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THE BODY PROJECT

An Intimate History of
American Girls

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CHAPTER FOUR

BODY
PROJECTS

In the twentieth century, the body has become the central personal project of American girls. This priority makes girls today vastly different from their Victorian counterparts. Although girls in the past and present display many common developmental characteristics—such as self-consciousness, sensitivity to peers, and an interest in establishing an independent identity—before the twentieth century, girls simply did not organize their thinking about themselves around their bodies. Today, many young girls worry about the contours of their bodies—especially shape, size, and muscle tone—because they believe that the body is the ultimate expression of the self.

The body is a consuming project for contemporary girls because it provides an important means of self-definition, a way to visibly announce who you are to the world. From a historical perspective, this particular form of adolescent expression is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the twentieth century, adolescent

girls learned from their mothers, as well as from the larger culture, that modern femininity required some degree of exhibitionism.¹ By the 1920s, both fashion and film had encouraged a massive “unveiling” of the female body, which meant that certain body parts—such as arms and legs—were bared and displayed in ways they had never been before. This new freedom to display the body was accompanied, however, by demanding beauty and dietary regimens that involved money as well as self-discipline. Beginning in the 1920s, women’s legs and underarms had to be smooth and free of body hair; the torso had to be svelte; and the breasts were supposed to be small and firm. What American women did not realize at the time was that their stunning new freedom actually implied the need for greater internal control of the body, an imperative that would intensify and become even more powerful by the end of the twentieth century.

The seeds of this cultural and psychological change from external to internal control of the body lie in vast societal transformations that characterized the move from agrarian to industrial society, and from a religious to a secular world. But I want to bring the story closer to home and focus on some characteristic “body projects” that have absorbed the attention of adolescent girls since the beginning of the twentieth century. These projects demonstrate how the experience of living in an adolescent body is always shaped by the historical moment. They also show how cultural pressures have accumulated, making American girls today, at the close of the twentieth century, more anxious than ever about the size and shape of their bodies, as well as particular body parts.²

THE CENTURY OF SVELTE

In the 1920s, for the first time, teenage girls made systematic efforts to lower their weight by food restriction and exercise. Although advice on “slimming” and “reducing” was usually directed at adult women, college and high school girls also dieted. In 1924, the *Smith College Weekly* printed a letter from students warning about the newest craze on campus: “If preventive measures against strenuous dieting are not taken soon, Smith College will become notorious not for sylph-like forms but for haggard faces and dull listless eyes.”³

Despite the threat of ill health, college girls in the 1920s worked hard to become slender. Instead of writing home happily about weight gain and abundant eating, as female collegians had done in the 1880s and 1890s, young women at elite schools such as Smith debated the virtues of different diet plans and worried about gaining weight. Popular serial fiction for younger girls, such as Grace Harlow and Nancy Drew, now had a fat character who served as a humorous foil to the well-liked, smart protagonist, who was always slim.⁴

The adolescent girls involved in the first American “slimming craze” were motivated by a new ideal of female beauty that began to evolve around the turn of the century. In 1908, Paul Poiret, a Parisian designer, introduced a new silhouette that replaced the voluptuous Victorian hourglass, with its tiny waist and exaggerated hips. Instead, Poiret’s dresses shifted visual interest to the legs. The new, fashionable figure was slender, long-limbed, and relatively flat-chested. American women of all ages donned the short, popular chemise dress that was the uniform of the “flapper” in the 1920s. As they did so, they bade farewell to corsets,

stays, and petticoats, and they began to diet, or internalize control of the body. This set the stage for what one writer called "the century of svelte."⁵

THE SLIMMING OF YVONNE BLUE

The story of Yvonne Blue reveals how the ideal of slenderness was first incorporated into the experience of American girls. Born in 1911, Yvonne was the eldest of three daughters in a Protestant family living in Hyde Park, an intellectual mecca that surrounded the University of Chicago. Her father was an ophthalmologist; her mother was a homemaker with a literary bent. Although the Blues were teetotaling Baptists who enjoyed sedate pleasures such as golf and reading, their daughter tasted the full repertoire of American popular culture: she read everything from comics and women's magazines to best-selling novels, listened to jazz on the radio, and went to the moving pictures regularly. From these sources, as well as from her peers at the University of Chicago High School, Yvonne eventually learned that a slender body was central to female success.

As a girl of twelve and thirteen, Yvonne Blue had been unconcerned about her appearance. She was bookish then, imaginative, and filled with literary ambitions. She wanted to be a famous author or the leader of a pirate gang, or travel the world as Peter Pan. By the time she was fifteen, however, these lively literary and dramatic projects were tempered by a new self-consciousness. Between thirteen and fifteen, Yvonne underwent a growth spurt that increased her height by almost six inches and her weight by over forty pounds, so that she was nearly five feet six inches tall and

weighed 150 pounds. This increase in size was natural, but it seemed problematic in the 1920s, when a small, slender female body was considered highly desirable. Yvonne told her diary that she wanted to be "slim and sylph like," like her favorite film stars—or like the sophisticated women she saw in popular magazines and the rotogravure.

The skimpy dresses and frenetic Charleston of the "flapper" may be a cliché, but the flapper image really did capture the new emotional and social possibilities available to Yvonne's generation and to adolescent girls ever since. After World War I, many girls cut loose from traditional moorings to church and community, as well as from ties to their mothers and grandmothers. The adult women who supervised single-sex groups in the 1920s, such as the Girl Scouts, began to note a decline in membership and interest, which they attributed to all of the new entertainment options open to young women.⁶ In addition to new experiences with radio and movies, adolescent girls went about unchaperoned, rode in automobiles, and talked on the telephone, all of which increased mobility and autonomy. But as young women became more independent of their mothers and more knowledgeable about the world, their self-esteem began to have more to do with external attributes than with inner qualities, such as strength of character or generosity of spirit. Since movies, magazines, and department stores in the 1920s all gave primacy to a woman's visual image, even young teenagers like Yvonne began to worry about their appearance in ways that required increased attention to their bodies and made the body into a project.⁷

Like most girls of the period, Yvonne's career as a flapper began with a haircut. "Yesterday I went to the barber's and had my hair shingle bobbed cut in a bob just like a boy's only longer," she wrote in 1923, the year she entered high school. For Yvonne and

her friends, the bob was an important symbol. In the nineteenth century, hair was considered a woman's crowning glory, and the more the better. Most girls grew their hair long so that it could be piled on top of the head as a declaration of maturity, and they spent long hours with their mothers and sisters reading aloud, sewing, and talking while they dried and brushed their hair. These intimate, intergenerational grooming rituals—like the sewing and reading they accompanied—disappeared once the bob became the order of the day. Short hair did not require the same kind of labor, and it visually separated the young from the old. In addition, it symbolized a new attitude toward the female body—an attitude that proclaimed greater freedom but also required new internal constraints, one of which was controlling food intake.

As Yvonne became more self-absorbed (which is not unusual in an adolescent), she also became more dissatisfied with the way she looked. At fifteen, social events that should have been fun became worrisome because she felt so large and ungainly. When she was invited to a special luncheon for talented young poets in the Chicago area, Yvonne dreaded going because she had to wear a "screaming red dress" that she thought made her look like a "trick elephant." One particularly miserable day, she called herself a "fat, crude, uncouth misunderstood beast" and wallowed in the idea that she was a pariah at school. Like many girls in de Beauvoir's "difficult patch," Yvonne was dramatic and prone to exaggeration: "I wonder if anyone in the world has ever hated herself as I hate myself?"

