PATRIOTIC SUPPORT: THE GIRDLE PIN-UP OF WORLD WAR II

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Patriotic Support: The Girdle Pin-Up of World War II

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Thesis

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Government and commercial campaigns waged during World War II to encourage women to pursue occupations once reserved solely for men altered the public’s ideas regarding women’s capacity to serve their nation, and not only in ways directly related to industrial production. Once imagined as a threat to decency and the moral fiber of the nation, women’s sexuality became harnessed to the winning of the war and the morale of the troops through public relations campaigns that explicitly charged women with objectifying themselves for the good of the nation. One of the most prevalent visual icons of femininity serving that purpose during this period was the pin-up girl—a figure of fantasy gracing magazine gatefolds, playing cards, packaging, calendars, and advertisements of all kinds. The pin-up comprised a set of visual conventions that not only guided illustrators’ and photographers’ production of the female image; it also shaped women’s changing sense of their physical selves. The prescriptive dimension of the pin-up was best literalized in girdle marketing campaigns which urged women to reshape their bodies to align with new wartime ideals. World War Two-era girdle advertisements reveal the extent to which the pin-up as an image of femininity permeated ideas of women’s capacities as not only sexual partners but also as citizens and members of the nation. Pin-ups encouraged the reconciliation of traditional tropes of femininity such as beauty and glamour with strength, independence and bravery in ways that
appealed to the average American woman and man. Girdles construct identity by way of reimagining and repositioning the physical self, producing the psychological and aesthetic appeal of an idealized woman in the form of images such as the pin-up. The deep cultural and historical meaning of the pin-up refracted through the lens of girdle advertising presents an unparalleled opportunity to analyze shifting gender ideologies during World War Two.

Girdles and corsetry have a long history in the construction of human physiognomy, imbued as they have been with the power to reconstruct women (and men’s) figures in the pursuit of an idealized, hegemonic image of physical beauty. For much of the previous half-century, American women looked to commercially produced corsets and girdles to contain their bodies according to contemporary beliefs about health and ideals of slimness and youth. Girdles not only shaped the body, but reflected and reified popular and medical conceptions about the physical capacities of women. During World War II, I argue, the role of the girdle would take on a special and pronounced meaning that centered upon women’s bodily capabilities and the physical display of the girdled frame as a representative of the idealized wartime pin-up.

Analysis of girdle advertisements and popular Varga and Petty Girl pin-ups contributes to the burgeoning field of visual history. Visual historians argue that a greater understanding of cultural history can be achieved through the study of symbols and icons, many of which are visual in nature. Visual historians employ art history techniques, paying close attention to formalist properties, symbolism and cultural mentalité to understand images and place them within their historical context. Rather than relegate pictorial sources to the role of visual aids for textual arguments, visual history seeks to
read images as texts themselves that are infused with cultural, social and historical meaning. John Thornton Caldwell examines the limited role the visual register has had in historical analysis which often reifies the written word as more accurate or truthful and imagery as dubious or “false history.”¹ Caldwell contends that images are both historical and real, acting as products of history with their own agency.² These visual historical products are crucial to socio-cultural understanding because “cultures represent themselves with images.”³ These sources which not only offer an image to the viewer of pin-ups in girdles, but also operate as an extension of women’s own visual self-determination through physical alteration and thus are doubly visual, calling for a visual history analysis imbued with feminist perspectives on the body and women’s representation in the media.

Visual media, such as cinema, poster art, magazines, calendars, and packaging, became more and more central to Americans’ daily life during and following World War II. In an attempt to sell the war, Office of War Information propaganda campaigns, as well as advertising media, circulated cultural and political meanings that framed perceptions about the war and shaped the way Americans felt about themselves. Encouraged through recruitment campaigns, women embraced a new sense of freedom and challenged themselves through volunteering, service and war production employment in ways that commanded a new sense of self and a revision of traditional gender identity. Since the Office of War Information freely used the media to achieve its ends, threads of the American political and ideological agenda permeated advertising as well. Within the

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
medium of girdle advertising in particular, rationing of metals and rubber required dramatic revision of both girdle construction and marketing, impacting the industry in a way that made the war even more salient to both copy and illustration. While the influence of intimate apparel advertising cannot be said to have shaped identity for all women, and indeed, would have read differently across class and racial lines, nevertheless the overlap of the pin-up girl and the girdle advertisement, rationing and war propaganda made such advertisements particularly prescriptive through their promotion of hegemonic beauty ideals, which in themselves reveal much about national identity and racial politics, as well as femininity.

A Girl for Every Taste: Different Styles of Pin-Ups

While the definitions and span of the pin-up as an icon has been broadly conceived by both enthusiasts and art and cultural historians, the term “pin-up” was originally applied to the women who adorned the gatefolds of *Esquire* magazines and captured the popular cultural imagination during World War II. Her impact was reflected in and influenced by the overlapping spheres of Hollywood, fashion, advertising, and military settings and war recruitment campaigns, where her face was ubiquitous. Since the pin-up had so many arenas, I have created distinct categories to differentiate between some of these types of pin-ups. Predominantly, girdle pin-ups are of the illustrated type popularized by Petty and Vargas and represented an ideal American femininity that appealed to women on a variety of levels. These women symbolized a spectrum of ideas and values, all of which were mutable and able to simultaneously

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represent the new patriotic war worker, the traditional femininity of the sweetheart left behind “at home,” and America herself. Girdle pin-ups tapped into the iconography of the pin-up and the language of transformative advertising to create a potent allure and influence for gender identity.

The Hollywood or Cinematic pin-up, composed of glamorous portrait-style photography popularized by George Hurrell, featured the brightest stars of the silver screen. The two most-requested photos were those of Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth, women who were revered as representing the pinnacle of American beauty (Hayworth was called the “Love Goddess”). These stars were admired by both women and men and established not only beauty standards but fashion trends as well. Cinema fanzines like Photoplay encouraged identification with such stars by sharing their vulnerabilities in a move that not only made stars relatable, but promised that if women could find that one fault holding them back, they too could become successful glamour goddesses (often a lure in girdle advertising that promised to correct “figure faults”). In addition, the actresses themselves encouraged their fans to send pin-up photographs to soldiers and to keep up their beauty regimes so that they would retain the charm that their soldiers dreamed of from afar.

Race often drops out of scholarly examination of the pin-up, yet black women too took their cues from this same set of images. In the post-war period, African-American women seeking to define and display their own beauty were featured in pin-up poses in magazines like Jet, Hue and Ebony. Analyzing African-American pin-ups or Civil Rights

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5 Following a trend of transformative advertising, small “social failure” pieces about actresses identified shortcomings that had been overcome on the road to success. A Hollywood scrapbook assembled by Irene Price c. 1936, in the author’s collection, bears clippings that identify nail-biting and posture as two such flaws.
pin-ups gives special attention to the political and historical meaning inherent in the visibility of this genre.

Artistic Conventions and Aesthetic Properties of the Pin-Up

To undertake a visual analysis of girdle ad women as pin-ups, one must first articulate the properties of the pin-up as conceptualized by Vargas, Petty and other top artists. While other artists created pin-ups during this period, the “Petty Girl” and the “Varga Girl” were considered the ideal and serve as a representation of beauty hallmarks embodied by pin-up girls. One immediately apparent observation is that Varga and Petty Girls were often clad only in lingerie or half-nude. When clothes were depicted, they clung to the body like a second-skin, reminiscent of the snug fit of foundation wear. This was also due to the fact that Vargas often sketched a nude model and then painted clothes on afterwards. Another hallmark of this was the tendency to suggest clothing through a flesh colored line.

Varga and Petty Girls were the epitome of glamour with beautifully waved or curled hair, fresh pink cheeks, sparkling eyes, long lashes and red lips and nails. Despite their sexualized nature, they could be the girl who lived next door. The emphasis on feminine beauty, punctuated with flowers, ribbons, and, of course, feminine undergarments conveyed a sensuality as well as luxury. Pin-ups often wore extravagant or rationed goods like silk negligees and stockings. While these types of pin-ups mostly suggested upper or middle class backgrounds, women who were working for Uncle Sam often had more expendable income than ever before. With new spending power—and ads
that made consumer choices synonymous with patriotic duty and freedom of choice—
“classy” pin-ups seemed a more attainable ideal than ever before.

The most important hallmark of the pin-up is the pose. The artist presented,
displayed and stylized the body. The pin-up physique—long legs, tiny ribcage, full
breasts, soft limbs and tiny, doll-like hands and feet were wildly out of scale and overtly
sexual, creating what Joanna Frueh calls “monster beauty.” Legs extended out from the
body ended in a pointed foot to give the illusion of an even longer leg, even if the pin-
up was standing (on tip-toe). Arms were frequently behind the head, a position that both
indicated sexual surrender, but also thrust the breasts outward. The pin-up usually looked
at the viewer in a flirtatious way. The key to the pin-up was fantasy—she was positioned
in a sexual pose, with an emphasized curvy physique. She offered herself to the viewer
and was a commodified object as one ad for Varga Girl playing cards implied by its
recommendation to give service men the “gift of gal.”

While it is evident that both girdle advertisements and the icon of the pin-up
imparted ideas about gender and ideal femininity, scholars have not explored the overlap
between these mediums in depth. Jill Fields and Kurt Vonnegut have both noticed
similarities between the illustrations for intimate apparel and the more widely known pin-
ups of Alberto Vargas or George Petty, who illustrated advertisements for Bestform
lingerie. Jill Fields, in her study of intimate apparel, notes that the illustration conventions
of the pin-up have been prevalent in girdle advertising. These conventions follow the

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6 Buszek, Pin-up Grrrls, 3.
7 “For Men in the Service, the Gift of Gal,” Esquire, August 1942, 151.
body posturing of the pin-up who returns the gaze of the viewer in sexual provocation. If the girdle ad models pose in the same fashion as the pin-up, display similar formal and artistic properties, and mirror the same beauty aesthetic while serving as a sexualized and exposed object, are they any different than pin-ups? Are they not then pin-ups themselves, particularly in light of the similar ways in which both girdle ad women and pin-ups informed identity? Since the pin-up was the beauty ideal of World War II and girdles were beauty aids for perfecting one’s figure in pursuit of ideal beauty, it seems inescapable that the advertising for foundation wear would employ the perfection and aesthetic appeal of the pin-up to promote their products. Due to the pin-up’s appeal for women and the unique marketing of foundation wear to women, investigation of this topic must then pursue the girdle ad woman as a pin-up.

