makes the worker look fashionable by using a fashion illustration style, is one of the rare exceptions. Other than the solution used by this Gossard ad, I am not sure how an explicit picture of a factory worker can be made to look like a middle class woman. Further, since most of this advertising occurred before the official government effort to recruit women workers, the advertisers would not have had statistics on the demographic makeup of the workforce. Indeed, it has taken nearly fifty years for historians to reach consensus that the factory workers of WW2 came from other jobs, rather than being stay-at-home housewives enthused by patriotism. It seems inappropriate to charge the people who made the campaigns with lying. The word “lie” implies not only a contradiction between the statement and the facts, but knowledge that the two do not match and an intent to deceive.

Some ads do imply a married woman, if not necessarily a prosperous housewife, as a reader. In the Kleenex ad in Figure 4, we see an ad intended to address directly the most prominent concern among women considering defense work—the objections of husbands who were not fighting age or who had not enlisted. Through a cartoon sequence, Kleenex suggests arguments to win over a recalcitrant mate so that the woman can be free to work. The state of matrimony is not glorified here, but is treated as an obstacle to be overcome. Many ads focus on romanticizing war work (Figure 5). In magazines for young working women, like *Mademoiselle* and *Glamour*, were career-oriented ads (Figure 6) that did not seem to contemplate a return to family after the war’s end.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Elizabeth Arden ad in Figure 7 presents an image common in the war years, the woman who waits for the return of her man. This ad would also be an example that supports feminist historians’ contention that the imagery reinforced traditional roles in anticipation of the return to “normal” family life (and therefore undermined women’s true interest in economic emancipation). I think such arguments construct too limited a conception of “women’s interests” and so ultimately fail to explain what happened after the war. The woman in this ad clearly misses her man and is worried about his safety. That’s because her mate and other males in her kinship group provide her with more than money. Like most other women, this sad face at the window looks to her kin—including the men—to give her love, warmth, attention, laughter, and other things essential to her well-being. When any one of their family members are in real danger, most women experience severe emotional distress. Women who had male kin fighting World War II bore this psychic stress for months, even years, on end. Many women dealt with this pain by going to work for the war effort. There were many other motivations—a sense of civic duty, the

desire for more money, and so on. But I think it is essential for us to remember what none of these women could forget: that their husband, or son, or brother might be killed at any minute. The subjective experience of this prolonged fear must have seemed unbearable.

Like the ad agencies, the editors of the women's magazines took it as their mission to recruit for the factories, the military, and the nursing forces. Features on proper clothing for war work appeared with great fanfare in *Vogue*, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and all the other major women's magazines. Publications that catered to working girls in peacetime threw themselves into the war campaigns with special fervor. Both *Mademoiselle* and *Glamour* instituted regular sections on the war effort and their covers had war themes, showing young women in different roles.

Trousers appeared prominently in magazine features since defense work often required them. Many war jobs required uniforms. Though you would think selling uniforms would be anathema to a fashion magazine, the women's press stepped up to the challenge. This is from *Vogue*:

The uniform stands for our new spine of purpose, our initiative in getting women working, splayed out into hundreds of different jobs, to find talents which have been massed over. It means that we know that it is time to stop all the useless little gestures, to stop being the Little Woman and be women.

Because different classes of war work had their own dress requirements, magazines attempted to cover a range of outfits. They all addressed safety and cleanliness, as well as attractiveness.

Factory work, for instance, required some kind of hair covering for safety reasons. A persistent problem for employers was that women wouldn't wear their kerchiefs, caps, or snoods because they didn't want to cover up their hair. Magazines suggested ways to make hair coverings more stylish, suggested using other things like lipstick instead for color and femininity, and sometimes resorted to straightforward exhortations: "Here are some DO's and DON'TS, for safety and suitability, for these women in arms. DO WEAR a short 'defense haircut' and hair nets, low-heeled, arch-supporting shoes, short white socks, cotton sweat shirts. USE good cleansing soap, hand and nail cream, nail pumice. TAKE relaxing exercises at lunch hour; drink lots of water. DON'T WEAR jewelry, high heels, open toes, long stockings, sheer blouses, low necklines, nail polish, mascara, too much lipstick—and NO LOOSE ENDS that might catch in machinery." In these "do's and don'ts" of factory dressing, the women's magazines often quoted verbatim from government safety directives. Some historians have inferred from these messages that the magazines were still trying to send "subliminal" messages to readers, so that women would remain feminine and thus be easier to rein in once the war was over.

Women sometimes spent the money they earned on very feminine items like furs, stockings, and jewelry. Some got bored with wearing slacks or overalls and used the higher paychecks to indulge in lacy lingerie that contradicted the bland, "masculine" sameness of their clothes. Others splurged on a party dress—even a fur—to break out of the grind of wearing overalls to work. Individual stories reveal the strains that such behavior put on family relations. One woman, who struggled with her mother and her soon-to-be-ex-husband throughout the war, told this story:

One time they came up with this jamboree session at the Plantation Club for people at the plant where I worked. All the girls were going, and I wanted to be a part of it too. I asked what people were gonna wear—"Slacks?" "No," they said. "The girls really dress up." I had no dresses, just slacks, snoods, blouses, and flat-heeled shoes. So I went down to Sweldon's and bought this two-piece tunic dress—emerald green with dark lace. I splurged, and got a new hat—a fisherman's cloche—and new shoes too.

I'd asked my husband to come over to watch the kids. And my mother dropped by that day too—she hadn't known I was going out. The kids tattled on me, they said "Wait till you see Mom's new dress." Then the Fight was on. My mother was shocked over the price of the hat and my husband thought I'd flipped my lid.

Somehow I got out of there, and ten of us jammed into a car. The ballroom was loaded with people. It was sort of a release. Most of the girls had gone out and bought clothes for this special occasion. Our lead man came and sat with us for awhile, and there were a lot of men from the different plants.

Count Basie's band was there. We had a table fairly close to the floor, and somehow I got to talking to Basie. He was very friendly, and full of fun. He said to me, "Are you a riveter?" "No," I said, "but my sister's name is Rosie." We got to kid-ding around, and then he sang that song called "Rosie the Riveter," while I sat on the piano bench with him. I really had a wonderful time.

We had another big row when I got home. My mother thought I was neglecting the kids. Everyone was mad at me for going. But I wasn't that concerned about the fuss they made. By this time, you know, it was late in the war, and women were making more money, and we were starting to manage our own affairs.

Even these purchases of traditionally feminine items, therefore, can be seen as rebellion from the proper feminine norm because they are violations of the consumption rules of kinship. As we have seen, a consistent complaint from unemployed women is that they have to wait for money and permission from a male family member (husbands, fathers) before they can buy small luxuries for themselves. For a woman to use some of her new paycheck to go out and buy, say, silk stockings, can be seen as a transgression just as legitimately as that same woman putting on pants.