What was new and modern about Yvonne's adolescent angst was that she focused on weight loss as a solution to her problems. As a result, she began to "slim," in the summer of 1926, when she was fifteen. "I'm so tired of being fat!" she wrote. "I'm going back to school weighing 119 pounds—I swear it. Three months in

which to lose thirty pounds—but I'll do it—or die in the attempt." To that end, she sent away for a booklet called "How to Reduce: New Waistlines for Old," written by Antoinette Donnelly, the beauty editor at the *Chicago Tribune*, and she began to count calories, a relatively new concept in the 1920s. Although she had a full-length mirror, the Blues, like most middle-class families in the 1920s, did not own a scale, so Yvonne began taking trips to the drugstore, or the gymnasium at the University of Chicago, to weigh herself.⁸

On some days, Yvonne wrote down everything she ate; on others, she "forgot." Sometimes she noted special temptations, such as ice cream or fried chicken. One summer evening, to avoid eating, she refused to enter a restaurant with her family and sat outside in the car while everyone else went inside. There were a number of unpleasant struggles with her concerned parents, who did not approve of adolescent dieting and thought she looked just fine: "Mother and Daddy make me so mad!" she wrote. "They *make* me eat [emphasis in original]. Last night I dropped most of my meal in my lap, and rolled it in my napkin and fed it to Tar Baby [the dog] later." Although the *Chicago Tribune* reducing plan recommended 1,200–1,500 calories a day, along with a program of exercise, Yvonne was so enthusiastic and impatient that she tried to keep her daily food intake down to 50 calories, allowing herself only lettuce, carrots, celery, tea, and consommé. "No cake or pie or ice cream or cookies or candy or nuts or fruits or bread or potatoes or meats or anything," she wrote unhappily. At one point, she became faint and her mother insisted that she remain at home on the chaise, drinking cocoa and eating fruit to restore her energy.

Yvonne's flamboyant dieting angered her parents, who had little interest in seeing her lose weight. Although they were progres-

sive people for the 1920s, they held to the traditional Victorian idea that weight loss was not particularly healthy or attractive in a growing girl. Yvonne and her friends had a very different idea, however, and they talked incessantly about "slimming." One of Yvonne's best friends, Mattie Van Ness, decided to join Yvonne in her diet even though she herself was not at all large. Together, they made dieting into a game and a competition. Mattie wrote to Yvonne from her family vacation that summer: "I had a dream with you in it. You wore a lumberjack blouse and a checked skirt, and you were so thin I nearly died of envy. I am terribly fat."

Weight was so often a subject of conversation in school that Yvonne developed a savvy response to the familiar question, How much do you weigh?: "I always ask people to guess my weight when they inquire it and I always give them as small a sum as they'll swallow." By watching her sweets and denying herself all carbohydrates and most meat, Yvonne reduced her weight to about 125 pounds, which made her feel triumphant on her return to school for her senior year, in September of 1926.

IMAGE IS IDENTITY

Yvonne Blue's body project feels modern because it reflects a deep faith in the power of personal image, as well as the excitement and potential of a "makeover." By changing the configuration of her body, she hoped to create a new image for herself that would win popularity and status at school. Like many others who grew up in the 1920s, Yvonne was greatly concerned about "image." This was a reflection of the world in which she came to maturity. Even an ordinary girl without Yvonne's literary imagination could re-

create herself in a number of different ways. Every time she went to a movie, opened a magazine, entered a department store dressing room, or changed her lipstick, she could try on a new identity. Because it was no longer considered sinful or shallow to care so much about how you looked, girls talked among themselves about how to improve or change their hair, face, and figure. In her bedroom, Yvonne obsessed with Mattie about the ways in which Betty Bronson, a favorite film star, changed her looks in order to play different roles, and that model stayed with both of them as they proceeded through high school.

Yvonne re-created herself in a number of different ways over the course of the next few years. Only a few months before her sixteenth birthday, she did something that is characteristic of modern girls: she deliberately changed her handwriting. This kind of self-conscious transformation of handwriting did not occur in girls' diaries until the 1920s, when girls learned from popular culture how flexible personal image could be. Yvonne's new handwriting was extremely artificial and stylized. It did not slant to the right, according to the Palmer Method taught in grade school; certain letters were executed in clear defiance of the rules of capitalization; and there was an eclectic mixture of cursive writing and printing. By altering her image on the page as well as in the flesh, Yvonne hoped to convey that she was unusual and talented, instead of ordinary and boring. (In the 1950s, I remember changing my handwriting so that I would appear more mature and feminine. Because Joni James was a popular vocalist then, I began spelling my first name the way she did, dotting the *i* with a little circle and making my letters as round as possible.)⁹

Yvonne devoted even more attention to the construction of her image at the University of Chicago, where she became a freshman in 1927. Although she lived at home with her parents, col-

lege represented a new social world that was exciting but also frightening. The night before she entered college, she wrote optimistically that tomorrow "will be the most important day of my life so far." But within days Yvonne was feeling ill at ease and inadequate because of the social pressures associated with Freshman Week and rushing a sorority. She feared that she would be unpopular again in college, as she thought she had been in high school. "I am miserable," she wrote, "because Helen [a high school friend] is being rushed for two sororities and I am not. I don't want to go to the events—they're all bridge suppers or dances—[but] it's the principle of the thing. Evidently our high school records precede us. It's not fair and I resent it."

In this difficult moment of transition, Yvonne paid close attention to her figure, her hair, and her clothes. Eventually, she was invited to join the Acoth Club, and she was sufficiently impressed by the behavior of her sorority sisters to write about them in her diary: "[They] talked of nothing but boys, smoked incessantly, and scattered 'O my Gods!' quite liberally through their conversation." Under their tutelage, she took up cigarettes, cut her hair in the most severe bob possible, and began to dress only in black. Two months into her freshman year, Yvonne wrote: "I have lost sincerity and become a cynic. My type is now sophisticated, bored, blasé and it is going over well on campus." But a year later she was cultivating a different persona, and cast herself as a "smart Northshore society girl," the clubby kind, who traveled around in a yellow Whippet roadster.

Over the course of her college career, Yvonne Blue changed her image as regularly as students change classes at the beginning of each term. She also began to demonstrate a lively interest in young men, and spent a good deal of time thinking about ways to attract them. At age eighteen, she chose a familiar form of expres-

sion to announce her maturity (and her intentions) to the world. On her own, without the advice of her mother, she went to a downtown Chicago department store and bought a tight, clay-colored, crepe de chine dress that clung to the figure and accentuated her lower torso and breasts. This was an important purchase for a young woman who thought so much about "types" and "images" and also wanted to display "sex appeal," a quality she had read about in women's magazines and popular advice books. (She actually took prolific notes on Doris Langley Moore's *Techniques of the Love Affair*.)¹⁰ Yvonne realized that her new silk dress was revealing. In her diary, she wrote with no embarrassment that it "fit like paper on the wall," and she reported gleefully what the saleswoman said when she came out of the dressing room to model it: "When you are young you should show every bump."

Yvonne's crepe de chine actually revealed more than her slim, grown-up body. The slinky new dress was a symbol of the ways in which culture and fashion in the 1920s had begun to blur the distinction between the private and the public self. Only fifty years before, Yvonne's display of flesh would have been unthinkable for a woman of her class and background, and the words of the saleswoman in Chicago would have made no sense. But by 1930, the year Yvonne purchased the crepe de chine, even nice middle-class girls understood that their bodies were in some ways a public project. In fact, girls like Yvonne intuited that modern femininity required some degree of exhibitionism or, at least, a willingness to display oneself as a decorative object. This sensibility has made girls in the "century of svelte" extremely vulnerable to cultural messages about dieting and particular body parts.