Chapter II provides an historical overview of the girdle and examines the effect of the war upon the girdle industry and the ways in which girdle advertising was framed to address women’s unique contributions and concerns during war. Background about the entrée of the pin-up into the popular media and feminist interpretations about the ways in which the female body is displayed and constructed are especially important to imagining both the rise of the pin-ups’ popularity and the effect of pin-ups upon women’s identity (Chapter III & IV). As an image of idealized (white) beauty, the pin-up often seems mute on African-American femininity; yet these images bear potent subtextual messages about identity and racial and national tensions, shaping the ways in which black women received these images and imagined themselves as pin-ups (Chapters V & VII). The appeal of the pin-up continued to inspire women’s identification and emulation into the

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post-war period and beyond, attesting to her powerful hold in the American cultural imagination (Chapter VI & VII).

Employing the pin-up girl as a representation of the perfect American girl in girdle advertisements inspired consuming women to shape their figures and their womanhood along the lines of the pin-up. The figure perfection promised by girdle manufacturers not only held out the possibility of transforming into this flawless symbol of American femininity, but also guaranteed bodily support for those engaging in physically demanding war-work, making the wearing of girdles synonymous with the new American woman’s identity.
The cover girl’s body is no one’s body, it is a pure form which expresses no attribute.

—Roland Barthes

The Evolution of the Corset and Girdle

As women’s place in society and the home shifted over time, the laces of their corsets and girdles became part of a tug-of-war between freedom and constraint. Once imagined as domestic angels that presided over the home in extremely restrictive corsetry worn even during maternity, women began to increasingly enjoy public spaces at the turn of the nineteenth century. Political struggle, the attainment of suffrage for women, new employment and educational opportunities, lifestyle changes and fashion trends threatened the corset’s hold upon women. With the advent of the flapper and the new boyish silhouette in ascendance, lingerie manufacturers were forced to change tactics to modernize and maintain relevancy with women who might forgo corsets altogether. Their ads employed discourses suggesting danger to women’s racial purity and femininity. Trade journals and undergarment advertising promised to save women (and sales) from descending into a “corsetless...moral danger.”

The introduction of the flapper aesthetic in the 1910s with its diminished bust and hips—the boyish silhouette—and a new lifestyle that demanded freedom of movement as

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women enjoyed more outdoor leisure activities, called forth changes in corset design. This new aesthetic forced manufacturers to streamline their foundations in a way that would diminish feminine curves to achieve a determinedly boyish silhouette. Despite widespread industry panic that women would eschew foundations altogether, shifting sales pitches and products to meet the demands of modern women allowed companies to assert that their products were actually essential to creating the new shape, especially for those who were not youthful or naturally slim. The irony is that women who sought the carefree break from traditional feminine attire by adopting a boyish shape often actually had to reach for the most feminine type of garment to securely bind their flesh, slim their hips and flatten their chests and buttocks.

In addition to arguing that women needed girdles to achieve the flapper look, manufacturers employed fear-mongering arguments to stress the importance of a foundation garment to women’s health. Scientific rhetoric and concerns about biological idealism fueled the tendency to classify and type figure faults that needed correction. Identifying a problem in need of solving and offering garments tailored to these needs produced demand in a shrinking market and helped corsetieres to stay current. Doctors and experts weighed in about the risks to health and figure for the corsetless woman, while some argued that the flapper figure was mannish and to be avoided by women—at worst, an ethnic or biological defect.\textsuperscript{10} Positioned as scientific and medical evidence, these arguments were positive that the corset was a safeguard against physical deformity and moral questionability. With this in mind, manufacturers argued that even though the

\textsuperscript{10} Fields, \textit{An Intimate Affair}, 62.
vogue was to look corsetless, women still needed the right foundation to be fashionable and healthfully protected.

While going without foundation wear could cause aesthetic damage according to the marketers of girdles, manufacturers also contended that the wrong type of garment might actually create figure faults. The corset was deemed old-fashioned and corsetieres agreed that it should be forsaken for the modern girdle that promised the right kind of shaping for contemporary fashion, freedom of movement and the maintenance of propriety. Girdles used less boning and more elastic in order to capture a younger clientele (the flapper demographic) and ensure a new generation of consumers.\(^\text{11}\)

The drive to regulate and influence the undergarments that women wore was but one part of the struggle between tradition and modernity that had women’s sense of freedom and self-determination at its heart. The clothing women wore was important signifiers of class, gender and personal identity and central to women’s visibility and voice in the larger arena of the sociopolitical journey of women throughout history. The 1930s signaled the return of the womanly shape and the foundation wear industry rebounded in spite of the Great Depression. During the 1940s, as women’s roles changed to meet the demands of the war effort, the idea of freedom in undergarment marketing would become even more weighted with political, cultural and social meaning.

Controlling Wild Flesh: Girdles and Sexuality

At the same time that women’s girdles in mid twentieth-century advertisements clearly promoted a sexualized figure; conversely, they also purported to contain if not stifle sexuality. As physical alteration constricted women’s bodies, women’s own notions

\(^{11}\) Fields, *An Intimate Affair*, 74.
of sexuality and consciousness of the body became constrained. Since the girdle positioned women to be mindful of figure faults as well as their own attractiveness and sexuality, some scholars have argued that the girdle may be viewed as a metaphoric chastity belt. The girdle reins in and controls “wild flesh” and covers the genital area. Sandra Bartky argued that wearing girdles created a tendency for women to “sit and stand with legs, feet and knees close or touching [which] may well be a coded declaration of sexual circumspection…or an effort, albeit unconscious to guard the genital area.”\textsuperscript{12} Such a posture may be observed in girdle advertisements and pin-up art in which legs are usually touching. Further, wearing a girdle was part of a proper wardrobe; not wearing a foundation garment connoted loose morals, a lack of modesty and the aspect of indecency. Thus, girdles were a symbol of virtue and modesty that was prescribed by a patriarchal society in the same vein as a chastity belt.\textsuperscript{13} The girdles’ connotations of modesty and propriety helped to mediate some of the tensions that might be aroused by the image of a sexually provocative, partially unclad woman—a line that the pin-up was always crossing as she flirted with sexual fantasy yet remained a symbol of the faithful all-American girl waiting at home.

If the girdle helped to regulate sexuality and to connote a certain type of woman, then it also was instrumental in how women were recognized and defined. Society often assigns gender identity through the physical body. The girdle, along with other shape wear, was a commodified key to attaining that identity. Dr. Jan Schoemaker argued that


\textsuperscript{13} I will further examine the link between girdles and sexual morality in the film \textit{Anatomy of a Murder} in Chapter V.
corsetless women were neither women nor men, suggesting that the girdle created feminine identity as well as shaped bodily form.\textsuperscript{14} Gender theorists have argued that feminine gender is, in part, known by possession of breasts and hips. Hence, society often assigns gender identity through the physical body. The idea that the trappings of gender—cosmetics, lingerie, hairstyle—created femininity echoes Judith Butler’s contention that gender is performed and created.\textsuperscript{15} Butler’s theory that the body itself is a passive instrument or medium inscribed with cultural meanings and that these meanings construct gender, necessitates a closer look at the iconography of the pin-up.\textsuperscript{16}

Girdles Go To War

In previous decades, elasticized material had allowed manufacturers to create a few girdle sizes that would fit a range of bodies due to “give” in the fabric, but restrictions on materials and production required redesign. Indeed, girdle manufacturers were forced to reinvent their products during the war due to material scarcity and the integration of industry divisions into war production. The military needed silk for parachutes, powder bags, and gas bags; Rayon became the most popular silk substitute in intimate apparel and fashion.\textsuperscript{17} Japanese capture of Asian rubber plantations, a major supplier of U.S. rubber, cut rubber production by 50% in 1941.\textsuperscript{18} By 1942, rubber was a rationed material and the War Production Board would limit manufacturers to “thirty-six

\textsuperscript{14} “Eminent Surgeons Endorse the Corset,” \textit{Corsets & Lingerie}, December 1921, 32-35.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 12.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
square inches of elastic fabric per garment.”¹⁹ The U.S. also called up synthetic rubber for duty. Government needs reassigned undergarment finishing tape for cartridge belt construction and metal for munitions production.²⁰ Metal was another important component of girdle construction used for grommets, garter fasteners and zippers. New and improved girdles boasted innovative fabric use and a more exact fit. With more tailored designs, ordering by phone was no longer feasible; now in-person purchasing and fittings were a must.²¹

Copy alluded to the innovation of new girdles and their improved fit through measurement terms such as “precision,” “adjustable” and “exact” teamed with concepts like “System of Corsetry,” “Tailored-to-Fit” and “Vital Dimension.”²² Advertisers portrayed wartime girdles as scientific garments that promoted ideals of health, vitality and “Victory Vigor.”²³ Positioned as a supporting garment that allowed the wearer to move and fight fatigue while engaged in war work, girdles supported the muscles and posture. The theme of science is overtly woven into an American Lady ad with the model superimposed upon the image of a scientist holding a test tube.²⁴ The ad copy calls the new girdles “miracles” made of “textiles born in a test tube” and created by masterminds. An ad for Camp Scientific Supports combined science, good health and patriotism in its news article presentation. The ad “She Serves, Too” draws a parallel between military

¹⁹ “Improved by Rationing,” Harper’s Bazaar, September 1943, 94. For ease of reference, all images were given titles.
²¹ “Improved by Rationing.”
²⁵ “Miracles.”
service for one’s country and the featured fit expert by envisioning her with many soldierly qualities such as devotion, training, patriotism, responsibility. The ad portrays women as having useful skills and the girdles it is promoting as aiding women in applying those skills for the benefit of the nation as a whole. Camp’s girdles were performing a “heroic job in helping women to feel more fit...millions of women now engaged in the heavy work of industrial war.”

Camp Scientific Supports emphasized the strain that the war placed upon working women who were either taking on war work or added household responsibilities due to scarcity of domestic help—a reference to the increasing numbers of African-American women who were able to seek new opportunities through industrial employment. The ad cautions the svelte woman that figure support is essential even for her. As the copy claims, even a “perfect 36 can suffer” from postural concerns. Camp’s ad operates on many psychological levels all to suggest that all women require foundations to perform their American duty.