It is true that both the articles and the ads in the women's magazines during the war years emphasize duty to country and concern for men overseas, as well as professionalism. However, though I checked all the wartime issues of the Ladies' Home Journal and Vogue and many issues of True Story, Mademoiselle, Glamour, and Radio Digest, I did not find anything to support Maureen Honey's charge that: "The progressive idea that women could perform all kinds of work in society was accompanied, however, by a shrill patriotic appeal that undermined its potential as a feminist reordering of national values." The women's recruitment effort, in fact, seems infused with awareness that the war was not an attempt at national aggrandizement, but a distasteful task undertaken out of necessity. Though there is mild patriotic imagery—like the use of red, white, and blue—it is subsumed under a seriousness of purpose, rather than nationalistic search for glory.

My opinion is that the feminist literature on this topic shows an overall lack of appreciation for the magnitude of the threat posed by all out war. I was saddened by the repeated insistence upon counterposing some preferred feminist agenda against the drawing together of women to support their community. As Honey disapprovingly remarks: "War work became a vehicle for women to shoulder their civic and moral responsibilities as good citizens rather than a way to become more independent and powerful." I think it's crucial to point out here that when a culture is under as serious a threat as the U. S. was during World War II, everyone's priorities change—and appropriately so. Women did wonder during the war whether they would be able to keep their gains when the peace came—and this was discussed at some length even in the fashion magazines—but they did not hesitate to commit themselves in spite of that uncertainty. Whether they would keep their jobs after the war was a moot point, after all, if there wasn't going to be any "after the war."

The position avowed by these historians is also limited by an excessive focus on sexual relationships between men and women; in fact, Honey asserts that women who were unmarried had no reason to be concerned about the fate of men overseas. Other kinship relations that women had with fighting men should not be so callously underestimated. A major part of the power of kinship inheres in the extrasexual ties—brothers, uncles, sons, nephews, cousins and also sisters, aunts, nieces—that provide security, love, and stability for both men and women. Women have responsibilities to their gender, but they also must and should "shoulder their civic and moral responsibilities as good citizens," particularly under circumstances of severe duress.

In fact, contrary to what has been proposed by feminists like Tobias, Honey, and Hartmann, I would argue that the shift in national priorities during the war produced a moral imperative that was essential to the gains that were made by women as a result. With the community's attention focused upon survival, the

gender divisions in work, dress, and sexual behavior were relaxed. This not only allowed women to run through the suddenly-revealed gaps in the social structure, it compelled them to do so. As feminists seldom note, some women resisted recruitment into the war effort. Without media pressure to go to work, more might have stayed at home. Gains that come by permission from the social order are sometimes as meaningful, as useful, and as long-lasting as those that accrue from direct confrontation with it. The heroism that can be claimed today for the contribution of the “Rosies” of World War II is a priceless rhetorical asset in the continuing fight for employment equality—something that is roughly equivalent to the claims made by African-American males based on their combat contribution during this conflict. Though there are times for both, the increasing insistence among academic feminists that freedom can only be gained by radical confrontation, or by separating from culture and kinship altogether, is not only unnecessary, but ultimately self-destructive.

The return of normal kin relations brought both rewards and setbacks for women. The relief of wartime tension over missing loved ones must have been wonderful. And, for many women and girls, the return of eligible young men to dances, parties, and dates must have been nice, too. The postwar shift to bridal imagery is nevertheless sudden and startling. I do not wish to devalue the sincere and legitimate wishes of many women to find love and have children after the long delay of the war. However, this moment was undoubtedly the beginning of the biggest setback of the century, the birth of the “Feminine Mystique.”

Please bear in mind, though, that the “Feminine Mystique,” as described by Betty Friedan, had two faces. One was the dutiful house-wife. The other was the insatiable sexpot. In the decade that preceded the feminine mystique years, the sexuality of women was more brazenly displayed in the popular culture than ever before, leading to several controversies over censorship and pornography. At the center of this flurry over the depiction of sexual women was a new incarnation of the “spicy pictures” furtively traded by men for a hundred years, the pin-up. Appearing even in official government publications and genteel ladies’ magazines, the pin-up’s impact upon the perceived sexuality of women must have been significant.

Pin-Ups on Parade

Joaquin Alberto Vargas y Chavez was flat broke. As he sat across the desk from the publisher of Esquire, his wife waited anxiously back in California. Though Alberto had built an impressive career as a “pretty girl” illustrator since emigrating from Peru in 1916, working first with the Ziegfeld Follies and then for the big Hollywood studios, he had been blacklisted after supporting a studio unionizing effort during the late 1930s. Struggling to survive without work, he and his wife had depleted their savings, borrowed many times against their home, and lived on the charity of friends. It was now 1940, and Alberto was desperate. Perhaps the man from Esquire knew this. He hired Alberto on terms only a desperate man would accept.

At that time, one of the most popular features in Esquire was the pretty girls drawn by George Petty. Though the “Petty Girls” had been appearing in their pages for only about a year, Esquire was already tired of the artist’s complaints about being overworked and underpaid. As the man from Esquire, David Smart, sat looking at the pictures drawn by the soft-spoken Peruvian, he knew already he had found the way to replace Petty.

Alberto Vargas drew his first pretty girl illustration for the October 1940 issue. Smart insisted on calling the pictures “Varga Girls” rather than “Vargas Girls” for reasons only he knew. Soon, however, everybody recognized Vargas’ drawings, whatever they were called. These extraordinary images became the most frequently cited memory of fighting men during World War II. They were pinned to lockers, made into six-foot posters for briefing stations, and appeared in the military edition of Esquire. Stateside, they also became very visible. A huge Varga Girl—a full city block long—posted over the New York Winter Garden Theater to promote Mexican Hayride, was reported by newspapers and magazines all over the country. The poster for Betty Grable’s movie debut, *Moon Over Miami*, was by Vargas. The new “Varga Girls” were found in ads for Jantzen, MGM, Acme Beer, and Sealy Mattress Company.

Under the terms of his contract, however, Alberto Vargas could not produce work for anyone except as arranged by and through Esquire. For this privilege, Vargas was to be paid \$75 a week. So Vargas himself never made any real money from his drawings. In fact, he and his wife lived in a building under Smart's supervision and all their bills were paid by a kind of "company store" system that left Vargas in debt to the magazine. His economic relationship was not unlike that of a wife whose husband provides for her every need, but allows her no freedom or money of her own.

Esquire ratcheted up the number of drawings required from Vargas until, at fifty-two a year for the magazine plus all the various calendars and advertisements Esquire arranged, it was no longer physically possible for him to produce them. Vargas sued, but the contract was upheld. So, by the end of the 1940s, Alberto Vargas was out of work and broke again. To this day, Esquire holds the rights to the body of work Vargas produced during the war.