BREAST BUDS AND THE "TRAINING" BRA

In every generation, small swellings around the nipples have announced the arrival of puberty. This development, known clinically as "breast buds," occurs before menarche and almost always provokes wonder and self-scrutiny. "I began to examine myself carefully, to search my armpits for hairs and my breasts for signs of swelling," wrote Kate Simon about coming of age in the Bronx at the time of World War I. Although Simon was "horrified" by the rapidity with which her chest developed, many girls, both in literature and real life, long for this important mark of maturity. In Jamaica Kincaid's fictional memoir of growing up in Antigua, *Annie John*, the main character regarded her breasts as "treasured shrubs, needing only the proper combination of water and sunlight to make them flourish." In order to get their breasts to grow, Annie and her best friend, Gwen, lay in a pasture exposing their small bosoms to the moonlight.¹¹

Breasts are particularly important to girls in cultures or time periods that give powerful meaning or visual significance to that part of the body. Throughout history, different body parts have been eroticized in art, literature, photography, and film. In some eras, the ankle or upper arm was the ultimate statement of female sexuality.¹² But breasts were the particular preoccupation of Americans in the years after World War II, when voluptuous stars, such as Jayne Mansfield, Jane Russell, and Marilyn Monroe, were popular box-office attractions. The mammary fixation of the 1950s extended beyond movie stars and shaped the experience of adolescents of both genders. In that era, boys seemed to prefer girls who were "busty," and American girls began to worry about breast size as well as about weight. This elaboration of the ideal

of beauty raised expectations about what adolescent girls should look like. It also required them to put even more energy and resources into their body projects, beginning at an earlier age.

The story of how this happened is intertwined with the history of the bra, an undergarment that came into its own, as separate from the corset, in the early twentieth century. In 1900, a girl of twelve or thirteen typically wore a one-piece "waist" or camisole that had no cups or darts in front. As her breasts developed, she moved into different styles of the same garment, but these had more construction, such as stitching, tucks, and bones, that would accentuate the smallness of her waist and shape the bosom. In those days, before the arrival of the brassiere, there were no "cups." The bosom was worn low; there was absolutely no interest in uplift, and not a hint of cleavage.¹³

The French word *brassière*, which actually means an infant's undergarment or harness, was used in *Vogue* as early as 1907. In the United States, the first boneless bra to leave the midriff bare was developed in 1913 by Mary Phelps Jacobs, a New York City debutante. Under the name Caresse Crosby, Jacobs marketed a bra made of two French lace handkerchiefs suspended from the shoulders. Many young women in the 1920s, such as Yvonne Blue, bought their first bras in order to achieve the kind of slim, boyish figure that the characteristic chemise (or flapper) dress required. The first bras were designed simply to flatten, but they were superseded by others intended to shape and control the breasts. Our current cup sizes (A, B, C, and D), as well as the idea of circular stitching to enhance the roundness of the breast, emerged in the 1930s.

Adult women, not adolescents, were the first market for bras. Sexually maturing girls simply moved into adult-size bras when they were ready—and if their parents had the money. Many women and

girls in the early twentieth century still made their own underwear at home, and some read the advertisements for bras with real longing. When she began to develop breasts in the 1930s, Malvis Helmi, a midwestern farm girl, remembered feeling embarrassed whenever she wore an old summer dimity that pulled and gaped across her expanding chest. As a result, she spoke to her mother, considered the brassieres in the Sears, Roebuck catalog, and decided to purchase two for twenty-five cents. However, when her hardworking father saw the order form, he vetoed the idea and declared, "Our kind of people can't afford to spend money on such nonsense." Although her mother made her a makeshift bra, Malvis vowed that someday she would have store-bought brassieres. Home economics teachers in the interwar years tried to get high school girls to make their own underwear because it saved money, but the idea never caught on once mass-produced bras became widely available.¹⁴

The transition from homemade to mass-produced bras was critical in how adolescent girls thought about their breasts. In general, mass-produced clothing fostered autonomy in girls because it took matters of style and taste outside the dominion of the mother, who had traditionally made and supervised a girl's wardrobe. But in the case of brassieres, buying probably had another effect. So long as clothing was made at home, the dimensions of the garment could be adjusted to the particular body intended to wear it. But with store-bought clothes, the body had to fit instantaneously into standard sizes that were constructed from a pattern representing a norm. When clothing failed to fit the body, particularly a part as intimate as the breasts, young women were apt to perceive that there was something wrong with their bodies. In this way, mass-produced bras in standard cup sizes probably increased, rather than diminished, adolescent self-consciousness about the breasts.¹⁵

Until the 1950s, the budding breasts of American girls received no special attention from either bra manufacturers, doctors, or parents. Girls generally wore undershirts until they were sufficiently developed to fill an adult-size bra. Mothers and daughters traditionally handled this transformation in private, at home. But in the gyms and locker rooms of postwar junior high schools, girls began to look around to see who did and did not wear a bra. Many of these girls had begun menstruating and developing earlier than their mothers had, and this visual information was very powerful. In some circles, the ability to wear and fill a bra was central to an adolescent girl's status and sense of self. "I have a figure problem," a fourteen-year-old wrote to *Seventeen* in 1952: "All of my friends are tall and shapely while my figure still remains up-and-down. Can you advise me?"¹⁶

In an era distinguished by its worship of full-breasted women, interest in adolescent breasts came from all quarters: girls who wanted bras at an earlier age than ever before; mothers who believed that they should help a daughter acquire a "good" figure; doctors who valued maternity over all other female roles; and merchandisers who saw profits in convincing girls and their parents that adolescent breasts needed to be tended in special ways. All of this interest coalesced in the 1950s to make the brassiere as critical as the sanitary napkin in making a girl's transition into adulthood both modern and successful.

The old idea that brassieres were frivolous or unnecessary for young girls was replaced by a national discussion about their medical and psychological benefits. "My daughter who is well developed but not yet twelve wants to wear a bra," wrote a mother in Massachusetts to *Today's Health* in 1951. "I want her to wear an undervest instead because I think it is better not to have anything binding. What do you think about a preadolescent girl wearing a

bra?" That same year a reader from Wilmington, Delaware, asked *Seventeen*: "Should a girl of fourteen wear a bra? There are some older women who insist we don't need them." The editor's answer was an unequivocal endorsement of early bras: "Just as soon as your breasts begin to show signs of development, you should start wearing a bra."¹⁷ By the early 1950s, "training" or "beginner" bras were available in AAA and AA sizes for girls whose chests were essentially flat but who wanted a bra nonetheless. Along with acne creams, advertisements for these brassieres were standard fare in magazines for girls.

Physicians provided a medical rationale for purchasing bras early. In 1952, in an article in *Parents' Magazine*, physician Frank H. Crowell endorsed bras for young girls and spelled out a theory and program of teenage breast management. "Unlike other organs such as the stomach and intestines which have ligaments that act as guywires or slings to hold them in place," Crowell claimed, the breast was simply "a growth developed from the skin and held up only by the skin." An adolescent girl needed a bra in order to prevent sagging breasts, stretched blood vessels, and poor circulation, all of which would create problems in nursing her future children. In addition, a "dropped" breast was "not so attractive," Crowell said, so it was important to get adolescents into bras early, before their breasts began to sag.¹⁸ The "training" that a training bra was supposed to accomplish was the first step toward motherhood and a sexually alluring figure, as it was defined in the 1950s.