Other themes of wartime girdle advertising included pride in sacrifice for welfare of the country. A 1943 Realform ad captioned “Military Needs Come First” shows a blonde flirtatiously pasting a stamp into her ration book, and act which made the political sexual by positioning patriotism as sensually appealing. The copy itself reveals that Realform has devoted most of its knitting machines to the production of camouflage nets and that this might mean that Realform girdles are scarce. Talon girdles also proudly announced their part in war production by listing their wartime services such as

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supplying Talon fasteners, gauges, and metal donations to the military. Since Talon also recognized the limit this placed on production, their ad told women to plan for the long term and purchase a dependable Talon foundation today.

Frequently, these advertisements used military verbiage that linked wearing a girdle to fighting for victory. Hickory foundations by Perma-lift had an especially patriotic flair—“Discover for yourself the victory of Hickory”—and described the ability to buy your favorite brand names like Hickory as an American right that might be taken away.28 This line that appeared in numerous Hickory ads implied that American rights and freedom could be expressed and maintained through consumption of luxury items.

Cementing the connection between military campaigns against the enemy and women’s personal campaigns to seduce men, Hickory called the smoothing effect of foundations a “camouflage campaign.”29 Messages to buy more war bonds and stamps prevailed as did star motifs. Other popular themes common to girdle advertisements were health benefits, perfection and transformation, magic, erotic conventions of the pin-up and during the war, glamour and beauty, sacrifice, victory and patriotic duty.

Advertising references to the women’s war work were always physical. The implication was that women experienced fatigue from activity, especially the more taxing industrial work, and that they needed to wear foundations to support their bodies, their postures and their muscles. The notion of physically frail women inherent in girdle ads contributed to the feminization of women in the media and served as reminders that work outside the home was temporary. Since these ads focused on the physical body and

27 Harper’s Bazaar, 3 January 1942, 16.
gendering through that body, gender theory serves as a perfect analytical tool. Theorists of gender identity formation have argued that society ascribes gender through the physical form and as such have considered corsetry to be influential in creating the ideal female body type when in vogue. The reductive nature of girdles and corsetry symbolized erasure of the body, reduction of flesh, reconstruction of form and the disappearance of flaws. This emphasis on “becoming small” operated as a form of invisibility in which the garment controlled the woman and rendered her increasingly inert and diminutive. This association of diminutive features common to pin-up girls translated into girdle advertisements. The notion of a delicate and dainty woman who must be defended was one aspect of wartime gender roles and worked as counterinfluence to the masculinization of women holding “man-sized” jobs during the war.

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30 “We love to make you feel small,” Mademoiselle, April 1947. See also Flickr, Internet, available from http://www.flickr.com/photos/leifpeng/84417270/in/set-1753475/, accessed 1 April 2009. The ad caption “We love to make you feel small” was part of the 1947 Jantzen girdle marketing and reflects efforts to diminish women’s presence in the public sphere and return them to the home after the war.
CHAPTER III

POSITIONING THE PIN-UP

*Our American troops are ready to fight at the drop of an Esquire.*

Bob Hope

Recognizing the audience of both the pin-up and her counterpart, the girdle pin-up, is vital to evaluating its cultural meaning. The pin-up popularized by *Esquire* artists George Petty and Alberto Vargas had a wide appeal for military men and became a symbol of the war effort that graced bombers and barracks alike, but pin-ups also held a deep fascination for women. Marketing by companies such as Cold Ray permanents and Jantzen swimwear employed Vargas for illustration, and Jergen’s cosmetics in particular capitalized on the ideal beauty of the Varga Girl with the tagline “Be His Pin-Up Girl.”31 Hollywood actresses, such as Betty Grable—the number one Hollywood pin-up of the war—also encouraged women to adopt the role of a pin-up in their sweetheart’s lives.32 Even magazines created for a predominantly male readership such as *Esquire* appealed to women as well. In fact, a poll of *Esquire* readers revealed that three-quarters of such magazines were read by women and that the most popular feature for them was

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illustrations such as pin-ups.\footnote{“Don’t Look Now...But There’s a Woman Reading Over Your Shoulder,” \textit{Esquire}, October 1940, 171.} Held up both as pin-ups in their own right and as fashion icons for women, Hollywood actresses like Grable represented an attractive ideal for women to aspire to. Sending pin-up style photos to their soldiers was one way that women could “become his pin-up.”

Some of the most definitive pin-up art graced the pages of \textit{Esquire} magazine as imagined by two of the genre’s most well-known artists, George Petty and Alberto Vargas. The Petty Girl was showcased in a cartoon format, smirking over humorous one-liners that revealed her lust for sexual adventure and wealthy gentleman. Eventually, \textit{Esquire} sought to replace the high-salaried Petty and contracted Vargas, who had been a portraitist for the Ziegfeld Follies where he had honed his skill depicted glamorous fantasy women while following Ziegfeld’s tradition of glorifying the American girl.\footnote{Buszek, \textit{Pin-Up Grrrls}, 198.}

\textit{Esquire} readers disagreed about which girl signified the ideal American woman and one reader who found Vargas’ women too hardened wrote in that “...[Petty’s] women have their emphasis in such a manner as to make one take them in the belief that such women really exist—and they do.”\footnote{“The Sound and the Fury,” \textit{Esquire}, December 1940, 12.} Fans of the pin-up genre—men and women—clearly saw Petty or Varga Girls as more than mere fantasies, but as symbols of real women.\footnote{Women reacted on a very visceral level to the Varga Girl. One-fourth of Vargas’ fan mail at \textit{Esquire} was from a female readership. See Hugh Merill’s \textit{Esky: The Early Years at Esquire}. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 89-90.} Vargas himself wrote that each of his creations was “a composite picture of all American girls.”\footnote{Cornelia Lively. “Famous Varga Girl Creator and Wife Visiting in City.” \textit{Birmingham News}, 10 October 1945.} Since the pin-up was an illustrated version of American womanhood, her appeal for soldiers and women on the home front meant that men and women
identified with her—not only as a war goddess that became the symbol of the American
dream complete with a wife, family and peaceful life; but also a standard women could
relate to and style themselves after. In short, the pin-up helped to define femininity and
national ideals for both men and women during World War II.

Even before the attack on Pearl Harbor, *Esquire* pin-ups were taking on a
decidedly American nationalistic appeal.38 Coupled with the verses of Phil Stack, Varga
pin-ups flirted with patriotic and military themes throughout the war which elevated their
revered place as the ideal American woman. Almost each verse placed focus upon the
war and the accompanying art depicted women dreaming of homecoming soldiers,
writing letters, even enlisting, showing that women were not merely the protected but
also protectors, helping to ensure victory and the safe return of the men they pined for.
The popularity of these pin-ups meant that *Esquire* would commission special military
editions, calendars and playing cards which were marketed for soldiers.

The presence of pin-ups in foxholes, footlockers and as nose art on bomber jets
meant that the pin-up served as a symbol of protection, but she did her patriotic duty, too.
Both Petty and Vargas were commissioned to create recruitment posters for women’s
military divisions that would depict a spirit of high-adventure, glamour and American
toughness.39 With women identifying with the pin-up and the pin-up joining up,
American women were encouraged to imagine themselves fighting for Uncle Sam as
well.

While magazines such as *Esquire* meant to satisfy a male readership offered up
bevies of perfectly airbrushed super-beauties, women’s publications featured

advertisements that sold women the means to such figure perfection, particularly girdle advertisements. Though more frequently targeted towards women, girdle pin-ups were available to men as well. In addition to women’s fashion magazines, girdle ads appeared in publications such as *LIFE*, widely read by both sexes. Men constituted a part of the undergarment consumer force, buying for their wives or sweethearts what they found sexually appealing. However, women shopped with any eye to what men would like as well and with that in mind, the pin-up’s role as ideal beauty influenced girdle manufacturers who reflected the pin-up in their marketing.

It would be a mistake to consider the image of the pin-up exclusively a creation of one man’s fantasy. Pearl Frush, a female contemporary of Alberto Vargas, also created paintings of pin-up girls. A bit more realistically proportioned than Varga Girls, Frush’s pin-ups and had the flavor of Hollywood glamour, yet still exhibited women with the body posing conventions that displayed the female form for titillating effect. Girdle manufacturers also employed female illustrators, such as Virginia Smith who rendered American Lady Foundations advertisements.

More important than whether the illustrators were male or female is the response of female consumers of these images. Pin-ups fired women’s imaginations with both an inspiration and aspiration bent. Indeed, one quarter of Alberto Vargas’s fan mail was from women who often wanted to be evaluated as potential muses, but even more frequently as pin-up artists in their own right. The sheer volume of this type of response from women indicates the deep level of personal resonance and identification that could be found in the pin-up.

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40 Fields, *An Intimate Affair*, 118.
42 These advertisements will be analyzed in this paper. See Figures 10 and 11.
Just as the Varga Girl and pin-ups of her ilk constituted sexual, commodified objects, so did the girdle ad. These women modeled saleable garments, but they were also to be consumed. The artists constructed the realm of the pin-up—and thus the girdle pin-up—for a male gaze. The aim of the girdle was to create a shape pleasing to the male eye. Girdle pin-ups struck sexually provocative poses, punctuated by various states of undress and a sensuality that came from being a viewable object and the pin-ups’ own jouissance.

This awareness translates into self-conscious posing in which the pin-up arranges her body for titillation. Often depicted touching themselves, enjoying their sexuality and cognizant of being “looked at,” the pin-ups straddled a line between object and subject status. This tension between a role as a sexual object and as a sexually empowered subject created conflicting messages during a turbulent period. The duality of the pin-up as an empowered figure vital to the war effort and one constantly feminized in girdle ads emphasized the temporary nature of women’s newfound autonomy.
Figure 1. *Eyeful* magazine cover by Peter Dribben, 1946.