George Petty, always Vargas' closest rival, was not subject to the same limited contract at Esquire. Petty had been illustrating ads since at least 1938 (Figure 8). Other artists who had illustrated various men's magazines, like Hollywood Humor and Police Gazette, also benefited from the sudden interest in their art. The resulting body of pin-up work shows a number of distinctive features. Certain facial expressions, gestures, and body positions appeared repeatedly. A favorite conceit was the blown-up skirt—as in Marilyn Monroe's famous pose—which was sometimes accompanied by fallen panties or slip (how or why a skirt blows up while the underwear falls down, I have never understood). These and other scenarios demanded an expression of surprise that became typical (Figure 9). A frequent body position has the woman's legs in the air (Figure 10). There was a variety of repeating cultural themes, such as Latinas, sailors, and cowgirls.

Advertisers of toiletries, lingerie, hosiery, and other personal adornment items hired pin-up illustrators for ads in that ran in the women's magazines. There we can see not only the work of known illustrators, but the surprised look, legs in the air, and other typical pin up features. These eventually appear even in ads for corn pads, menstrual pain relievers, and recruitment posters (Figure 11). Men have been looking at "dirty pictures" of women for an awfully long time without those same pictures showing up in ads for women's products.

The crossover appearance of the pin-up style appears connected to their meaning to soldiers overseas. It would be easy to explain away the connection between pin-ups and fighting men by assuming they were aids to masturbation, but the record suggests there was more to it than that. Historian William R. Brown has used the letters and poetry written by men in combat during the Second World War to document the ways these soldiers dealt with the very immediate inhumanity of battle and the seeming abstraction of the war's purpose. Letters, snapshots, posters, movies, and traveling shows from America were clearly crucial in helping these men retain a feeling of connectedness, even a sense of reality, that transcended the brutality of their conscious context. The soldiers of World War II looked at Vargas girls or Hollywood photos, but they also cherished snapshots of girlfriends. (Ads that coax the reader to "be his pin-up girl," such as in Figure 16, harken to the fondness that soldiers had for both kinds of pictures.) An erotic response to any of these was possible, but in addition to the photos of the loved one, the soldiers also had pictures of children, siblings, and other kin. These pictures were carried to war as a reminder of emotional ties and as an expression of hope for a safe return, and so, by definition, were not just a way to reduce people to objects. In fact, such pictures were evidence of the young male's enmeshment in the same kinship system as the women.

In making sense of the purpose of war, a consistent tactic was to personify feelings about home through an allegorical figure, usually a female. One soldier wrote: "First of all, I don't know exactly what democracy is, or the real common-sense meaning of a republic. But as we used to talk things over in China, we all used to agree that we were fighting for The American Girl. She to us was America, Democracy, Coca Colas, Hamburgers, Clean Places to Sleep or The American Way of Life." This allegorical heroine—no stranger to the culture in 1941—became the emblem for American life to soldiers under the strain of combat.

Thus, the "American Girls" who came to entertain the troops weren't just sex objects, but were also emblems, like Columbia or the Statue of Liberty. Maxene Andrews, of the Andrews Sisters, told a moving story about a soldier's response to one of the USO stars. At the height of the fighting in Naples, Ella Logan,

a popular Broadway star, finished her show by telling the GIs she wanted to bring them the spirit of wives, sweethearts, mothers from home.

All of a sudden a tall blond soldier came down the aisle. He was covered with mud, his helmet and guns were slung over his shoulder, and his face reflected too many days and nights of seeing too many friends die. With everyone in the audience watching him apprehensively, he walked up to the stage and listened as Ella continued speaking. Then he climbed up onto the stage, took the mike away from her and said, "I'd like to say something." Ella looked down at the floor, wondering what might be coming next. Everyone else was, too. "I've got to contradict you, Miss Logan," he went on. "You don't look like anyone's sweetheart. You don't look like anyone's wife. And God knows you don't look like anyone's mother."

Then he lifted her chin. She saw tears on his cheeks. He kissed her on the forehead and said, "You look like an angel." Then he turned around, climbed back down off the stage, and thumped out of the theater in his combat boots.

Later, press reports said every man in the place had his handkerchief out and the star herself was full of tears. Stories like these illustrate that images of beautiful women were more than pornography and more than propaganda; they became part of the mental equipment that helped soldiers stay sane under insane conditions. Thus, though anti-pornography forces typically insist that pornography is irredeemably a violent form, the pin-ups of the 1940s may have been used as an antidote to or inoculation against the total violence of war.

Feminist historian and antipornographer Susan Gubar would take issue with this idea. In her essay, "This is My Rifle, This is My Gun," she shows an image of Betty Grable with a grid superimposed upon it and tells us that pinups were used to teach camouflage techniques and map reading. She talks about how fighter pilots sometimes named their planes after women, as other soldiers named barracks and bunks, and shows a photograph of Jane Russell standing beside a plane painted "Russell's Raiders." She describes violent wartime images, such as propaganda posters showing Germans threatening females. Merely by mentioning all these instances in one breath, Gubar collapses important situational and presentational differences to make a broadly outrageous declaration: she tries to persuade us that World War II itself was really about perpetrating violence upon women, and that all these images, including the pinups, were expressions of the desire to hurt, rape, and kill women.

Yet American women were as far removed from the violence of war as any group on the face of the earth between 1941 and 1945. What was unique about their experience—as compared either to American men or to women elsewhere in the world—was their relative freedom from fear during one of the most frightening episodes in human history. Gubar's attempt to "coopt" the danger faced by others during this conflict to serve the political purposes of a relatively comfortable group is, in my mind, not only intellectually unsupportable but morally indefensible.

Another typical feminist attack on erotica is to assert that the pictures "commoditize" women. Certainly, the Alberto Vargas images of women were valuable commodities, as the struggle over their ownership shows. However, whether real women were thereby commoditized is less clear. Esquire wanted the Varga Girls because they believed, as had so many editors and publishers before them, that drawings of beautiful women would help sell the magazine. Therefore, the magazine itself was the item being intentionally commoditized here. Vargas, by selling his services to Esquire, was also commoditizing himself (particularly given the ultimate terms of his contract, under which Esquire virtually owned him). Esquire sold Varga Girl images to a variety of advertisers trying to commoditize their own products (like face cream), as well as putting them on many objects they offered for sale themselves (such as playing cards). So these, too, are instances in which the pictures were used to commoditize other objects.

But are the women depicted in these pictures themselves commoditized? Vargas sometimes worked with a paid model, who was offering her services as a commodity, just as Vargas offered his services to Esquire. His wife also posed for him. But since Anna Mae Vargas acted as her husband's business manager—pushing

him, prodding him, and representing him throughout his career—she, too, was commodi-tizing him. All workers who contributed to the production of Vargas images, Esquire magazines, playing cards or face creams were commoditized, too. There appears to be an endless string of commoditizations involved with the Varga Girls.