In the interest of both beauty and health, mothers in the 1950s were encouraged to check their daughters' breasts regularly to see if they were developing properly. This was not just a matter of a quick look and a word of reassurance. Instead, Crowell and others suggested systematic scrutiny as often as every three months to see if the breasts were positioned correctly. One way to chart the ge-

ography of the adolescent bustline was to have the girl stand sideways in a darkened room against a wall covered with white paper. By shining a bright light on her and having her throw out her chest at a provocative angle, a mother could trace a silhouette that indicated the actual shape of her daughter's bosom. By placing a pencil under her armpit, and folding the arm that held it across the waist, mothers could also determine if their daughter's nipples were in the right place. On a healthy breast, the nipple was supposed to be at least halfway above the midway point between the location of the pencil and the hollow of the elbow.

Breasts were actually only one part of a larger body project encouraged by the foundation garment industry in postwar America. In this era, both physicians and entrepreneurs promoted a general philosophy of "junior figure control." Companies such as Warners, Maidenform, Formfit, Belle Mode, and Perfect Form (as well as popular magazines like *Good Housekeeping*) all encouraged the idea that young women needed both lightweight girdles and bras to "start the figure off to a beautiful future."¹⁹

The concept of "support" was aided and abetted by new materials—such as nylon netting and two-way stretch fabrics—developed during the war but applied afterward to women's underwear. By the early 1950s, a reenergized corset and brassiere industry was poised for extraordinary profits. If "junior figure control" became the ideal among the nation's mothers and daughters, it would open up sales of bras and girdles to the largest generation of adolescents in American history, the so-called baby boomers. Once again, as in the case of menstruation and acne, the bodies of adolescent girls had the potential to deliver considerable profit.

There was virtually no resistance to the idea that American girls should wear bras and girdles in adolescence. Regardless of whether a girl was thin or heavy, "junior figure control" was in order, and that

phrase became a pervasive sales mantra. "Even slim youthful figures will require foundation assistance," advised *Women's Wear Daily* in 1957. In both *Seventeen* and *Compact*, the two most popular magazines for the age group, high school girls were urged to purchase special foundation garments such as "Bobbie" bras and girdles by Formfit and "Adagio" by Maidenform that were "teen-proportioned" and designed, allegedly, with the help of adolescent consultants. The bras were available in pastel colors in a variety of special sizes, starting with AAA, and they were decorated with lace and ribbon to make them especially feminine. In addition to holding up stockings, girdles were intended to flatten the tummy and also provide light, but firm, control for hips and buttocks. The advertisements for "Bobbie," in particular, suggested good things about girls who controlled their flesh in this way: they were pretty, had lots of friends, and drank Coca-Cola. As adults, they would have good figures and happy futures because they had chosen correct underwear in their youth.²⁰

By the mid-1950s, department stores and specialty shops had developed aggressive educational programs designed to spread the gospel of "junior figure control." In order to make young women "foundation conscious," Shillito's, a leading Cincinnati department store, tried to persuade girls and their mothers of the importance of having a professional fitting of the first bra. Through local newspaper advertisements, and also programs in home economics classes, Shillito's buyer, Edith Blincoe, promoted the idea that the purchase of bras and girdles required special expertise, which only department stores could provide. (*Seventeen* echoed her idea and advised a "trained fitter" for girls who wanted a "prettier" bosom and a "smoother" figure.) Blincoe acknowledged that teenage girls were already "100% bra conscious," and she hoped to develop the same level of attention to panty girdles. In order to attract junior customers and get them to try on both items, she

had the corset department place advertising cards on the walls of dressing rooms in sections of the store where teenagers and their mothers shopped. Strapless bras were suggested on cards in the dress and formal wear departments; lightweight girdles were suggested in the sportswear and bathing suit sections.²¹

In home economics classes, and also at the local women's club, thousands of American girls saw informational films such as *Figure Forum* and *Facts About Your Figure*, made by the Warner Brassiere Company in the 1950s. Films like these stressed the need for appropriate foundation garments in youth and provided girls with scientific principles for selecting them. They also taught young women how to bend over and lean into their bras, a maneuver that most of us learned early and still do automatically.²² Most middle-class girls and their mothers embraced the code of "junior figure control" and spent time and money in pursuit of the correct garments. Before a school dance in 1957, Gloria James, a sixteen-year-old African-American girl, wrote in her diary: "Mommy and I rushed to Perth Amboy [New Jersey] to get me some slacks, bras and a girdle. I don't even know how to get it [the girdle] on."²³

In the postwar world, the budding adolescent body was big business. Trade publications, such as *Women's Wear Daily*, gave special attention to sales strategies and trends in marketing to girls. In their reports from Cincinnati, Atlanta, and Houston, one thing was clear: wherever American girls purchased bras, they wanted to be treated as grown-ups, even if they wore only a AAA or AA cup.²⁴ In Atlanta, at the Redwood Corset and Lingerie Shop, owner Sally Blye and her staff spoke persuasively to young customers about the importance of "uplift" in order "not to break muscle tissue." And at Houston's popular Teen Age Shop, specially trained salesgirls allowed young customers to look through the brassieres on their own, and then encouraged them to try on

items in the dressing room without their mothers. Although many girls were shy at first, by the age of fourteen and fifteen most had lost their initial self-consciousness. "They take the merchandise and go right in [to the dressing room]," Blincoe said about her teenage clientele. Girls who could not be reached by store or school programs could send away to the Belle Mode Brassiere Company for free booklets about "junior figure control" with titles such as "The Modern Miss—Misfit or Miss Fit" and "How to Be Perfectly Charming." In the effort to help girls focus on their figures, Formfit, maker of the popular "Bobbies," offered a free purse-size booklet on calorie counting.²⁵

Given all this attention, it's not surprising that bras and breasts were a source of concern in adolescents' diaries written in the 1950s. Sandra Rubin got her first bra in 1951, when she was a twelve-year-old in Cleveland, but she did not try it on in a department store. Instead, her mother bought her a "braziere" while she was away on a trip and sent it home. "It's very fancy," Sandra wrote. "I almost died! I ran right upstairs to put it on." When she moved to New York City that September and entered Roosevelt Junior High School, Sandra got involved with a clique of seven girls who called themselves the "7Bs." Their name was not about their homeroom; it was about the cup size they wanted to be. "Flat, Flat! The air vibrates with that name as my friends and I walk by," Sandra wrote in a humorous but self-deprecating manner. By the time she was sixteen, Sandra had developed amply, so that her breasts became a source of pride. One night she had an intimate conversation with a male friend about the issue of chests: "We talked about flat-chested women (of which, he pointed out, I certainly am not [one])."²⁶

Breasts, not weight, were the primary point of comparison among high school girls in the 1950s. Although Sandra Rubin

called herself a "fat hog" after eating too much candy, her diary reportage was principally about the bosoms, rather than the waistlines, she saw at school. Those who had ample bosoms seemed to travel through the hallways in a veritable state of grace, at least from the perspective of girls who considered themselves flat-chested. "Busty" girls made desirable friends because they seemed sophisticated, and they attracted boys. In December 1959, when she planned a Friday-night pajama party, thirteen-year-old Ruth Teischman made a courageous move by inviting the "gorgeous" Roslyn, a girl whom she wrote about frequently but usually only worshiped from afar. After a night of giggling and eating with her junior high school friends, Ruth revealed in her diary the source of Roslyn's power and beauty: "Roslyn is very big. (Bust of course.) I am very flat. I wish I would get bigger fast."²⁷ Many girls in the 1950s perused the ads, usually in the back of women's magazines, for exercise programs and creams guaranteed to make their breasts grow, allegedly in short order.²⁸