The striking similarities between girdle pin-ups and the types of pin-ups that were circulated to men can be found by comparing a Bestform girdle ad with the cover of *Eyeful* drawn by Peter Dribben. Dribben’s work was less realistic than Vargas’ and associated with “girlie mags” such as *Eyeful*. However, the parallels between the Dribben pin-up and the Bestform pin-up provide an excellent starting point to emphasize the role of a girdle model as a pin-up. The 1946 Dribben illustration exemplifies previously outlined pin-up tropes.\(^4\) Her awareness of being viewed informs the position of her body. She winks at the spectator in a tacit agreement that her appearance is constructed

\(^4\) Peter Dribben, *Eyeful*, January 1946, cover.
for the pleasure of the viewer. While the pin-up is on the phone—a popular theme which evokes the girl waiting at home for her man to call—her attention is focused on the presumably masculine viewer. Since she is recognizing her own desire through eye contact, the viewer can be at ease that she is not “making a date” on the phone. Another cultural note in this fantasy is the scantily clad woman on the phone—“what are you wearing?”—which allows the male imagination to construct a scenario like the one presented by *Eyeful*.

The color red has long been associated with sin—likely due to the forbidden apple of Eden and the color of the devil’s flesh. Red also bears an erotic and romantic connotation, expressed through the vampy red lipstick and fingernails of popularized during the 1940s. The thrilling combination of sex with sin and danger is represented by the red foreground and telephone. Uniting the symbolism of a sexually dangerous situation with the pin-up—a symbolic stand-in for the American woman whose physical perfection and virtue was augmented by American exceptionalism—was a common wartime theme. Concerns about venereal diseases spread by “Victory Girls” or “Good Time Charlottes” were bound up not only in notions of the vamp, but also the girl-next-door and these were reflected in wartime propaganda posters that often identified seemingly innocent-looking women with a sexual threat. The conflation of sex and wholesomeness so commonly found in the pin-up is also found in the Dribben doll. Her girlish curls, ribbon and daisy earring give her an innocence that strengthens her appeal. In common with other pin-ups, her body proportions and positioning are key elements. She strains to elongate her body in an attempt to appear slimmer, resting on her

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fingertips. She thrusts her breasts and ribcage forward and sucks her waist in. Her legs are unrealistically rendered and seem overly round.

Figure 2. Bestform ad illustrated by George Petty, 1942.

Compared to the Bestform ad, similar stylistic choices reinforce the idea of girdle models as pin-ups (Figure 2). The Bestform girl is more wholesome, presumably to appeal to a female audience. Like the Eyeful pin-up she is on the phone and gazing back to smile at the viewer. This girl’s reputation is less questionable than the Dribben illustration. Her hair is tied up in a scarf, a common way to protect pin curls before

45 George Petty for Bestform, 1942.
brushing them out, indicating that she is staying at home. Her fingertips toy with the phone cord in an unconscious way that may be akin to touching one’s hair nervously. While both the Dribben and Bestform girls look back at the viewer, the Dribben girl’s flirtatious wink distinguishes her from the more demure Bestform pin-up. This lends a subtle modesty that is missing from the Eyeful girl. Like pin-ups, the position of her body also suggests posing for the benefit of the viewer. She is leaning on her elbow, slightly raising and turning her body so that her breast is more visible, while lifting her shoulder in a seductive, yet coy manner. Displaying one’s body, while synonymous with the pin-up, is necessary in girdle advertising to reveal the perfection, desirability and allure that can be attained through wearing the manufacturer’s girdle.

In a Formfit girdle ad whose model bears a resemblance to Rita Hayworth, a popular Hollywood actress and wartime pin-up, themes of patriotism mingle with the image of the pin-up to define wartime feminine identity (Figures 3).46 The text of the ad acknowledges changing times and roles for women while the pin-up herself completely reasserts a traditional gendered identity. The Formfit girl tilts her head to the side in a retiring way to counterbalance the sexualized pin-up pose with vulnerability and demureness often associated with undergarments. She lifts her shoulder in a seductive Mae West manner, and like West; the pin-up’s posture makes femininity a performance. Hand on hip, her pelvis leans to the viewer in a vampy fashion. As with Varga and Petty Girls, she stands on tip-toe to elongate the leg and sculpt the muscles. The pointed inset on her girdle forms an arrow that draws attention to her genital area and the embroidered bra cups further eroticize her. While the Formfit ad clearly outlined concepts of

femininity through the body, it also identified the character of American women in its text. Formfit offered the “support you need for these hectic days of added responsibility.” Copy emphasized hard work as rewarding, suggesting that women want to do even more “within the bounds of our strength.”

Ads tempered this “strength” with femininity and glamour to maintain women’s pre-war image and role. Jantzen advised that “nobody wants you to give up glamour...go along on the job looking wonderful” making glamour and war work reconcilable goals. Formfit made this dual duty for women even clearer when their copy read “Yes...you may have to do a man’s work—but by all means retain your woman’s loveliness.” The pin-up bolstered the aura of glamour that surrounded undergarments and to instill it in traditionally masculine employment and military pursuits all while serving as a role model of ideal American womanhood. The pin-up helped to filter cultural tensions about the women’s role in the war into a glamorous dichotomy of the gal left behind and the gal behind the soldier, full of American patriotic spirit.

Clearly, girdle ads follow the same conventions that define pin-up art and are therefore pin-ups themselves. Accepting the pin-up as a construct of gendered notions of wartime femininity and extending the definition of pin-up to include girdle advertisements, girdle ads may be read as sites of gender construction for women during WWII.

48 Ibid.
49 “Glamour is always smart,” Jantzen, 1943.
50 “Yes,” Tailored-to-Fit by The Formfit Company.
Figure 3. 1943 Formfit ad with a striking resemblance to Rita Hayworth, a popular Hollywood pin-up.
CHAPTER IV
WATCHING OUR FIGURES: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION
THROUGH THE GIRDLE PIN-UP

During World War II, factory and military war work threatened to masculinize women by forcing them to step out of traditional gender roles in unprecedented numbers. However, the government was clear that the main focus of womanhood would remain the family and home and the phrase “for the duration” emphasized the temporary nature of war work and gender fluency. Depictions of women in recruitment ads and the military, where WAVES regulation required wearing lipstick to match the cord on your hat, tempered masculinization of women with femininity. Girdle ads were no exception to this imperative. The government linked attractiveness to both gender identity and to patriotism, and the commodified ideal represented by girdle ads echoed this sentiment.

The Foundettes Munsingwear advertisement, “I’d Like a Pat on My Girdle,” contains character elements of sacrifice, duty, patriotism and all while suggesting that the girdle was a vital partner in the war effort and in keeping women’s morale high (Figure 4). The arrangement of imagery coupled with the text reinforced traditional feminine traits and pursuits. The WAC is turned away from the viewer, downplaying “threat” of her masculinization as a member of the military. Her gloved hand may make reference to the delicacy of women and their need for protection—certainly to the rough nature of the

51 “I’d Like a Pat on My Girdle,” Munsingwear Foundettes, Munsingwear, Inc., 1942.
work—as it counteracts the phallic wrench, which symbolizes masculinity both on a Freudian level but a practical one as tools and technical work typically represent masculine aptitudes. Knowledge of automobile repair, considered a decidedly masculine pursuit, necessitates an emphasis of the remaining ad pictures upon femininity. Both the sash on the WAC’s waist and the flair of her jacket emphasize her curves, rooting her gender in her physical frame. Focus upon the physical (in)ability of a woman to do a man’s work is echoed in her posture: her foot on fender and leaning forward in a resting position may signify the tiring aspect of work, indicating she is not as well-equipped to perform this duty as her male counterpart. While many girdle ads focused upon fighting such fatigue, the Munsingwear ad is concerned with femininity, figure perfection and wartime alternatives to elastic.

The second image strips the WAC of her military uniform and presents her as fully feminized. A toothbrush replaces the wrench, establishing that her masculinization was temporary. Her setting is not just the home, but the bathroom, bringing to mind the importance of grooming, beauty and appearance to the status of this figure and reinforcing her femininity. Her hair is elegant and is accessorized with jewelry and makeup. Perhaps she is preparing for a date, a possible indication that her femininity can be determined in relation to men and one that also links her to the pin-up. She is available for dating, waiting for her man. Her role as a WAC and her devotion to the male soldier have an equal patriotic weight. She stands deep in thought, uncertain about the future. This reading reflects societal concerns about women engaged in non-

52 This follows Luce Irigaray’s theory of male/female signifying relationships in which the female can “never be the mark of the subject,” but rather acts as a phallogcentric lack. Stripped of agency, the women’s lack of male aptitudes is what renders her female gender. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble, 14-15, 38.
traditional roles. The depiction of light and shadow suggests linear past, present, future. The woman is caught between, reflecting on her role. The accompanying text refers to the popular social embarrassment ads that claim certain products can help one avoid social disgrace. Here an uncontrolled figure caused the WAC to get the not-so-subtle hint from an anonymous friend to buy a Munsingwear Foundette.

The third image embroiders upon the themes of the second. The woman is applying lipstick on her parted, erotic lips. Putting on cosmetics is an ultra-feminine act and putting lipstick on is a sexualized act. She has become rendered down exclusively to the sensuality of her mouth. The text describes her girdle as comfortable as a “birthday suit” supporting the view that girdles enhanced natural beauty while serving as a surrogate second skin. Finally, she stands with her back to the viewer, half-nude, her vulnerability and sexuality bound up within her Munsingwear girdle.

The Munsingwear ads suggested that it was easier to do your war work when you were “smooth and sleek” because Munsingwear “knows how to take care of us patriots.” Ads positioned masculinization and non-traditional roles as less desirable, difficult and temporary. Femininity and vulnerability are shown to be “natural states.” This sent the message that wearing a girdle would help retain femininity while engaged in war work.

Girdle and pin-up art also tempered the luxurious and elegant side of beauty with sacrifice for the war effort. This dichotomy plays to the class tensions between the middle and upper-class girls depicted in pin-up art that took a style cue from Hollywood actresses and the working class aesthetic of Rosie the Riveter (Figure 5). Women war

53 “I Need a Girdle...It Keeps My Chin Up,” Musingwear Foundettes, Munsingwear Inc., 1942.
workers had more money than ever before and often spent it on luxury goods.\textsuperscript{54} Popular songs of the period such as “Minnie’s In the Money” and “You Can’t Get that No More” featured lyrics such as “you can’t jive these girls like you used to do, ‘cause some of ‘em is making more money than you” marveled at the spending power and newfound autonomy of women war workers.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} See the documentary \textit{The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter}. Directed by Connie Field. 65 min. Clarity Films, 1981 for an oral account of how one African-American riveter, Wanita Allen, saved money for a fur coat.