If we use the term “commodity” in its more precise meaning—something that is being offered for an exchange of ownership—the scope is limited to the pictures, the magazines, the face cream, the playing cards. The only person who comes close to being truly commoditized is Alberto Vargas himself, whose work and even whereabouts were controlled by his “owner,” Esquire magazine. Even still, there are comparisons that would cast doubt on whether we should really call what happened to Vargas “commoditization.” If we allow Vargas to be categorized as a “commodity” for having sold his services under whatever conditions, we would eventually be led to classify a broad range of other services and creative work as the “commoditization of persons,” including doctors, lawyers, teachers, and even the authors of feminist books. This classification then becomes rather pointless, while at the same time trivializing actual commoditiza-tion.

Consider, for example, that while Alberto Vargas was slaving away at drawing beautiful nudes to appear all over the world, millions of Jews were being herded like cattle to the gas chambers. Before they died, the women often had their hair cut off to be sold as wigs. After they died, both sexes of these unfortunate people were subject to having their fillings pried out to sell as marketable goods. It seems appropriate to distinguish, therefore, between the commoditization of services (such as illustration), or performances (such as acting or modeling), and the commodi-tization of persons (as in slavery, the Holocaust, and marriage). When it comes to the point where our critique of the culture can no longer distinguish between a box of face powder, a girlie magazine, a feminist book, and the mining of a Jewish woman’s dead body for precious metals, our terminology has lost its edge. It’s time to rein in this talk.

Subculture, Commoditization, and Kinship

Some say the first pin-up of the war years is the cover of the November 10, 1941 Time magazine, which has a George Petty illustration of Rita Hayworth (Figure 17). Legend also has it that a pin-up of Rita Hayworth was taped to the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. So, Rita Hayworth can claim the first and last pinup of the war years. In between, Rita was voted or named “most popular pin-up” many times.

Feminists writing on beauty in American culture tell us that the movie “goddesses” and pin-ups of the 1940s were all blonde. Susan Brownmiller adds a racial spin: “America’s cult of blondeness reached its zenith in the Forties and Fifties, ironically at the moment in history when Nazi Germany and the cult of Aryan supremacy went down to defeat.” Yet Rita Hayworth, the undisputed queen of 40s glamour, was born Margarita Carmen Cansino in Southern California in 1914 and began her career as a flamenco dancer in a Mexican border town during Prohibition.

On her father’s side, Rita’s family, immigrants from Spain, had long been dancers on the stage. As live performance passed into the age of film, Margarita’s father, Eduardo Cansino, moved the family to Hollywood and tried to hold the act together by playing night clubs, working by day as a dance teacher to the stars. In 1926, with Prohibition making work in clubs hard to get, Eduardo was inspired to rejuvenate the act by putting his daughter in it. He had Margarita dye her light brown hair black so she would look more Hispanic in the Mexican border towns where nightclubs still operated. She was a sensation. When Prohibition ended, the new “Dancing Cansinos” could work at the best clubs in Hollywood.

Her father probably would have been satisfied with things as they were, but Rita wanted a film career. Hers was a long, but determined climb to fame. She began making films in the early 1930s for Fox Studios. She made 32 films as Rita Cansino, some of them in Spanish, before she was “made over” as Rita Hayworth. Film historians like to say that Hollywood “Anglicized” Margarita in order to make her more easily “commoditized” for the American audience. But wartime America was fascinated by everything Latin. The early 1940s saw a rush of successful movies with Latin locations, stars, music, and themes: Mexican

Hayride, Down Argentine Way, A Weekend in Havana, That Night in Rio, to name just a few. Hispanic fashions were popular throughout the war. In night clubs, sophisticated crowds danced sambas, rhumbas, and tangos. Lupe Velez and Dolores del Rio were highly successful, appearing even in ads for nationally-branded beauty products. When Margarita Cansino first arrived on the scene, in fact, she was often compared to Velez and Del Rio. With these two overshadowing her and so many Latin vehicles being made, Margarita was not particularly distinctive. So, Rita was de-Latinized by Hollywood, but not because Hispanic women were unwelcome. On the contrary, it was because they were becoming a cliché.

Margarita's hair was dyed several colors for assorted roles before she settled on the copper color that became her trademark. She did have her hairline lifted through electrolysis. Her low hairline had been inherited from her Irish mother, not her father, whose hairline was quite high, a feature not atypical of people born in Spain. Her new name was actually her mother's maiden name. So, while Rita's Latin (and patrilineal) origins were obscured by her makeover, her Irish (and matrilineal) roots were brought forward. Ironically, the critique of Hayworth's "makeover" takes its authority from emphasizing the male lines of her kinship, rather than the female.

Rita Hayworth changed her name in 1937 and appeared in five movies that year under the new name. Though she later played women with Hispanic names, the characters she played her first year were named Sue Collins, Mary Gillespie, Betty Holland, and Betty Morom. Throughout her career, Hayworth played Latinas as well as other ethnic (and supposedly "nonethnic") characters. She also played a broad range of "types," from the sex goddess to the super-cheery star of musical extravaganzas. Her first "big movie" was as Fred Astaire's new dance partner in *You'll Never Get Rich*, for which she won rave reviews. She dyed her hair blonde for the leading role in *Lady from Shanghai*. Her red hair came about for the remake of *Blood and Sand*, which she won over 37 other actresses. In short, Hayworth seems to have had been given the opportunity to play many characters and ethnic subtypes, just like any other "ordinary American."

Consider, though, that another very popular star of the war years, the "Brazilian Bombshell" Carmen Miranda, played exclusively Latina roles. Feminist Historian Shari Roberts complains that Miranda always appeared as herself or "as some stereotypically Latin persona." Her names across several films include *Querida*, *Chiquita*, *Chita*, *Marina*, *Carmelita*, and four *Rositas*. Roberts announces that such type-casting robbed Miranda "of any actual claim to her heritage." Roberts further decries the fact that Miranda's films were set variously in Brazil, Argentina, and Cuba and that her accent was inaccurate for some of these roles. A casting policy that would comply with Roberts' agenda would have required that Miranda appear in roles where her names were Gretchen, Molly, or Elizabeth, but all settings would have to be Brazil. This would entail "Anglicizing" Miranda on one hand, but restricting her roles to those true to her country of origin, thus "stereotyping" her.

Roberts also complains that the typical plot of the Carmen Miranda film entailed a marriage between a North and South American. In these narratives, she says, "The gender difference overlays the ethnic and national differences, and the sexual resolution works to resolve all differences. The underlying assumption of this logic is that 'it's a small world after all,' that 'under the skin' we are all essentially the same, and that any differences between cultures are only superficial and irrelevant. Cultural and ethnic differences are seen as problems that can and should be easily resolved." Such films undeniably reduced complex geopolitical issues, as Roberts points out. But looking at stories about intermarriage was not an entirely ridiculous proposition for an audience that was already swimming in a mix of historical matrimony so deep that many Americans couldn't even tell you what their ethnic lineage was.