The lament of the flat-chested girl—"I must, I must, I must develop my bust"—was on many private hit parades in the 1950s. There was a special intensity about breasts because of the attitudes of doctors, mothers, and advertisers, all of whom considered breast development critical to adult female identity and success. Although "junior figure control" increased pressure on the entire body, and many girls wore waist cinchers as well as girdles, it was anxiety about breasts, more than any other body part, that characterized adolescent experience in these years. As a result, thousands, if not millions, of girls in early adolescence jumped the gun and bought "training bras" at the first sight of breast buds, or they bought padded bras to disguise their perceived inadequacy. In the 1950s, the bra was validated as a rite of passage: regardless of whether a girl was voluptuous or flat, she was likely

to purchase her first bra at an earlier age than had her mother. This precocity was due, in part, to biology, but it was also a result of entrepreneurial interests aided and abetted by medical concern. By the 1950s, American society was so consumer-oriented that there were hardly any families, even among the poor, who would expect to make bras for their daughters the way earlier generations had made their own sanitary napkins.

Training bras were a boon to the foundation garment industry, but they also meant that girls' bodies were sexualized earlier. In contemporary America, girls of nine or ten are shepherded from undershirts into little underwear sets that come with tops that are proto-brassieres. Although this may seem innocuous and natural, it is not the same as little girls "dressing up" in their mother's clothing. In our culture, traditional distinctions between adult clothing and juvenile clothing have narrowed considerably, so that mature women dress "down," in the garments of kids, just as often as little girls dress "up."²⁹ While the age homogeneity of the contemporary wardrobe helps adult women feel less matronly, dressing little girls in adult clothing can have an insidious side effect. Because a bra shapes the breasts in accordance with fashion, it acts very much like an interpreter, translating functional anatomy into a sexual or erotic vocabulary. When we dress little girls in brassieres or bikinis, we imply adult behaviors and, unwittingly, we mark them as sexual objects. The training bras of the 1950s loom large in the history of adolescent girls because they foreshadowed the ways in which the nation's entrepreneurs would accommodate, and also encourage, precocious sexuality.

DIETING: THE CONSTANT VIGIL

As we near the end of the "century of svelte," the body projects of middle-class American girls are more habitual and intense than they were in either the 1920s or the 1950s. Although Yvonne Blue's experience feels familiar, dieting was different in the 1920s from what it is today. In the first place, Yvonne was fifteen years old when she started to diet, instead of nine or ten, the age of many contemporary girls when they begin to monitor their appetite. In addition, Yvonne's efforts to reduce were regarded as inappropriate by her parents, who never made any accommodation to help her, such as purchasing special foods. Yvonne's dieting was confined to a single summer, and her standard of slenderness was not as extreme as today's. In 1995, middle-class white girls define perfection as five feet seven inches tall and 110 pounds, and many work long hours at exercise and body sculpting in order to achieve the body of their dreams. Although some studies suggest that African-American girls are more relaxed about and more accepting of different body types, this may well be a function of economic status rather than cultural differences. *Essence*, a magazine that caters to middle-class African-American women, regularly runs stories on body-size anxiety and eating disorders, a fact which suggests that conventional "white" standards become more relevant among women of color as affluence increases.³⁰

In the 1920s, dieting was a fashionable game for Yvonne and her girlfriends; it was not a way of life as it is for middle-class women and girls at the close of the twentieth century. Ever since the 1960s, adolescent diaries repeat, over and over, the same concern: "I've been eating like a pig," "I've got to lose weight," or "I must starve myself." This preoccupation is persistent rather than

episodic; it characterizes the teen years of most middle-class girls, regardless of race; and it underlies their struggles with self-identity, peer relationships, and even educational and occupational choices. When seventeen-year-old Heather Ellis was faced with choosing a college in the late 1980s, the New Jersey teenager factored her dieting into that important decision. After she heard that one of her choices, Mount Holyoke, had good food, she wrote, “[That is] a drawback since I want to lose weight not gain any.”³¹

American girls are on guard constantly against gaining weight, and, as a result, appetite control is a major feature of their adolescent experience. “I’m too ugly. I’m too fat. I have a crummy personality,” wrote Carol Merano, a sixteen-year-old at Westport High School in Connecticut in the late 1960s. Carol was five feet four inches tall and weighed 120 pounds. She had an ample supply of close girlfriends, dates with boys, a good school record, and artistic talent, but her self-esteem was surprisingly dependent on the numbers she saw on the bathroom scale. Before the current cult of fitness and exercise took hold in the 1970s and 1980s, weight was the primary concern, more than a lean, toned body. Carol did not jog with her friends, “work out” at a health club, or do aerobics. Thirty years ago, counting calories and skipping meals were still the primary routes to weight reduction among adolescent girls.

Throughout high school and in her freshman year at George Washington University, Carol weighed herself at least once a day and tried all kinds of diets, including the *Harper’s Bazaar* 9-Day Diet, the Doctor’s Quick Weight Loss Diet, and the Air Force Salad Diet. Carol’s emotional life was grounded in the success or failure of these efforts. When she did not lose weight, she berated herself and her mood plummeted: “I’m very depressed tonight.

Same reason: I’m 120 pounds.” A month later, in November 1968, she was on top of the world: “I weigh 112. Everything is great for once.” But by the beginning of the New Year, Carol was back to 120 again—unhappy and signing herself “Fatty.” Almost everything in Carol’s world was conditioned by what she ate, even her relationship to her diary: “I’ve been hiding from this book because I haven’t stuck to my diet.”³²

Like so many other girls in late-twentieth-century America, Carol Merano felt good only when she felt thin. In the hope of getting to 110 pounds, her desired weight, she watched herself like a hawk, restricted calories, and tried to avoid family meals. For a few months, she ate only Carnation Instant Breakfast for supper. Although her mother disliked this kind of behavior because it meant that Carol did not participate in the family’s evening meal, she did not make Carol stop. No one in Westport wanted a fat daughter, and dieting seemed to be a normal part of teenage life.

Carol spent a great deal of time thinking about the psychology of eating, as well as the content of different foods and their effects on her body. In her diary she made nutritional pronouncements that reflected dieting wisdom in the late 1960s. “No carbohydrates or fats. That’s it. Nothing more, nothing less.” One evening, when her weight was up to 117 pounds, she vowed: “No great amount of hunger will drive me to eat until *supper time* [emphasis in original] when I will eat tons and tons of vegetables and whatever else is non-fatty.” Despite her low-cal eating, Carol sometimes lost control of her appetite, and this led her to cigarettes, which she considered an effective appetite suppressant. “I’ve really gone off my diet,” she explained, “because I didn’t have any cigarettes which is agony.” All of this attention to weight and food meant that Carol watched her body very carefully, complain-

ing about constipation and bloating at certain times of the month. Whenever she felt that her stomach was "out a mile," she gave herself an enema, something she considered "gross," but which also made her feel "very thin," and that made her happy.

As a freshman, at a point when her weight hit 120 pounds and she felt like a "stuffed sausage," Carol asked herself: "Why do I want to be thin?" Her initial answer had many layers: "So I will fit in my clothes. To show up Penny [a close friend]. To be the skinniest person in my [dormitory] room. So I will be a changed and better person outwardly—to fit my inner self." But then she stopped to consider her list: "That's bull shit. I just want to be thin so I can stop thinking about it." Yet even when Carol was down to 114 pounds, she was still consumed by the same nagging issue. "All I've been thinking about lately is how I look. That's because I look pretty bad. As soon as I look half-way decent again, I won't have to worry about it so Goddam much," she wrote. Looking "half-way decent" meant losing weight, and the persistence of that perceived need made Carol's appetite control essential to her sense of well-being.