Figure 4. “I’d Like a Pat on My Girdle,” by Munsingwear Foundettes (1942) tempered the masculinization of war workers and military women with femininity.
Figure 5. The pin-up modeling Warner’s LE GANT STA-UP-TOP girdle flaunts the autonomy of the newfound earning power of the war worker. With more earning potential than ever before, some women indulged in luxury items and despite rationing that impacted the girdle market, “elegant” girdles were meant to tempt women to spend their money on just such garments. Warner’s LE GANT STA-UP-TOP, Warner’s Inc.
Looking With Longing: Envy and Homoeroticism in Girdle Advertisements

In her article “Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look,” Diana Fuss examines the homosexualization of the viewing position, arguing that in order to desire to be like the commodified woman in advertising, the viewing woman must also desire the model on some level. While Laura Mulvey and other film theorists have argued that the cinematic camera lens operates as a masculine eye fixed upon a feminine desire-object, Fuss contends that the photographic aperture specific to fashion photography—which she argues often mirrors the cinematic close-up—is uniquely feminine by virtue of its intended surveyor and when directed at images of women, comprises a homosexual mode of address. As the primary consumer for women’s undergarments would have been women themselves, Fuss’s theory on homosexual gazing is a useful form of analysis for examining girdle advertisements, specifically those with an ultra-sexual pin-up style.

Certainly advertisements were designed to elicit desire and envy and in the context of girdle ads, those emotions are charged with sensuality as the viewer gazes upon provocatively posed women in garments that were marketed as being like a second skin. Looking, desiring and possessing are intimately bound within both the pin-up and advertising through fantasy, enticement and identification. Each medium encouraged identification and transformation into the object of one’s desire—to satisfy one’s envy through self-perfection. As this could never be achieved, advertisers were always able to market the product that would satisfy that one missing link to realization of this ideal. By scrutinizing the pin-up, the line between wanting to be and wanting to have the other woman, envy and desire become conflated.

Figure 6. This ad capitalizes on the genre of pin-up art that depicts women surprised by a voyeur’s gaze while in a vulnerable state of undress. The mirror—rather than offering the pin-up a site of autoerotic reflection and enjoyment—heightens the spectatorial access of the viewer. The phone, a common pin-up accessory, firmly roots the image in pin-up iconography. The act of “catching” this woman by surprise highlights the image’s forbidden allure inherent in the homosexual mode of address. Super-Fit for Super-Form Brassiere, Inc., 1947.
The girdle pin-ups exhibitionist posing encourages this sort of homosexual gazing, particularly as the women are displaying merchandise—and themselves—in various states of undress. Many lingerie ads encouraged voyeurism on the part of the female reader by drawing picture frame or other borders meant to focus the eye upon the pin-up. Advertising copy such as “someone is looking at your legs,” also reminded female readers that they, too, were to be visually consumed.\textsuperscript{57} An ad for Hickory Girdles and Perma-life Brassieres not only encouraged critical self-apprehension with copy that listed figure faults, it implied that others were assessing your figure as well by showcasing an embarrassed pin-up caught undressing (Figure 7).\textsuperscript{58} A prelude to the pin-up art of the fifties that would eroticize embarrassment and exposure, this pin-up is caught in a female viewer’s homoerotic voyeurism. Her pursed lips and closely drawn-up arms express surprise and shame, but her eyes lock onto the viewer with a raised brow as if to dare them to look. The ad’s copy promises not to pinch “your tender frame” while declaring its popularity with “Activity women and leisure lovers,” sending a dichotomous message about female frailty and athleticism.

\textsuperscript{57} Alba stockings 1948.
\textsuperscript{58} “Wanted,” Hickory Girdles and Perma-lift Brassieres 1942.
Figure 7. Girdle ads often employed military verbiage to depict their products as vital to the war effort. “Wanted,” Hickory Perma-lift Foundations 1942.

As girdles and other forms of intimate apparel were not only meant to shape the figure into a pleasing and feminine form, but also to inspire sexual attraction and desire, the centerfold of the 1940s would surely do the trick to sell sexuality and appeal, as well
as serve as an object of identification, envy and desire for the female viewer. Pin-up posing, which emphasized the limbs and bust and sometimes featured women touching themselves, implies an autoerotic fascination with one’s body that carried over into girdle advertisements.
CHAPTER V

BENEATH THE SKIN: READING RACE IN ALABASTER BODIES

The ideas of freedom, equality and justice originate from the human body, not with any one geographic or cultural location.

—Zillah Eisenstein

World War II provided unprecedented opportunities for African-American women against a backdrop of a war laden with the criminalized racial ideologies of Adolf Hitler. African-Americans emphasized this and drew attention to the hypocrisy of racism at home through the Double V campaign. U.S. tensions about racial difference and the threats posed by the enemy became focused in propaganda and other cultural sources through female bodies that needed protection from foreign rapists or predatory exotic women who could tempt American soldiers. While these anxieties circulated through these cultural medium and daily thought, African-Americans embraced their new socioeconomic opportunities, supported Allied efforts to combat totalitarianism and racism and felt their own sense of entitlement and possibility surge. Racial anxieties, the African-American push for “Double V” and the way that these tensions were channeled through the female form suggest that the pin-up as a wartime icon might contribute cultural meaning to the dialogue about race and ethnicity that took place during World War II.
Viewing the pin-up as a nexus of cultural ideas about femininity, beauty and national identity would, on the surface, seem to embrace an exclusively white vision of what constitutes not only a beauty ideal but one of perfected womanhood. However, close analysis of images of pin-ups and girdled pin-ups reveals that they have much to say on racial and exotic others and that these racial subtexts are complex, indicative of a larger, societal picture of racism and a fascination with the exotic. In his work *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and the American Visual Culture*, Martin A. Berger examines works of art that are devoid of African-Americans yet have a great deal of symbolism and meaning regarding race and whiteness. Berger’s contention is that a “cultural blindness” to whiteness creates a tendency to assume that images of whites do not carry racial messages or “unseen discourses.”59

Examining the pin-up, a symbol replete with cultural meanings, yields a striking “unseen discourse” that is beneath the skin of the pin-up, beyond whiteness and national borders.

In a foreword devoted to the Varga Girl, author Kurt Vonnegut reminisces about Sears-Roebuck “Wish Books” and the pages devoted to women in undergarments, prices nearby.60 Struck by the implications of this, Vonnegut argued that these lingerie pin-ups were equated with merchandise that could be bought. Advertising in Esquire magazine for Varga and Petty Girl playing cards made even stronger allusions to the sale of women. The Vargas ad makes the claim that the decks’ queens “will be your slaves for 95 cents.”61

The Petty Girl playing card order form goes even further calling the collecting of women “sweet and hot” and suggesting that “wiser men have collected

60 Austin, *Varga, the Esquire Years*, 6.
61 *Esquire*, June 1941, 17.
Circassian slaves.” A popular theme of Esquire cartoons employed the fantasy of the harem. In one, men in turbans haggle over price in front of a woman with a very Western hairstyle. Another cartoon features a terrified looking woman on an auction block. The turbaned auctioneer glares at the man who says “I have a friend who can get one for me wholesale” (Figure 8).

This fascination in the trafficking of women, indeed women as sexual slaves, echoes the sexual exploitation of black female slavery. bell hooks has argued that the sexualization of enslaved black females on the auction block constituted a nakedness for others, engendering a dread of and humiliation within their own feminine bodies.

Hortens Spillers refers to the African-American body as “unprotected female flesh” that has left the enslaved women beyond her gender, dispossessed of her own body. These theories suggest that the pin-up as an exposed, sexual object would not only have a rich racial discourse, but also contribute to feelings of alienation and discomfort for African-American women seeking to come to terms with their femininity. Confronted with white visions of beauty and womanhood, the legacy of being “outside” the feminine gender continued to be reinforced for African-American women through the images of the pin-up.

62 “Collecting, Sweet and Hot,” Esquire, March 1941, 163.
63 “Please Don’t Haggle Over the Price Right In Front of Her,” Esquire, April 1941, 31.
64 “I Have a Friend Who Can Get One for Me Wholesale,” Esquire, December 1941, 63.
The girdled pin-up, specifically, carries racial connotations. The girdle, by way of the corset, carried with it the role of maintaining the boundaries of racial purity. During the 1920s, the danger of going corsetless was linked to the destruction of morality and racial purity. Corsets repressed the natural—or out of control—body and acted as safeguards for national and moral security. Scientists, doctors and the foundation wear industry published numerous articles describing the degenerative effects of nature upon
the body. An *Esquire* magazine cartoon illustrates these concerns through the belief that the young (native) woman with slim, graceful lines that were left uncontrolled would develop wildly as she matured (Figure 9). The image depicts an obese Polynesian woman with bones in her hair and large, meaty biceps and calves in contrast to her slim, beautiful young daughter. Scientists wrote of the transformation of attractive Indian women into Squaws with “grotesque bodies.” The image of a plump, desexualized feminine other corresponds to that of the Mammy.

Figure 9. “You may call me ‘mother’ if you like.” *Esquire* 1944.

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67 “You may call me ‘Mother’ if you like,” *Esquire*, September 1944, 51.
68 “The Evils of the No-Corset Fad,” *Corsets & Lingerie*, November 1921, 24-25.
While doctors made the case that corsets and girdles were scientific garments that supported internal organs, staved off muscular strain and defied the effects of gravity and age upon the body, they also argued that foundation wear protected ideals of nationalism and racial purity. Dr. Jan Schoemaker believed that corsetlessness eroded femininity and threatened women’s traditional roles as reproducers of a race. In response to the emergence of the New Woman who eschewed corsets, Schoemaker wrote that “women who imitate men are not the kind…to mother the next generation.”