Indeed, we might ask what constituted "authenticity" for American Latinas of the 1940s. In the early history of the West, Spain's policy forbade marriageable girls to emigrate to the New World. Thus, the first generation born in the Western United States after the Spaniards arrived would necessarily have been mestizo. In some sense, then, even the earliest "California belles" were "inauthentic," since they were as closely related to the native tribes as to the people of Spain. Throughout the history of the West and Southwest, Spanish, Anglo, French, German, Native American, and Russian peoples mingled commodities and bloodlines through (and alongside) intermarriage. So, the ideal of ethnic authenticity held up by

Roberts (and others) is overly simplistic when held up against a population with such a complex kinship/trading history.

When a writer condemns an actress for being untrue to her ethnicity because of her characters, hair color, plots, or locations, it implies that the authentic Latina self is easily identifiable and representable. Such criticism assumes actresses should be limited to playing roles that reflect their real identities, an imposition that is not made on the talents of “nonethnic” actresses. It also omits consideration of what should perhaps be a key question from a feminist perspective: is the actress in control of her own commoditization through selection of these roles?

Carmen Miranda’s character, for example, was already developed before she came to the United States from Brazil, where she had been a big star. That “tutti frutti” persona was the result of careful study and creation on the part of the star herself. Though a native of Portugal, she adopted the Brazilian dialect, but included the dress and grooming of women in the black Brazilian subculture. She was highly conscious of the theatrical nature of her persona and, therefore, could (and did) play it “straight,” comic, or even as a self-parody. No one forced this persona on Miranda; it was the result of her art and she doesn’t appear to have suffered for it.

On the other hand, in spite of her stardom, Rita Hayworth was a very unhappy woman. The source of her sadness appears to have been her need to rely on men and her inability to set limits on their power over her. Though it’s clear that Rita was very ambitious for herself, she was always vulnerable to the influence of strong men upon her career. The first man in her life, her father, not only dyed her hair, he took her out of school to pursue a career of his choosing. He also took great pleasure in presenting her as if she were his wife. When Rita had a chance at Hollywood, she eloped with a much older man in order to escape the control of her father. The first husband is the one who arranged the electrolysis and helped her get a career in movies started. Though Hayworth continued to play beautiful women in the movies until she was well past fifty, she never was able to get control over her own “commoditization” as an actress, thus leaving her at the mercy of manipulating men who “managed” her career. A quiet woman in private, Rita Hayworth was well-liked and respected by others in Hollywood, but she spent the rest of her life going from one domineering husband to another, including Orson Welles and even a prince. The inability to control her own career was continuous with her unsuccessful attempts to “commoditize” herself as a wife, since she seemed unable to separate the two exchanges. While it may be easy to write off Rita Hayworth’s sadness to the myth of “the beauty that destroys” or to pity her for being an “inauthentic” Latina, her real problem was her passive sexuality, the poison of which seeped into every corner of her life. Ironically, some of Hayworth’s most famous roles were of manipulating, “castrating” beauties like Gilda, the title role in what was probably her best film. The beauty who controlled men, rather than letting them control her, was a role Rita could never personally carry off.

Hayworth’s sadness, however, does not negate the potential for her positive effect on other women caught in the same oppressive subculture of kinship from which she came. In Los Angeles between the Wars, the Mexican immigrant community struggled with the rebellion of its young, especially its daughters. Young Latinas rebelled against their subcultural system in several consistent ways, many of which pointed to their emulation of screen stars. If they went to work, they spent their money on movies and grooming products. They cut their hair and dressed in a manner their parents thought provocative. One mother observed: “My Lupe says she will bob her beautiful hair if I say, ‘yes,’ or if I say, ‘no.’ What makes her like that? She knows that her father will beat her if she does not mind us. Since we have been in the United States she has always been a good girl, until now when she says that she will do what she wants.”

The young females of this subculture were victims of a marriage exchange system controlled by their fathers. As one historian observed: “women were not to be emancipated, only passed on to other men.” As part and parcel of that exchange/kinship system, the fathers also had the right to completely control their daughters’ grooming and social lives, specifically in order to enforce sexual abstinence. One eighteen-year-old Latina said in 1932: “I never had any fun since I was sixteen years old. As soon as I was sixteen my father began to watch me and would not let me go anywhere or have any friends come home. He was born in old Mexico but he has been here long enough to know how people do things. The way it is with the

Mexicans, the bigger a girl is, the farther they pull her into the house.” Fathers strongly resisted their adopted society’s requirement that their daughters as well as their sons go to school. As early as possible, girls were taken out of school and brought home to cook, keep house, and wait for a marriage only their father could arrange. Some virtually became prisoners: “My girl Theresa wants to go out but Perez won’t let her, not even to a Christmas party. . . . She says she’s going to marry an American and do as she pleases. She cries all night. Perez says if she won’t stop, she’ll see what she’ll get.”

Expressing the desire to “marry an American” was the ultimate rebellion because achieving that goal would take the girl out of the native kinship system. Such threats had real power over parents. In America all a young woman had to do to get married was to attract a husband—she did not need her father to arrange it, nor a dowry to pay for it, nor a pedigree to deserve it. All she needed was to win someone’s heart. A young woman who insisted on choosing her own mate dealt a direct blow to the Mexican patriarchy. Any behavior that seemed likely to end in that result—dressing “like an American,” for example—was perceived as a serious threat.

Young women of the Mexican community sneaked out to see young men and quite often eloped. After marriage—whether to an American or another young Mexican—these women used grooming to express their desire to run their households differently from those they had grown up in: “The first thing I did [after getting married] was to bob my hair. My father would not permit it and I have wanted to for a long time. I will show my husband that he will not boss me the way my father has done all of us.” These behaviors would be seen as “conservative” or even antifeminist by critics today, because of the emphasis on sexual allure. However, I would argue that the tactics used by Latinas—actions taken to gain control over their own commoditization—were explicitly feminist in this context. Women behaving this way provoked anger and disruption among those whose power they aimed to destroy—not lovers, not husbands, but fathers.

Though “nonethnic” American women were also subject to an oppressive kinship system, one that would be reinforced after the war, they did not have to endure the level of restriction that Mexican fathers put on their daughters in order to commoditize them. American women were usually allowed to choose their own mates. They still had restrictions on their sexuality (expected to be abstinent outside marriage), their dress, their choice of friends and social life. Yet they had enough freedom within those restrictions to be enviable to Mexican immigrant daughters.