Although weight and dieting were central preoccupations in Carol Merano's adolescence, she did not have either anorexia nervosa or bulimia, two common eating disorders that afflict contemporary girls in increasing numbers. Instead, Carol suffered from what psychologist Judith Rodin, president of the University of Pennsylvania, dubbed the "normative obsession" of American women.³³ Just like millions of other women and girls in the late twentieth century, this suburban Connecticut teenager was sufficiently fearful of fat to become a restrictive eater—that is, someone who habitually monitors food consumption. Because of her vigilance, between the ages of sixteen and nineteen Carol kept her weight within an eight-pound range, but her self-esteem and personal happiness were determined by whether she was at the bottom

or the top of that range. By the time she was twenty, the energy this vigilance required began to wear on her. Although Carol did not swear off dieting, she began to think about what a relief it would be if she could only "stop thinking about it." In effect, she admitted her own emotional addiction to weight and appetite control.

Few adolescent girls at the end of the twentieth century are able to stop thinking about "it." Instead of relaxing the imperative to lose weight and be thin, the pressure to control the body has been ratcheted upward by an even more demanding cultural ideal: a lean, taut, female body with visible musculature. This particular feminine icon—epitomized by Jane Fonda, Madonna, and the new Oprah—requires even more attention, work, and control than the thin body desired by Carol Merano. In this aesthetic, the traditional softness of the female body is devalued in favor of toning, muscles, and strength. Instead of poetic tributes to the velvet breast or the silken thigh, we give our highest praise to body parts whose textures suggest metal and building material. At any given time of the day or night in the United States, a sizable number of young women, as well as young men, are working out, trying to achieve "buns" and "abs" of steel, or legs and arms of iron. Companies like Procter & Gamble, maker of Secret deodorant, have developed special "feminine" products to aid young women in the pursuit of a "hard" body. Advertisers portray young women in athletic poses, making a connection between a lean body and their particular product. Today, most adolescent girls control their bodies from within, through diet and exercise, rather than externally, with corsets or girdles. Fashion is a major contributor to this internalization of body controls: if you are going to bare your midriff or your upper thighs, a girdle is not what helps you do it.

Our national infatuation with "hard bodies," combined with the idea that bodies are perfectible, heightens the pressure on ado-

lescents and complicates the business of adjusting to a new, sexually maturing body. On the positive side, the current emphasis on female muscles and strength could translate into less dieting (because of increased exercise) and better nutrition (because of more information about the content of different foods). Girls who go regularly to gyms and exercise studios, and those who participate in organized sports, should be physically stronger than earlier, more demure generations, or peers who “veg out” rather than “work out.” But there is a flip side to all this attention to the body that is neither positive nor benign. The fitness craze can aggravate adolescent self-consciousness and make girls desperately unhappy (if not neurotic) about their own bodies, particularly if it is combined with unrealistic expectations drawn from airbrushed and retouched photographs in advertising, and the seductive camera angles and body doubles so common in television and movies. In addition, there are all kinds of regular opportunities—in the fitness room, at the exercise studio, in the shower at the gym—to compare physiques. Although eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia, are not caused by visual images alone, these pathologies thrive in an environment in which so many “normal” people work so hard (and spend so much money) in pursuit of the perfect body.

HITTING BELOW THE BELT

Because we see so many extraordinary, hyperbolic bodies, young women today grow up worrying about specific body parts as well as their weight. At the moment, big breasts are not quite the fashion imperative they were in the 1950s, yet anxiety about them has never really disappeared. A third of the 38,000 girls who replied to a *Sassy*

magazine poll in 1989 thought their breasts were too small and 12 percent admitted stuffing their bras.³⁴ Teenagers in the 1990s continue to wear padded bras, and they also adopt new stylistic innovations in brassieres, such as the recent Wonderbra, whose fame is based on its ability to create seductive cleavage on even the flattest chest. Yet a bosom that is too small (or too large) is fixable in a world where mammoplasty is accepted and accessible. Women between the ages of twelve and twenty-two and between thirty and forty are the most likely to have breast augmentation, although plastic surgeons these days have to deal with much younger girls who are already unhappy with their chests.³⁵

In the 1990s, the real heat is on the lower body, especially thighs and buttocks. The current emphasis on the lower body has to do with a commingling of aesthetic, health, and sexual imperatives that make a taut female pelvis, sleek thighs, and a sculptured behind both objects of desire and symbols of success. Our current below-the-waist orientation is reflected in a national discourse about female thighs that has generated new products and procedures, and also increased female insecurity and dissatisfaction with the self.

Americans have talked about glamorous “gams” ever since the Rockettes made good legs a requirement back in the 1930s. But American taste in legs has changed considerably in the past half-century: the Rockettes of yesteryear had shorter, chunkier limbs than today’s long-stemmed, lean favorites. Changes in fashion account for the recent emphasis on tight, narrow thighs. In the wake of the 1960s miniskirt, more adult women than ever before began to worry about this particular piece of anatomy. The “jeaning of America” also promoted leaner thighs. As jeans became a national uniform, particularly for adolescents, the upper leg, crotch, and buttocks were all brought into focus. But it was the bikini, and—more recently—bathing suits with legs cut upward toward the

pelvic bone, that really made the tone and shape of thighs such a pervasive female concern.³⁶ When she was asked "What body parts are women most concerned about?," Betsy Brown, founder and president of Great Bodies, Inc., had a succinct and definitive answer based on experience with an exercise studio in Washington, D.C.: "Thighs. And then abdomen. [But] first, thunder thighs."³⁷

"Thunder thighs" entered the lexicon in the early 1980s both as shorthand for female anxiety about the body and as a misogynistic slur. In separate, unrelated interviews, Debra Sue Maffet (a Miss California who later became Miss America), Shari Ann Moskau (another Miss California), Cynthia Yantis (Miss Indiana), and Melissa Bradley (Miss Ohio), all complained to reporters about their "thunder thighs." Two of these beauty queens admitted that, because of their thighs, they dreaded the swimsuit competition. The psychology of the modern beauty queen reveals that even the most "gorgeous" women in our society worry about this particular body part, and that they use "fat talk," especially complaints about their thighs, as a way to express their insecurities.³⁸

"Thunder thighs" is also used against women in ways that can really sting. In 1982, sixteen-year-old Peggy Ward was dismissed from her high school marching band in Monongahela, Pennsylvania, because she was alleged to be too fat. Peggy was five feet four inches tall and weighed an unremarkable 124 pounds, yet the band director at her school maintained that a majorette of her height should weigh only 120 pounds. (He allowed five pounds for every inch over five feet.) Although Peggy's family physician tried to help by providing medical support for her claim that she was not overweight, the school system justified the requirement on the ground that local fans jeered overweight majorettes. The girls who marched with Peggy Ward did not support her either, and they accepted the litany of slurs that were routinely hurled at

heavy girls. In Monongahela, the fans apparently yelled "thunder thighs," as well as some of the old standards: "fatso," "earthquake," "tub of lard," and "beachball." Slurs like these heighten female insecurity about the body, and they contribute to the audience for female self-help books, such as Wendy Stehling's 1982 best-seller *Thin Thighs in Thirty Days*, which sold more than 425,000 copies within seven weeks of its release.³⁹