Getrude Nickerson commented on the effects of racial and ethnic mixing and the necessity for corseting when she wrote that inherited traits from a foreign grandmother might make a “hereditary attack” upon the figure. Since these authorities and cultural ideals identified corsets and girdles as guardian garments for national and racial identity, it follows that they also embedded girdle pin-ups with racial meaning. Jill Fields argues that black lingerie carries erotic connotations of abandon, sin and seduction which mirror the stereotype of the lascivious black “Jezebel.” Usage of the color black in lingerie allowed nice girls to be naughty and the ways in which the shade black was marketed suggests a strong link to cultural ideas of blackness, sin and black female sexuality. Kayser nylons described their “Inky” shade thus: “the witchery of this sheer black is enchantingly scandalous!” The Inky nylons were imbued with sexual power and black magic that would aid women’s transformation into more glamorous, sensual selves. Fields believes that white women could embrace this sensuality through what she calls a “safely contained and removable

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69 “Eminent Surgeons Endorse the Corset,” Corsets & Lingerie, December 1921, 32-35.
black skin.”

Accepting her argument that black lingerie operates as a form of racial masquerade, the viewpoint on white pin-ups wearing black lingerie should pivot to access the subtexts of race within.

Conceptualizing the girdle and other black undergarments as analogous to skin is suggested by their restrictive nature and scientific usage. Just as skin contains the organs that comprise the internal body, so does the girdle hold in the body’s shape. Indeed, the scientific claims that girdles support the organs, muscles and posture suggests that it shields internal anatomy in a manner that mere skin cannot. It fits snugly and smoothly as a second-skin so as to appear natural and undetectable beneath clothing. Lingerie advertisements clearly linked freedom of movement and a natural silhouette with girdles that were like a second skin. An advertisement for the new Invisible Playtex Living Girdle argued that their product was so well-designed and pliant that it “actually becomes part of the wearer, gives with every motion she makes” while being “as porous and alive as your own skin.”

Viewing girdles as second-skins while also examining Varga Girls whose clothing was skin-tight or merely suggested by a flesh-toned line—the skin is the outfit—allows a reading of black lingerie as a stand-in for black skin.

In a 1943 American Lady Foundations advertisement, a formfitting black lace all-in-one girdle embraces the pin-up’s body (Figure 10). This all-in-one controls the bust, torso, hips and thighs and is accompanied by black stockings and black heels. In fact, most of her body is covered by black fabric. The pin-up has a languid posture—back

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72 Fields, An Intimate Affair, 114.
arched, breasts jutting—and her legs are parted, somewhat of a rarity for the pin-up, whose closed legs echo Bartky’s contention that they were covering the genital area. The open positioning of the American Lady pin-up suggests a willingness to display her body, while her parted legs may reference sexual availability. Her arms are behind her head in a position of sexual surrender and her eyes are half-lidded with desire. Her cheeks are flushed and her hair is loose, hinting at an uncontrollable sexuality. Everything about her indicates sensual abandon.

The idea of black lingerie as a more sexually charged, racy garment is evident in the presentation of the model. Girdle pin-ups for white garments are feminine and sexualized, but still have an air of purity. The American Lady ad is selling sex, sensuality and a bit of sorcery. The advertising copy claims that just as Cinderella was transformed into a “vision of loveliness” by the glass slipper, the girdle will work a similar magic.

Contrasting the black clad girdle pin-up to Cinderella further delineates black and white garment connotations. The Cinderella figure is dressed in white—linked to sexual innocence—and her appearance is carefully controlled. Her hair is a structure, every hair in place. Her eyes are downcast in a demure way and she smiles serenely. Her powers of transformation rely upon Prince Charming to “free” her with his affections and a marriage proposal, albeit with a slipper in place of the ring. The American Lady pin-up is free to author her own physical transformation.

The language of the advertising text supports the idea of magical transformation. American Lady promises “figure-perfection” that will be achieved not only through exact scientific accuracy and the Vital Dimension, but also via “wonderous weaves” and “miraculous fabrics.” Not only are these fabrics exceptional and capable of
transformation, but they are patriotic too. The text claims that the “fabrics [are] doing a war-time job today” (emphasis mine). Suggesting that fabrics impart patriotic war support goes beyond stating that the fabrics are an alternative to rationed materials; it implies that the garment is the choice for a patriotic woman and that American Lady is behind the war effort. The popular motif of stars with the reminder to buy war bonds and stamps confirms the patriotism of American Lady. The erotic connotations of black lingerie with sensual abandon and wickedness carries the legacy of the Jezebel stereotype.

Another advertisement by American Lady for the Artist Model all-in-one features an exotic woman with a deeper skin tone than the alabaster Varga Girls (Figure 11). 75 She may be African-American or Latina, but her status as a mysterious non-white woman is certain. The model is glancing to the side, avoiding what Lauren Rabinovitz calls a “sexual contract” via returning the male gaze with a desiring look. 76 This suggests that while the model is feminized in a semi-pin-up pose, she is not an object of desire. Her body posture is one of self-awareness and awkwardness. She touches her face in a self-conscious manner—she even holds her hair close to her face and neck like a shield. She slouches forward, her legs tight together and drawn in and up in a quasi-fetal position. Her arms stay close to the body. Compared to the sexual assertiveness of the previous American Lady pin-up, whose arms were positioned above and behind the head, back arched and breasts thrust forward, the implication is that the Artist Model pin-up is uncomfortable in her own skin.

75 “We’ve been through all this before,” American Lady Foundations, 1943.
women created a dread of their female flesh suggests that reading the Artist Model pin-up as an black woman who is a sexualized exotic Other used to provide an air of mystique to American Lady foundations, bears out analysis as a vulnerable objectified figure.

Figure 10. “A Vision of Loveliness,” American Lady Foundations, 1943.
Figure 11. “We’ve Been Through All This Before,” American Lady Foundations, 1943.
Subtexts of race were not limited to the African-American regarding the pin-up. United States military involvement in Hawaii and the South Pacific intensified American lust for the exotic. Varga Girls wearing nothing but leis and grass skirts, cartoons and narrative in *Esquire* magazine and even the use of palm trees in advertising created an exciting fantasy with a Polynesian flavor. Zillah Eisenstein argues that the body is the fountainhead for ideas about democracy, freedom, equality and justice, and thus U.S. attitudes about national and foreign identities should be latent in the pin-up.77 The depiction of the exotic Other as a female entity that may be conquered mirrors U.S. military and political agendas. The often wedded ideas of racial purity and nationalism operate within the exotic Varga Girl. In the image titled “Reveille,” a leggy blonde wears nothing but a grass skirt and Hawaiian flowers (Figure 12).78

The title “Reveille” itself works with both Phil Stack’s verse and Vargas’ image to express an awakening of desire. Her expression is sweet, but slightly provocative with a raised eyebrow. The grass skirt is shorter than the traditional style, allowing more of her legs to show. The bamboo bordered shape that she leans on appears to be a tribal mask. The curve of her breast carries the allure of topless native women. Her hairstyle and complexion identify her as an American girl and points towards an appropriation of Polynesian temptation. *Esquire* cartoons expressed the desirability and appeal of Polynesian women, who appeared topless and nubile. One caption describes the natural beauty of Hawaii, both botanical and female, that create a man’s paradise (Figure 13).79

A perceived threat of exotic seductresses upon soldiers far from home may have

78 “Reveille,” *Esquire*, February 1942, 32.
79 “It’s Beautiful, Dear,” *Esquire*, December 1941, 121.
necessitated recasting the object of desire as an American woman. She could employ the same liberating sexuality and trappings of the exotic, but underneath all of that was the girl a soldier *should* be fantasizing about.

![Image](image1.jpg)

Figure 12. *Reveille.*

The poem by Phil Stack described the precious things that the American soldier went to war for—freedom and women such as this pin-up. In his poem “Reveille,” Stack envisioned America as a sleeping giant who was stirred by the attack at Pearl Harbor. Stack also identified “this girl who lives beneath Hawaiian skies” as an imperiled subject worth fighting for. Robert Westbrook called the pin-up an “icon of obligation” and this is
echoed in the sentiment that soldiers were “fighting for the priceless privilege of making love to American women.”

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Figure 13. “—it’s beautiful, dear; the moon, the stars, the sea, the waving grass,” *Esquire* 1941.
Recasting the exotic Polynesian as an American girl reflected ideals about nationalism and United States identity. The native woman depicted as beautiful and tempting and yet an unacceptable sexual partner, received powerful expression in *The Saga of Zela* published in *Esquire* in 1942.\(^{81}\) Oliver La Farge’s story about a soldier, Robert Baird, who becomes responsible for a Hicupil native, details the conflicting nature of Baird’s infatuation with the girl Zela. Not only do Baird’s prejudices mirror the effects of a colonial othering in Hawaii, but also concepts of racial and national purity of the American family. Baird’s assumptions about native women’s bodies parallel those of scientists who advocated the use of girdles to keep nature from deforming the female figure as he notes that the native’s appeal was a “short-lived beauty one found among these jungle tribes, a few years at most of slender body and high breasts.”\(^{82}\)

Baird’s confusion arises from his repulsion from Zela—he orders her face to be scrubbed with germicidal soap—and his desire to engage in a sexual relationship with her. Baird does not view Zela as human and he likens her innocence and virginity to that of an animal who becomes humanized through the addition of clothing.\(^{83}\) La Farge gives focus to Zela as an improper romantic entanglement through discussions of leaving Zela at a brothel, her inability to fit into the civilized world and most poignantly, her death at the hands of Dona Eloisa who found Zela to be an unwelcome threat. Ultimately, Baird refrained from sexual intercourse with Zela. After her death, Baird reflects that she was “a type rather than an individual” whose remembrance he distilled to “those golden

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\(^{82}\) Ibid, 110.

\(^{83}\) Ibid, 111.
breasts.”\textsuperscript{84} The Saga of Zela identifies some of the beliefs surrounding exotic women and can be read as a cautionary tale—Zela and Baird are from disparate worlds which must remain separated. The island temptress as a threat to both American men and women thus becomes a symbol of racial and national tensions inherent in the exotic pin-up.

Figure 14. June, 1943.