Taking Control

Dorian Parker was the descendant of Irish immigrants who ended up in Texas. She was the least pretty of three beautiful sisters, but she was the smartest. Her parents, though happily married themselves, discouraged all three daughters from thinking of marriage. Dorian, especially, was expected to remain single and do great things with her mind. When Dorian married early and had two children right away, there was disappointment. Nevertheless, the family stuck by her even when she and her husband soon divorced. Dorian moved back in with her parents, bringing the children with her. As she and her parents listened to the reports of Pearl Harbor, they worried about the sister who was at the base in Hawaii. That night, Dorian was filled with an insistent need to do something toward the war effort. She enrolled in an engineering training program and became a promising young tool designer. Soon employed by Eastern Airlines, Dorian Parker managed a team of men and submitted a number of design improvements to her employer. When her designs were repeatedly rejected, she felt frustrated and quit.

Wartime regulations precluded Dorian from getting another engineering job, so she went to New York and got a job writing advertising copy. At lunch with a friend one day, Dorian heard that fashion models made \$25 a week, then good money. Her friend thought Dorian was pretty enough to get a job. So, Dorian applied to a modeling agency. She was sent for her first assignment to see Diana Vreeland, then the fashion editor at Harper’s Bazaar. Vreeland and the photographer, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, looked at Dorian for a long time. Then Vreeland told Dorian to go home and get some sleep, to come back in the morning, and no matter what, not to change her eyebrows. With uncharacteristic obedience, Dorian went home, returned the next day with untouched brows, and ended up on the cover of Bazaar.

Dorian's new career was one that was stigmatized, much like acting had been before movies. Models were considered little more than prostitutes, an extension of old social purist ideas about display of the body, relationships between artists and models, and the general sin of picturing. Because of the potential shame to the family, Dorian and her parents agreed that she would not use her surname professionally, but would go by her first and middle names, "Dorian Leigh." In some sense, it mattered little, since models were not known to the public by name in the 1940s.

Soon Dorian was making a lot of money, but she was still broke most of the time because the agency was so slow to pay her:

It all depended upon how honest the agency was and how much the model could depend upon its bookkeeping. If she wanted to find out how much her agency owed her, she had to make an appointment with the bookkeeper, who would then total up how much money her clients had already paid. If the agency said they hadn't paid, what was the girl to do? Go to the client? Yes, she could do that, but very often the client would lie and say he had paid when actually he hadn't. A girl could spend most of her time chasing down the money she had earned and still not get it. And it was true—some girls making \$100,000 a year were one step away from poverty.

Dorian was quick to get impatient with this situation, so she marched into her employer's office and told him she didn't like the way he was running things. He laughed and Dorian, incensed at not being taken seriously, announced she would start her own agency and handle her own bookings. "Are you crazy?" he said, "You can't operate outside an agency!" Dorian answered: "I certainly can. My clients would call me if I were in Grand Central Station!" Making good on her threat, Dorian hired a secretary to answer calls and schedule appointments from the Elyée Hotel in New York. Soon other top models joined her. Dorian Leigh became the first woman to run a modeling agency in either America or Europe.

Let's stop and recollect the ways in which Dorian had employed exchange and kinship. First, she was not encouraged to marry by her family, but did so against their wishes. Divorce was not a very acceptable alternative in most American families in the 1940s, particularly among the Irish and particularly in Texas. Yet her family gave her sanctuary when she left a marriage they had considered ill-advised. Dorian took up war work in a gesture of support for her sister, who was on a military base in Hawaii. As an engineer, Dorian clearly was no intellectual slouch. Though she pursued a nontraditional field, she was quick to give it up when she was not fairly recognized. Instead of slugging away for the "dignity" of being in a job that used her head rather than her body, she ended up in a career that most feminists would consider unambiguously demeaning. Yet, as a model, she not only earned more money, she also aggressively wrenched control of her own commoditization away from men and took it over for herself.

Dorian then committed the ultimate transgression by taking control over her body as a sexual being. "All through the war, I was quite promiscuous, although I didn't think of my behavior in that way. I never went to bed with a man for money or any kind of favor, such as a job or a promotion, and I was able to say that for the years that followed as well. I was rather proud of the fact that I chose the men I loved."

Dorian became the first of the "jet set" models, who hobnobbed with royalty and millionaires, like showgirls of the Gilded Age. "I knew or came to know almost every millionaire in the world while I was a model, and they were only too willing to lavish money on me—for a price I wasn't willing to pay. I didn't want to be a rich man's mistress or even his wife; I didn't want to be bought. I wanted to choose the man, or men, I was to love; it just happened that the ones I chose were young, good-looking—and broke." The money Dorian made helped her to have the kinds of lovers she wanted, but led to unconventional financial arrangements. "I had to be myself, or so I thought. I had to live the way I chose, which meant that I needed an accommodating man—someone who could travel with me on assignments so we wouldn't have to be separated for such long periods of time; someone who would be ready to relax with me or have a good time together after I finished work, even when I finished at odd hours in the morning, which often was necessary. I didn't want to sit around and wait for a man to find time for me; I wanted him to be there when I needed him. And, if I had to pay some bills to make that possible, what difference did it make? It was only money, and I happened to have it." Dorian's attitude and expectations—often shared by her fellow models—were more in line with what was traditionally the male role. What gave these women the freedom

to choose as well as “keep” their men was financial independence—and what gave them the money was the ability to commoditize their own beauty.

Dorian Leigh was an independent woman who took responsibility for her own sexuality, even though it occasionally caused her pain. She married twice more and had five children, many lovers and untold pregnancies. Her life was a constant battle between society’s expectations and her own choices. She experienced triumph, but also tragedy. She made money, saw the world, and knew famous people, but she also experienced poverty and despair. Throughout, she had the love and support of her family. Dorian worked at reconciling the contradictions of her upbringing with her needs and hopes, but unlike many of her peers, she sometimes transcended her enculturation, usually maintained her autonomy, made and owned her choices.

Many feminists would discard whatever modest claim Dorian Leigh could make to having achieved freedom through taking control of her own exchange and her own sex life. As an “object” in an image, a model sells herself to be looked at. To them, this act of exchange is indistinguishable from prostitution, or even slavery, because they stubbornly insist that commercial images of women commoditize those women and not just the objects being offered for sale.

Dressing for Sex

One of the most telling examples of the way kinship rules were suspended as a crisis response is the relative tolerance shown lesbians in the military and defense sector during the war. Both the plants and the services attracted large numbers of lesbians. Others who joined the effort discovered they were attracted to women by being in all-female work groups and military outfits. In the port cities and factory towns, cohesive lesbian communities developed, each with a coherent pattern of dress and behavior. However, once the war was over, the efforts to police both gays and lesbians resumed at a level of viciousness unseen before the war.