In middle-class America, girls grow up hearing adult women talk about how much they hate their own thighs. In the past two decades, there has been a national crusade against cellulite, the nonmedical term for a kind of dimpled fat that appears on the legs and derrieres of many mature women, not just those who are overweight. As fashion and beauty experts railed against thighs that resemble "orange peel" or "cottage cheese," the research and development divisions of the cosmetic industry put a great deal of energy and resources into developing thigh creams that would melt away this dreaded type of fat. Even the adolescent readers of *Young Miss* were exposed to a "scientifically designed" Firm and Trim Kit guaranteed to "fight the appearance of cellulite in problem areas." By 1995, American women and girls were spending more than \$100 million on "cellulite busters," many of which needed to be applied liberally, at least once or twice a day, at a cost of \$60 a tube. Although scientific studies have never supported their effectiveness, thigh creams are major business; and liposuction, a procedure that vacuums fat from the thighs and buttocks, has become the most popular kind of cosmetic surgery in the United States.⁴⁰

Our national concern about "thunder thighs" says a lot about what Americans value. In fact, the way we think and talk about the terrain of our bodies is an important determinant of our psychological well-being. Psychological tests, known as "body cathexis

scales," confirm that in the contemporary United States there is a deep connection between an individual's sense of self and his or her level of satisfaction with different parts of the body. Not surprisingly, there is more self-hatred among women than men, and women tend to be especially dissatisfied about the lower body—the waist, hips, thighs, and buttocks.⁴¹ To put it another way: when an American woman dislikes her thighs, she is unlikely to like herself. This sad reality needs to be factored into our understanding of girls and the way in which they develop their sense of self.

IN THE DRESSING ROOM

Because the body is a proxy for the self, selecting clothes for it is always of vital concern. American girls typically evaluate the success or failure of their personal body project in dressing rooms at the local mall or department store. At this stage of life, what a girl wears and how she looks in it determine her level of self-acceptance, as well as her relations with her peers.

Adolescents are incredibly intuitive about the social meaning of clothes, so they understandably invest a great deal of time and energy in selecting and trying on clothing. At home, they may try on an insufferable number of different outfits before choosing one; at the mall, they work conscientiously at making purchases that express what they want to "say" to the world. With the possible exception of shopping for a bathing suit, buying jeans seems to demand the most thought and consideration. In the retail business, the common wisdom is that girls try on approximately fourteen pairs of jeans for every one they eventually purchase.

Why this classic indecision about a pair of pants? And what does it tell us about the contemporary body project? A girl trying on a pair of jeans in the 1990s has many things to consider in addition to cost. Although teens generally look for brand names, market research reveals that fit supersedes brand loyalty when it comes to jeans. Thus, the teenage shopper must first determine her size—which is no small matter, given the way American manufacturers cut and label garments. Because every female clothing company develops its own sizes and proportions, there is no standardized equivalent between body measurements and size. Hips that are thirty-six inches, for example, do not always equal size twelve.

The laissez-faire nature of sizing for American women makes shopping for jeans a physical, as well as a psychological, struggle that is difficult at any age. However, it is particularly torturous for adolescents who regard size, much like weight, as a definitive element of their identity. Some girls assume there is something wrong with their bodies when they cannot fit consistently into the same "standard" size; others will reject a pair of jeans simply because they do not want to wear that size, even though the number has no substantive meaning.⁴² (Of course, the connection between size and identity is not limited to adolescence. Plenty of adult women do the same thing throughout their lives.)

In front of a three-way mirror, usually under harsh, uncompromising lights, the adolescent girl assesses herself in terms of the current quest for bodily perfection. Studies indicate that white, middle-class girls tend to strike a series of static poses while trying on clothes; African-Americans are likely to be more fluid, in order to see how "one moves." But almost all girls sit down and bend in their jeans to see if they are comfortable, and they also inspect the cut, color, and details to make sure that a new

pair “says” what they want jeans to say.⁴³ Their real concern is the body inside the pants, so they ask: Do these jeans flatter my body? Do they make my thighs look fat or my butt too big? Is there a “wedgie”—that is, does the garment reveal the crack between the buttocks? As the girl evaluates the aesthetics of her lower body, she imagines how she and her jeans will fare in the world outside the dressing room.

Shopping is a narcissistic pleasure for some young women, but for many others it generates serious emotional anguish because of its symbolic complexities and the insecurities it stirs up about the body and its parts. “I’m afraid my legs are too fat for it,” a seventeen-year-old explained about the disappointment she felt when a special outfit did not make her look the way she desired. “I hate my body,” wrote another, who, at age twenty, was still trying to come to grips with the dissatisfaction she felt every day and whenever she tried on new clothes. At the end of the twentieth century, fear of fat, anxiety about body parts, and expectations of perfection in the dressing room have all coalesced to make “I hate my body” into a powerful mantra that informs the social and spiritual life of too many American girls.⁴⁴

PIERCED PARTS

At the moment, there is another body project that is more flamboyant and provocative than either dieting or working out. Body piercing, once regarded as characteristic of “primitive” people, has emerged in the 1990s as the latest form of self-expression among American adolescents.⁴⁵ Unlike aboriginal societies, where the part to be pierced is determined by long-standing ritual and

tradition, contemporary teens face an array of piercing options, just as they do with food, music, cosmetics, and everything else in American life. Many girls spend long hours pondering what part they ought to pierce and what “piercwear” (i.e., jewelry) they like best. Although multiple ear piercing has been stylish in the United States for at least a decade, the repertoire of pierced parts has recently expanded to include the eyebrow, nose, and navel. There are also some audacious teenagers who pierce their lips, tongues, nipples, and genitals.

Most adolescent “piercees” are ordinary high school and college students who listen to CDs, use computers, and talk openly about why and how they perforated their bodies. (Tattoos are less popular because they are permanent and require expertise; holes, in contrast, can always be allowed to close up if the style passes, and they are also more easily done in the first place.) Because state laws restrict body piercing and tattooing to those who are eighteen and older, many younger adolescents pierce themselves. Others seek out well-known body-piercing studios, such as Gauntlet, which has establishments in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles; or they find someone locally, perhaps through a beauty salon or via the Internet. *The Point*, a newsletter published by the Association of Professional Piercers, is available on-line for information and referrals, but there are also countless interactive possibilities, such as: “Hi. I’m making this inquirey (ok, so it’s misspelled . . .) on behalf of a thirteen-year-old who is desperate to get her nose pierced. It seems no one will do it for her because of her age. She has her mom’s permission—does anyone know a place/person in the Cleveland/Akron/Kent area who can/will do it for her? If so, please e-mail me. You will have the undying gratitude of an eighth grader from the sticks.” (Replies came swiftly, such as

“Have you tried bringing the mother along? If the parent/legal guardian signs a consent form then they cannot sue.”)