The Hawaiian siren painted by Vargas in January 1943 visually confirms Phil Stack’s verse that voices an American woman’s concerns: “This June I should have married/But an ocean stepped between/I hope no sultry so-and-so/Has landed my Marine!” (Figure 14)\textsuperscript{85} The image of a predatory woman wearing a grass skirt and flowers in an almost feline posture is sultry indeed. She raises her eyebrow in provocation and smirks at the viewer. Her claw-like fingernails tap the ground in a way that suggests she is biding her time while her body is tensed, ready to strike. Her elbow is far behind her and she has pulled her knee up under her stomach, indicating that she has

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\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 112.
\textsuperscript{85} “June,” Esquire, January 1943, 106.
lurched forward and is poised to rise at any moment or that she is crawling—both readings allude to a prowling lioness. The grass skirt is parted so that her legs and hip are visible and it merely covers her genital area—indeed; her legs are parted in a way that suggests a violation of Bartky’s theory of modesty and supporting a reading of sexual aggressiveness. Her eyes are gazing back with sexual desire. This “so-and-so” is waiting to ensnare that Marine! Both the visual cues and the poem by Stack emphasize the concern about U.S. men finding companionship in Polynesian arms.

Other exotic Varga pin-ups used a subtle visual cue to affirm the whiteness of the subjects: a sunburn. A 1944 Military Edition of *Esquire* featured twin pin-ups, both wearing Hawaiian-print sarongs and topless (Figure 15). These images evoke the popular actress Dorothy Lamour—the Sarong Girl—often clad in a tropical sarong. The glamour girl looks of these pin-ups are reminiscent of Lamour and thus Americanized beauty. The replacement of grass skirts with sarongs is a step toward “civilization,” but the sunburn is even more crucial. It means that the skin is pale enough to burn, negating the attractiveness of a deeper skin tone. By delineating what was an American fantasy and what was not, the pin-up aided in the definition of national identity for American women and men.

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86 *Esquire*, April and May 1944, back cover.
Figure 15. 1944 *Esquire* Military Edition.
CHAPTER VI

AMERICA’S SWEETHEART AND THE POST-WAR IDEAL

Wartime culture promulgated the idea that women would return to domesticity and become mothers after the war. This post-war woman took a central role in the soldier’s fantasy about a peaceful family life and also reflected national identity as formed around concepts of racial purity. Actress Ann Sothern reminded women about their roles during and after the war in an article called “What Kind of Woman Will Your Man Come Home To?” In the article, she wrote that planning a life together was an important piece of a soldier’s morale and something they would fight for. She summarizes by saying that these men are not only dreaming of coming home to their sweethearts, but also the mothers of their children. Sothern also advised women to stay feminine and keep up their appearance. After the war, women were to give up their newfound freedom and independence and take up the interests of their husbands. Sothern wrote that she would follow outdoor sports and prize-fighting—which she never liked—because that is what her husband enjoyed. Her view that it was the “least we can do as women” implies an indebtedness that women had to men for their freedom, even though they worked for it as well. Sothern encouraged women to embody not only the fantasy of the pin-up but of devoted domestic partners as well. Sothern’s advice mirrors OWI campaigns that encouraged women to return to domesticity after the war.

The conflicting depictions of women during the war represented the dichotomy of wartime womanhood—women who were independent and working in new masculine careers but who were also expected to stay feminine and relinquish those roles in favor of “natural” ones as wives and mothers. Girdle advertisements played along both sides of the new war woman by recognizing her patriotism and hard work, but also by casting her as an ultra-feminine and sexual being whose body needed a girdle to protect her while working.

A variant of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, the pin-ups sexuality and femininity depended upon her character as the sweetheart next-door who wouldn’t sneak off to the apple tree with anyone but her beau. 88 Indeed, the potential for greater sexual freedom of women during WWII was a threat which must be regulated, especially as the men returned home to share the post-war dream of domesticity. As previously argued, the girdle was a garment that not only reigned in fleshy figures, it also served as a metaphorical chastity belt. This preoccupation with the modesty provided by a girdle was prominent in the film *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959). 89 In this film, attorney Paul Biegler (James Stewart) remakes his femme fatale client Laura Manion (Lee Remick) into a demure housewife for the witness stand. 90 Laura’s flirtatious repartee with Biegler often centers on her feminine undergarments which become a symbol for her sexual immorality. Working to establish the conditions of her rape, Laura tells Biegler she was

88 Popular songs of the period such as “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree (with Anyone Else But Me)” lyricized the romantic ideal of a steadfast and loyal girl who would remain faithful for the duration. These songs hinted at fears about unchaperoned women and sexual promiscuity and made monogamy a patriotic duty.


90 Laura’s depiction in the film paints her as a woman of loose morals who frequents roadhouses and flirts with men behind her husband’s back. Laura’s manner of dress included tight sweaters with hot pants and high heels. In contrast, the secretary Mayda always wore dresses and pinned her hair up. Mayda describes Laura as “soft, easy...the kind men like to take advantage of and often do.”
wearing a bra, slip and panties underneath her clothes, but no girdle. Laura’s vampy clothing constituted an outward mark of her reputation. Her clothes were formfitting and displayed Laura’s body in a sexualized way that drew male attention. Linking Laura’s questionable behavior with her manner of dress, Biegler pulls a drunken Laura out of a cluster of fawning men in a roadhouse, admonishing her to “be a meek little housewife with horn-rimmed spectacles” until the trial is over.\textsuperscript{91} Central to Laura’s reformation is a girdle—“especially a girdle.” By wearing a girdle, Laura can adopt the role of a “good girl.” Belief that the girdle serves as a device for sexual containment and an instrument of modesty, Beigler tells Laura to “save that jiggle for your husband to look at.” The uncontrolled flesh of Laura—“jiggling” in a sexual way—reflected a moral laxity that was unacceptable on the defense stand. Biegler sought to portray Laura as virtuous, modest and ultimately, innocent. Being portrayed as sexually pure was crucial to Laura’s image as a victim of rape. This innocence from sexual viewing or “jiggling” supports the view that girdles contained sexuality even as they straddled the line between sex appeal and modesty.

Since women were expected to remain true during their soldiers absence—who were in turn fantasizing about and fighting for the “privilege of making love to American women”—intimate apparel ads in the post-war period \textit{appropriately} channeled female sexuality in offering restrictive foundations for daily wear as well as filmy negligees in which they could welcome home their heroic husbands.

\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Anatomy of a Murder}.
Towards the All-American Dream: Post-War Consumerism

As World War II concluded and soldiers began to return to American shores, women who had aided the war effort were encouraged by government propaganda to relinquish their careers to the men who would now occupy them (even though many were exclusively created to fill wartime needs). The emphasis was that women’s true and natural place was the home and that their attention should now be focused to creating a domestic haven for weary war heroes—a symbol of all they had fought for. In fact, women’s place in the private realm was held strong by the fact that during the war, the kitchen was still touted as women’s territory and envisioned as their battle front as they did their part to beat the Axis through careful menu-planning and rationing. The militarization of the kitchen was complete with the Home Front Pledge that women would make to uphold their American duties through sacrifice, fair shares, proper nutrition and exercising their American freedom of choice through consumerism. Just as the appeal to girdle purchasers during the war often centered upon American ideals of freedoms of movement, choice and the political power of the U.S. dollar (as well as envisioning a consumerist economy as a weapon against communism), the post-war advertising pitches shifted to continue to sell patriotism and the “American Dream” to women who would function as the main purchasers for their new domestic realms.

A survey of *LIFE* magazine in the immediate post-war period reveals the ways in which consumerism was tied to the notions of the American dream of 2.5 children and a white picket fence—the “happiest” brides dreamed of Community silverware.92

92 Community Silverware ad, Oneida LTD., 1948. The copy of this ad presents a dream of domestic bliss by writing: “You...and the man you love...your home...your table...your community, it’s a dream-come-true, for keeps!”
Advertising not only relished in the domestic side of American life, but in providing previously unavailable goods. Ads for large platters full of choice cuts of meat and vegetables smothered in butter whet shoppers’ appetite for goods no longer rationed, and women were encouraged more than ever before to shop for intimate apparel. During this period, the styles of garments changed and became more restrictive featuring wasp waist cinchers and Jantzen’s tagline “we love to make you feel small!” As women retreated back into the private sphere, their undergarments placed less emphasis on freedom of movement. Ads for lacy negligees that emphasized naughtiness or alluded to witchcraft became more and more common as women could presumably be shopping for their husbands who were home once again.

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93 An ad for Lady Borden Ice Cream also paints a picture of an ideal American family unified by the dinner table. “We wish we could be at your table tonight...we’d like to see your husband’s eyes widen when he tastes his first spoonful...We’d like to be there when the youngsters hold out their eager dishes...” Lady Borden Ice Cream, 1948.

94 Witchcraft and naughtiness was a common theme during lingerie ads throughout the fifties. Often the garments featured in such ads were black, drawing a correlation between racialized notions of sensuality and superstition.
Figure 16. “Grandma Knew” This 1945 Jantzen ad copy encourages women to retreat to pre-war roles by “hiding their efficiency” underneath feminine garments and by making themselves as diminutive as possible. Wearing impractically restrictive garments limited mobility and physical movement while making the women an ornamental presence. Intimate apparel of this period focused upon creating a wasp or doll waist and reflects a corrective move to return to pre-war normalcy and ease tensions about career women. The ad also draws upon American ideas about the frontier and national identity as well as the notion that women required protection from “savages,” thus reinforcing their frailty.
The tendency to focus on practicality or the necessity of getting the job done in your foundation wear during the war was replaced by dream and fantasy scenarios. The extent to which women became fantasies, more ephemeral than flesh, speaks to the way in which advertising for transformative beauty aids like foundation wear promises an elusive perfection that can never be attained. Interestingly, the cost of the pursuit of feminine perfection was the main narrative thread in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, produced in the late fifties. The character of John “Scottie” Ferguson (James Stewart) is constantly surrounded by symbols of transformation and femininity. During one of the movie’s opening scenes, Scottie is convalescing in Midge’s (Barbara Bel Geddes) apartment and wearing a corset for his posture. Midge is a lingerie illustrator—close to ultimate glamour, but never able to attain it. Midge behaves in a motherly way towards Scottie and wears glasses. Her inability to achieve feminine perfection is symbolized in a moment of self-loathing when she defaces a portrait of herself.