The most publicly visible sign of the lesbian subculture was the dress of the masculine-identified lesbian, or “butch.” Several discrete symbols were part of the adult butch look in the 1940s: very short hair; either blue jeans or a man-tailored suit; boots, loafers, or sneakers. Butches claimed the desire to wear these items came from within, an expression of self:

I have always considered myself butch identified. I have never felt feminine. I wore dresses because my mother bought my clothes, but as soon as I drew my first paycheck at age seventeen, I paid down on my first suit. Over the years women have asked why I dress so mannish. My response has been that I like wearing man-tailored clothing; it’s the way I choose to express myself.

Aside from expressing gender orientation, this behavior was, importantly, a means of communicating sexual desire to other lesbians. As one butch described it: “Dress for yourself. I like me butch, I know me butch, I know how to act butch. Be butch and dress for sex.”

The butch look was designed specifically to signal to a feminine-identified lesbian, the “femme,” and was often a conscious attempt to attract or seduce. Femmes dressed in a way that was not only hyper-feminine and sexy, but often rather formal. Silks and satins, spaghetti straps and high heels, these symbols appear repeatedly in the accounts of the early femmes. Comparisons are often made to women in the movies—not to Katherine Hepburn, but to glamour girls like Rita Hayworth. The femmes wore makeup, something that attracted and intrigued the butches: “I love women in makeup. I want to know what’s underneath but without removing the pancake, mascara, lipstick. No, they’re not dolls. They are actors in an ancient theater, real people playing fantasies, actors playing characters wearing comic or tragic masks. I am as fascinated by the mask as I am curious to remove it.” The femme lesbian, therefore, did embrace the feminine aesthetic of appearance, but, in their choice of sex partners, refused to accept the culture’s restrictions on sexual behavior. Thus, the butch’s counterpart, the femme, was also a transgressive persona.

The femme finely tuned her display of self into an image of the feminine that, while recognizable as a stereotype, was aimed straight and specifically for the butch. Though the femme wore heels and slinky dresses, she was not trying to attract a man. She was trying to attract a butch. So, she has to be recognizable as a femme and not just as feminine. That necessitates a subtle difference in the cues, much like the one that makes a woman in pants a butch rather than a man. The ethic of this display is to give what has previously been forbidden or elusive for the butch—the experience of being with a feminine woman. The femmes also became sensitive to the signals of the butch, whose characteristic smells, sights, and touches became highly eroticized in their imaginations: “. . . I was thinking about Bobby, remembering her sitting, smoking, squint-eyed, and me looking down at the way her thighs shaped in her jeans.”

Butches “dressed for sex” were easily identifiable to the ordinary American: “Even though many of my butch buddies ‘pass’ on the street, most of us, me included, couldn’t hang out safely with the boys at the pool hall without breast reduction and a handgun.” Writing today, butches sometimes brush off their identifiability with the explanation that, in those days, women didn’t wear pants. Some even claim that trousers and suits for women were unavailable. But the ads and editorial material in the women’s magazines show that trousers for women were available in a range of options, including even tailored suits. So, it wasn’t just the trousers that made the butches so clearly identifiable. Instead, “butch” was a highly cultivated look, in which the slightest mistake could result in exclusion and disappointment.

One “baby butch” went from the suburbs into New York wearing a skirt, but carrying men’s clothing in her purse. She changed in an alley, stashed the skirt and purse in a locker, and slicked her hair back into a duck’s ass: “A tough-acting woman in man’s clothes was called a butch diesel. I desperately wanted to be a butch diesel. This would be a great accomplishment for a sixteen-year-old suburban kid, cruising weekends in the Village. I had been in ‘the life’ on the streets—it wasn’t enough. I wanted to go into the butch diesels’ bars, to be accepted as one of them. They were tough, cocky, sure of themselves. They intimidated by their very existence.” She had already been watching the bar she wanted to go in. Though a friend had told her the “men” going into the bar were actually women, she had a difficult time believing it: “You couldn’t tell unless you heard them talk, and even then sometimes I wasn’t sure. I had finally accepted the truth and had watched them go in, alone or with snazzily dressed women. But I had never dared enter; it was out of my league. Well, no longer—I was ready!” She went into the bar. Everyone turned to look at her. Conversation stopped. This was a common occurrence in the gay bars: the crowd “sized you up” to see whether you were a policeman or a misfit. She waited in agony to see whether she would be accepted:

The silence was broken by a voice: ‘Oh my God, Millie,’ someone said, ‘it’s Prince Valiant!’ And everyone roared with laughter, and I knew, I knew. My hand reached up to find that my baby-fine hair had shed the beer glop and had drifted down and forward to hang limply about my ears. I reached for the flask, then re-alized it was too late. What would I do with it? Pour it on my head? I just held it on the table, too numb to move, too embarrassed to speak or even lift my head. I would love to say “And then everyone came over and said, ‘Welcome,’ and we all lived happily ever after.’ It didn’t happen. I ate the burger, left the fries, and split. Then they spoke: “Good night, sweet prince. A valiant effort.”

The baby butches who got lucky found a mentor, like Leslie Feinberg’s Butch Al, who took Leslie “under her wing and taught me all the things she thought were most important for a baby butch like me to know.” Al taught Leslie to tie her tie, how to treat women, and even how to use a dildo. The tenor of their relationship has a father-son quality that is almost stereotypic, but sincere: “She was gruff with me all right. But she peppered it with mussing my hair, hugging my shoulders, and giving my face something more than a pat and less than a slap. I liked it. I appreciated the affection in her voice when she called me ‘kid,’ which she did frequently.”

Butch Al and her girlfriend, Jackie, spent hours grooming and dressing Leslie:

They took me to secondhand stores to get me my first sport coat and tie. Al combed the racks, pulling out sport coat after sport coat. I tried each one on. Jackie would tilt her head, then shake it, no.

Finally the perfect sport coat was selected. Jackie smoothed my lapels and nodded in approval. Al gave a low whistle of appreciation. I had died and gone to butch heaven!

Then came the tie. Al picked it out for me: a narrow black silk tie. "You can't go wrong with a black tie," she informed me solemnly. And, of course, she was right.

So being butch, like being feminine, required an array of dress items, cut in a certain way and put together in a certain way, as well as a particular temperament to be expressed through manner and speech. To do it well required focus, effort, and a sense of style. It also could inspire a very energizing vanity.

Tonight all the jokes will be funny I will be the entertaining, laugh-a-minute, woman-of-the-world butch. I will be the writer with the funny anecdotes, the witty comments. I will be barbed and bristling, busy, busy with my butch performance. I will stand at that bar and select my femme, who picked me out moments beforehand anyway, and I will dance my butch's dance for her. I will be dapper and aching to please this woman, who spied the shark and reeled her in with a hand line.