In the 1990s, adolescent body piercing is a provocative symbol of a powerful revolution in sexual mores and behavior that brought gay culture into the mainstream of American life. While previous generations associated body piercing with New Guinea and exotic pictures in *National Geographic*, today's adolescents are apt to learn about piercing from ideas and behaviors emanating from the Castro and Christopher Street, two important homosexual communities in San Francisco and New York. Within the gay community, there is a diverse range of piercing practices, ranging from simply piercing the left ear (in order to announce a homosexual orientation) to bizarre forms of sadomasochism. In 1989, an avant-garde publisher in San Francisco issued a book that unveiled the full range of body piercing in the United States: *Modern Primitives: An Investigation of Contemporary Adornment and Ritual*. The book contained this warning: “Do not attempt any of the body modifications or practices described herein.” But it also provided an astonishing array of graphic photographs of extreme forms of piercing, sympathetic interviews with some of piercing's most dedicated devotees, and the names and locations of professional studios that served “piercing needs.” Readers also learned about *Piercing Fans International Quarterly* (now *The Piercing Magazine*) and how to mail-order nostril screws, barbells for the tongue, and different kinds of rings for the nipples, penis, labia, and clitoris.⁴⁶

Teenagers today grow up in a world where rigid dichotomies between gay (homosexual) and straight (heterosexual) behavior are disappearing. They also see more people behaving in ways once ascribed to homosexuals. This “homosexualization” of American life, first described by Dennis Altman in the late 1970s, has become a notable feature of current popular culture—partic-

ularly in music, sports, and fashion—all “worlds” adolescents value, follow closely, and imitate.⁴⁷ In 1991, Madonna's controversial book, *Sex*, featured an array of pierced male and female body parts in a series of sadomasochistic fantasies. Most American teenagers never read this expensive, self-indulgent book, but they did see Madonna flaunt her own navel ring in public, and they knew that she had “lifted” the idea of personal hardware from the gay men and women who were part of her entourage. On MTV other musicians followed her lead: Green Day and the Red Hot Chili Peppers displayed many different kinds of body piercing, and in 1993 an Aerosmith video centered on an innocent schoolgirl who got a tattoo and had her belly button pierced. In professional basketball, Dennis Rodman, the Chicago Bulls' superstar, forcefully moves his pierced and tattooed body around the court, demonstrating that this form of personal decoration has traveled well beyond its gay roots into the world of masculine athletic prowess.

Piercing became even more fashionable among girls when it was introduced in 1994 on the Paris runways by designers Jean Paul Gaultier and Christian Lacroix. Soon afterward, supermodels Christy Turlington and Naomi Campbell decided to pierce their navels. These developments, combined with the popularity of skirts, pants, and shirts designed to display more midriff than ever before, made a bejeweled navel a potent fashion statement, particularly when it was displayed on a flat, tight stomach. According to a poll by *Sassy* in 1994, adolescent boys think belly rings are “sexy” or “cute,” and most girls consider them desirable, if you have the right kind of body.⁴⁸ By electronic mail, an excited (but concerned) Long Island teenager sent out this message: “I just got my belly button pierced and the guy that did it was pretty nervous, his hand was shaking as he did it. Anyway, I was won-

dering if it may be too shallow, and how I could tell, cause the ring really sticks out. Is it possible to get a really small ring for it, so that it doesn't stick out?"

Other kinds of piercing, such as the eyebrow, lip, nose, and tongue, are much more controversial. Seventy-five percent of the teenagers in the *Sassy* poll considered this kind of piercing "repulsive" and most middle-class parents dislike facing this kind of adornment across the dinner table. As a result, body piercing can become a contentious family issue. Rather than face her parents' disapproval, one middle-class sixteen-year-old secretly pierced her navel and hid it all winter, until the summer months, when her shorts revealed the truth to her outraged parents. Because of the fierce battles that rage in some homes, talk-show host Jerry Springer devoted an entire program to explaining piercers to parents and vice versa. Young women with rings in their eyebrows and jewels in their nose characteristically report long periods of silent accommodation with mothers who all utter the same, unconvincing refrain: "You looked prettier without it."

For those struggling for autonomy and independence, maternal distaste for the piercing aesthetic is no deterrent. Piercing proves, in a public way, that your body is your own ("I-can-fuck-up-my-own-body-if-I-want-to!" seems to be a common refrain). It also signals your personal politics. If you become an "urban aboriginal" at the end of the twentieth century, it is usually a sign of two things: sexual liberalism (because piercing symbolizes opposition to conventional sexual norms) and cultural relativism (because it evokes the primitive and the exotic).

Most young people explain the practice as a way to differentiate themselves from bourgeois society and mainstream youth culture. These are young women who self-consciously reject the "good/pretty girl" ideal presented in *Seventeen* and *Mademoiselle*. But

instead of abandoning absurd weight goals, they choose something that their elders and many of their peers regard as mutilative and disgusting. Most of them seem to enjoy the stigma, regarding it as a clear-cut way to separate from those they consider "yuppies" and "princesses." "You don't see JAPS [Jewish American princesses] going around wearing nose rings," a sixteen-year-old with jewels in her face proclaimed with demonstrable pride.

Although piercing acts like a bumper sticker for many young women, there is a smaller group that takes delight in perforating more intimate body parts, such as nipples and genitals. "When people look at you with a nose ring they automatically label you as alternative," said a nineteen-year-old in upstate New York, "but nobody knows about my [clitoral] hood piercing except me and my boyfriend." Although some women—both gay and straight—pierce their nipples and genitals with the expectation that it will increase erotic sensation, the pierced high school and college students I interviewed were heterosexuals and they never offered sexual pleasure as an explanation. Instead, they spoke with girlish enthusiasm about the special "secret" they shared with their boyfriend, and how the genital decoration made them feel "more feminine."

The notion that genital piercing was a "special secret" made me think about the changing nature of intimacy in American society, and the ways in which girls' bodies express these changes. Rather than wear a boyfriend's school ring, the way earlier generations did, these young women tingled at the idea that they had a piece of love jewelry in (or on) the most intimate parts of their body. This was not a token that could be displayed publicly in school hallways, the way you flashed the ring worn on a chain around your neck when you were "going steady" in the 1950s. A ring on the clitoris is a very different kind of marker, intended only for the titillation of the "piercee" and her boyfriend. In an

era when the distinction between the public and private has all but disappeared, some teenage girls apparently feel the need to decorate their genitals in order to have *something* intimate—in effect, to claim some degree of privacy in a world where the body has been made public. (What was surprising was the pervasive sense of romance and intimacy that the practice carried, despite the fact that the hole and the jewelry were acquired in a commercial studio, through the intervention of a paid person.)

Most adolescent girls say “Yuck” when they think about piercing such delicate and personal body parts. But the genital-piercing adolescent subculture is not some wild aberration unrelated to broader, more familiar behavioral patterns in late-twentieth-century American society. In a culture that pays such meticulous attention to the body, it is not a fluke that some adolescent girls have become involved in this particular body project. After all, looking good—all over and everywhere—is a national priority, and it explains the economic success of an upscale lingerie chain such as Victoria’s Secret, which has a sizable number of adolescent patrons. In the past few years, a mail-order catalog from Delia’s LLC has offered teenage girls an opportunity to purchase their own version of the classic—and seductive—black bra and panties.

Adolescent body piercers are representatives of new sexual mores, but they also proclaim the ways in which exhibitionism and commercial culture have come together at the end of the twentieth century. Thirty years ago, sexually titillating underwear and lingerie were, by and large, intended for adults, in the privacy of their bedrooms. Today, we are likely to see it—on both women and girls—at parties or even in the streets. When underwear becomes outerwear, as it has in the past decade, adolescents of both sexes are likely to become confused about the nature of intimacy. At a time in life when sexual activity is beginning, this is no small

confusion, yet it is constantly increased by commercial activities—such as the marketing of lingerie or piercewear—that erode the important distinction between the public and the private. Although we may not want to admit it, the current craze for body piercing follows logically from the pared-down, segmented, increasingly exposed, part-by-part orientation toward the female body that has emerged over the course of the twentieth century. In fact, in a culture where everything is “up close and personal,” it should not surprise us that some young women today regard the entire body, even its most private parts, as a message board.