Having established cues for signaling each other, recognition and seduction was enjoyed by both parties:

I remember years ago, the day I started working at the plant and you had already been there a few months, and how your eyes caught mine and played with me before you set me free. I was supposed to be following the foreman to fill out some forms, but I was too busy wondering what color your hair was under that white paper net and how it would look and feel in my fingers, down loose and free. And I remember how you laughed gently when the foreman came back and said, "You comin' or not?"

I couldn't believe it the night I went to that new club on the West Side (a new bar almost every other week). There you were, leaning up against the bar, your jeans too tight for words and your hair, your hair all loose and free.

And I remember that look in your eyes again. You didn't just know me; you liked what you saw. And this time, ooh, woman, we were on our own turf. I could move the way you wanted me to, and I was glad I'd gotten all dressed up.

In this courting ritual, the grooming and showing of oneself to the other is stimulation and stimulating, build-up and denouement. The mating dance the two potential lovers choreograph is a complex putting on and taking off of masks, of asserted power and revealed vulnerability:

There was a woman once for whom I danced my butch's dance. And she danced her femme's dance for me and showed me what was underneath the mask. She was soft and curvy and as hard as flint, and she showed me that the mask was not a lie, not hers of apparent soft femininity nor mine of seeming steel and bluster. She taught me the excitement, the meaning of contradiction—not a flat negation of mutually exclusive opposites but the energizing of molecules oscillating constantly from one extreme to the other, always in flux.

And she initiated me, as surely as any high priestess, into the wonders of women's power. Hidden strength, deceptive power, always beneath the tranquil sur-face, a mask of apparent vulnerability and powerlessness. But with one swift movement women's power lashes out of the soft curves and slaps you in the face with startling muscularity, a punishment for simplistically and impudently believing that the looked-at have no power.

It's ironic that this butch, who put together her own appearance with constant awareness of how she would look to the femmes, would think of them as the ones who are "looked-at" and implicitly exclude herself from that category. A consistent feminist objection to erotic representations of women is that a woman, by becoming something "looked at," is reduced to an object, and thus rendered powerless. The butch and the

femme, like a man and a woman, both show themselves to each other and look at each other in the course of seduction. Part of the butch's role is to be "the one who looks." The femme certainly is looking (and their partners know it), so she feigns the affect of being only looked at. It is clear that the femmes derived a certain sense of power over the butch from all the orchestration and display. And, the femme, though feminine, was not necessarily seen as powerless by the butch.

The highly erotic dance of dress that constituted the lesbian courtship of the forties and fifties must have been a powerful draw because, after the war, the butches of that day endured arrests, rapes, civil rights violations, and daily harassment as the price for becoming part of that subculture. Police brutality was frequent. Butches were also chased, mugged, and stoned by "civilians." The narratives they tell are horrifying, akin in many ways to the racial harassment stories of the Deep South. Yet the butches also took chances that seem almost to invite disaster. There was a rule in New York, for example, that if a woman wasn't wearing at least three items of "woman's clothing," she could be arrested for impersonating a man. It seems like an easy way to deal with such a rule would be to dress like a butch, but wear some kind of women's underwear—not a bra, but maybe panties or a garter or stockings or something. Instead, they were butches right down to the skin: they wore men's underwear. The police would strip them, humiliating in itself, and find BVD's. Then, they were likely to be jailed, which often led to beatings.

The butches' insistence on wearing men's underwear, even under threat of violence and arrest, is instructive. Consider that if the objective was to "dress for sex" and the climax of this mating ritual was the butch and femme undressing for each other (also deemed important in heterosexual encounters), then the effect would be substantially dampened by the sudden appearance under the butch's carefully groomed exterior of, say, a garter belt. A lot of effortful seduction could go down the drain at that point. Furthermore, if we apply the discussion of the use of material objects to realize the self, as well as express it, then the underwear was important to the butch's whole construction of herself as a sexual subject.

The lesbian, like the heterosexual female, performs her inner experience of gender using the terms of the culture—boots and jeans or heels and satin. That's because culturally-inscribed objects are the only kind we have (and the only kind we will ever have). We now know that human sexuality generally is not a set of poles, but a continuum that may be acted out using a set of otherwise polarized signs. From the perspective of a multivocal continuum—rather than a "them" and "us" categorization—we can see that various orientations and individual identities are expressed in different combinations of gendered artifacts and practices.

Through the activism of the 1970s and 1980s, the lesbian community eventually overcame the repressive efforts of 1950s culture to put them back in their invisible place in the kinship system. Though the efforts of Second Wave feminism reintroduced dress restrictions for lesbians (a point that will be addressed in a later chapter), the culture at large began to display a remarkable mix of gendered signs by the end of the 20th century. Basketball Player Dennis Rodman wore eye makeup and a pink boa to book signings with remarkably little comment from his team. K. D. Lang, a very popular lesbian singer, appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair* dressed very "butch" and being "barbered" by supermodel Cindy Crawford. The kinds of dress restrictions actually put into law during the postwar period would be simply impossible now. However, one segment of the spectrum is still precluded from expressing itself without condemnation from feminists: the feminine, heterosexual woman is still presumed to have no agency in the performance of gender, regardless of her transgressions in work, sexuality, or politics.

Human beings need to create a sexual world in which to realize their desires. To the extent that gendered signs are used to express desire and preference, thus bring the love and satisfaction we crave, asking people to give up signs of dress condemns them to celibacy. For feminists who deal with the constraints of gender by becoming asexual, this may seem perfectly acceptable. To others, it is merely another harsh injunction to accept sexual passivity as the price of being female.

Postwar Post Mortem

The American kinship system and its attendant rules about work, dress, consumption, and sexuality were permeable at many levels during the war, not just at the level of women's work. The system itself seems to have demanded much of this "crossover" effect as the cost of protecting the community. Once the threat was over, there were actions on every front to close the gaps that opened up during the crisis. Not only were women encouraged to go back home, but a New Look was presented by fashion designers that rearticulated femininity in an exaggerated way with cinched waists and big skirts. Though popularized Freudianism increasingly presented women as creatures of sexual appetite, the only accepted mode for female sexual expression continued to be marriage to a male. Lesbians and gays who had gone relatively unmolested during the war years were thrown into jail, beaten, and taunted on the street. Even the popular pin-ups came under fire in renewed efforts to enforce censorship laws after the war. When we consider all these things along with the employment phenomenon that sent women back home, the kinship system—which denied women the right to control their own sexuality as part and parcel of their economic role—seems to be at least as much at fault as capitalism.

An enormous blossoming of new households was produced by the emphatic return of the traditional family, putting a strain on existing housing and fueling the postwar economy into overdrive. And so, G. I. Joes married retired Rosies, got their home loans, and settled in to repopulate the kinship system. After the experience of war, Joe and Rosie were not inclined to tolerate either sexual or political rebellion. Little did they know that in the cradles of America grew the seeds of both.