Scottie is contracted to follow a college chum’s wife, Madeleine (Kim Novak), whom Scottie falls in love with. After Madeleine’s death, Scottie meets another woman named Judy (Kim Novak) who bears a strong resemblance to his lost love. Scottie’s courtship culminates in an extreme makeover in which Judy is recast into Madeleine’s image. Shopping for a new wardrobe, Scottie ignores Judy’s personal tastes again and again and copies Madeleine’s style down to the fabric, cut and seam, leaving Judy no

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95 While girdle ads of WWII focused on idealistic and practical themes, ads for this period emphasized sexuality as evidenced by a 1948 Skintees Knit Panties ad “For Angels with a bit of devil in ‘em!” Skintees 1948.
97 Midge attempts to replace Madeleine in Scottie’s by painting herself into a portrait of Carlotta Valdez, the woman that is supposedly possessing Madeleine. With her glasses, Midge is out of place in Carlotta’s ornate gown.
room for self-expression. During the process, she attempts to maintain little personal style choices in an effort to cling to her identity asking “couldn’t you just love me for me?” but Scottie removes them as he recreates his ultimate fetishized dream woman. This process not only emphasizes the ways in which idealized beauty can transform the woman into a fetish object as risk to her own personal agency and self-hood, but it highlights the process itself as a brutal stripping away of personal, individualized traits that prevent one from fitting into a mold held as the beauty standard for femininity. Poignantly demonstrated in the climax of her transformation, Judy reveals her pain and the loss of her identity as she asks Scottie: “If I let you change me...if I do what you tell me, will you love me?...Then I’ll do it. I won’t care anymore about me.” The shift from Judy into the fantasy-woman Madeleine is symbolized by the hazy light from the neon street signs that filter through the window; as she steps into the room, she seems like the ghost of Madeleine coming through the fog as if in a dream.

Hitchcock’s vision of the cost of feminine perfection helps us to understand the psychology of advertising—the feelings of personal failing for the inability to live up to an ideal, the elusiveness of perfection and the ultimate goal of being liked or loved for “who you are.” Indeed, the opening title sequence for the film creates an aura of fear around femininity as the music eerily swells upon close-ups of a perfectly made-up mouth or eye fringed in long-lashes yet widened in terror.

Girdle advertising such as the kind that Midge produced aimed to improve upon nature and to erase flaws. Hitchcock’s fear of femininity builds upon the anxiety of the

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98 Midge’s ad emphasized the “revolutionary uplift” of a newly-designed backless, strapless brassiere. The notion that breasts need uplifting implies that the natural figure is unacceptable unaltered. Midge notes
female body as an unrestrained natural force—exemplified in the cultured restraint of Madeleine versus the brassy freedom of Judy—and teases out the ways in which the psychology of desire (for the perfect female body) infiltrates advertising for transformative products. Hitchcock alludes that such a quest can lead to madness, while it inevitably pulls the endlessly-seeking along in search of that one purchase that can make them beautiful.

The fantasy women in transformative marketing for products such as the girdle always promises the consumer beauty perfection, if she can only uncover the right beauty trick or secret. This fantasy figure, like the one in Hitchcock’s fantasy, symbolizes the psychological connection of desire, longing and femininity. Increasingly, advertising in the post-war period featured themes of fantasy, dreaming, secrecy, mystery, miracles, confidential knowledge and tricks and magic. Jill Fields notes that undergarments are specifically well-suited to the trope of hidden knowledge as the lingerie itself is covered by another layer of clothing.99 The dream imagery of post-war girdle ads is an interesting corollary to the American dream. With the serious business of winning the war behind, advertising could feature more fanciful subject matter. Dream imagery also holds the allure of fantasy that works so well for transformative products that seemingly work like “magic” to erase figure flaws and make the wearer beautiful. A 1948 girdle ad illustrated by Pete Hawley tells women “we see you in our schemes...” and features a dreaming

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99 Fields, An Intimate Affair, 189.
woman floating out of a cauldron along with symbols of magic: a wizard, potion bottles and a book labeled “Jantzen magic.”

Dream imagery became a popular and defining campaign form Maidenform bras in 1949. The Maidenform dream scenario featured women who dreamt about performing various tasks and careers while wearing—and exposing—her bra. Perhaps the appeal and longevity of this campaign was due to the fact that frequently the Maidenform model dreamed that she was holding occupations that offered very little room for her in reality. These fantasy scenarios offered women who found domesticity stifling—many of whom had worked during the war—an escapist appeal. The message in these ads was heavily weighted with restrictive gender coding. The possibility of working as an editor was only a dream after all, and even the empowering scene was undercut by the embarrassment of imaging oneself exposed and partly clad. Nudity implies vulnerability, not power.

Additionally, the bra helped to eroticize and mark the body as female by emphasizing the breasts and gender difference. Still, these ads had a powerful impact for women who were dissatisfied with the “feminine mystique,” even as they were encouraged to embrace it.

100 “We See You in Our Schemes,” Jantzen 1948.
CHAPTER VII
INTEGRATING BLACK BEAUTY: CIVIL RIGHTS PIN-UPS

In his essay “The Preconditions for Racial Change,” Harvard Sitkoff attributes the mobilizing ability of the civil rights movement to socioeconomic forces driven by industrial boom of the 1940s. These opportunities changed African-American perceptions about “what was right and how to get it” while mass migration positioned racism as a national issue. ¹⁰¹

Traditionally considered to be an exclusively white vision of American beauty, the iconography of the pin-up set a standard of beauty for African-American women as well that spanned from the Second World War to the Civil Rights Movement and beyond. The image of the white pin-up, in defining the standard of American beauty, placed African-American women on the margins of femininity. Ed Brandford, the owner of a prominent African-American modeling agency saw beauty as a “monopoly which permits no Negro girl to pass.” ¹⁰² Indeed, Brandford pointed to Hollywood beauty standards for creating exclusionary ideals. Glamorized African-American pin-ups of the 1940s such as Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge were caught between light-skinned beauty standards and the color barrier of Hollywood film. As such, African-American women with lighter skin tones and more European features were more likely to be showcased as beauties in

¹⁰¹Harvard Sitkoff, Preconditions for Racial Change in 158
the early fifties. However, with the emergence of the civil rights movement, black writers in popular magazines such as *Jet* and *Hue* sought to recognize “African-American women’s beauty...as part of the integrationist agenda” and thus, depiction of black pin-ups during the pivotal year of 1955 expanded the notion of what constituted black beauty.\textsuperscript{103} Black women were seldom glamorized in white media and formal attire became a popular image of validation. Pin-ups of *Jet* and *Hue* magazines displayed middle-class values of leisure or affluence, a multiplicity of skin tones, facial features and body types with accompanying text that alluded to racial progress and pride.

Harlean Harris is visually and textually depicted as “upwardly mobile” and career-oriented. Her triple-occupations—calendar girl, model and telephone operator—emphasize her success which is attributed to her “shapely form,” firmly placing her in the pin-up girl tradition.\textsuperscript{104} The camera angle places her at the level of the viewer as if to imply equality and the accessibility of her success to others. While the text makes references to racial progress and class mobility, Harris is still a woman with lighter skin.

“Miss Hue” for April of 1955, Josie Cain, marks a decided shift in the African-American pin-up.\textsuperscript{105} Cain wear African-influenced jewelry which draws upon racial heritage and pride. Her rounder face and features and deeper skin tone are a marked departure from previous models who more closely adhered to white standards of beauty. While these types of models continues to appear in *Jet* and *Hue*, there was an increased variety of African-American beauty. Cain has more natural hair, thicker eyebrows and is wearing minimal or no makeup, placing an emphasis on natural beauty. This natural

\textsuperscript{103} Walker, *Style & Status*, 97.
\textsuperscript{104} “Climbing to Success,” *Hue*, November 1955.
\textsuperscript{105} “Polka Dot Pin-Up,” *Hue*, April 1955.
African-American beauty was in contrast to the “whitening” of black women through artificial means such as bleaching creams and hair straightening and indeed emphasized a black standard of beauty.

Figure 17. Harlean Harris “climbs to success,” promoting racial pride and achievement for Hue magazine in 1955.
Figure 18. Josie Cain was a popular pin-up for sailors at Chicago’s Navy Pier in *Hue*, 1955.

Her status as a housewife counteracts her sexual depiction with an aura of respectability and follows in the club era tradition of couching black women’s feminity in domestic tones as opposed to sexual ones. Featuring an average woman rather than a model also implies that African-American beauty was common rather than exceptional. Called the “favorite pin-up of sailors stationed at Chicago pier” alludes to the pin-ups of
WWII and claims that legacy of attractiveness. Heralded as the one of the first negro telephone operators hired by Illinois Bell Telephone Company, Cain inspires others to break the color barrier and integrate and is a role model of racial progress.

Civil Rights pin-ups inspired racial pride, fostered the spirit of integration and gave a beautiful visibility to the push for equality. A long tradition of holding African-American women outside the definitions of womanhood centered in part upon the excluding black femininity from normative beauty standards. African-American pin-ups challenge those notions with pride and elegance to prove that “black is beautiful.” Thus, the pin-up served a political—indeed, integrationist—agenda.

While glamour held its appeal throughout the fifties and inspired both black and white women, a fashion image in Ebony raises interesting questions about the continued prevalence of white beauty norms. The image—published in 1953 before the Civil Rights pin-up began to break away from light-skinned beauties to focus upon the various forms of black beauty—not only features a model with lighter skin, but a very restrictive girdle. The girdle—a garment that restrains and diminishes excess flesh—concentrated on the hip, thigh and buttocks, areas that have been eroticized on the black female figure and linked to racial stereotyping and given an alarming fetish preoccupation in the case of Sartje Baartman, the Hottentot Venus. Making glamour synonymous with minimizing this area of the body implies that perhaps it is a white standard of beauty that is being sold, while simultaneously aiming to control the sexuality of black women through this metaphoric chastity belt. Indeed, the historic dialogue concerning women’s freedom and place in society and the move to keep them in restrictive garments to minimize that autonomy makes this advertisement especially charged with sociopolitical meaning.
Civil Rights pin-ups appeared in intimate apparel advertising as well. Perhaps the most striking example is an ad for Exquisite Form “new Equalizer bra” with the tagline “Now... all women are created equal...” (Figure 19).\(^{106}\) The word “created” has been slashed out and replaced with “made.” This advertising copy ran in *Ebony* magazine in 1952, referencing the civil rights movement and the longing for equality, however it sent mixed messages as the woman featured adheres to white normative beauty standards. As she is the fantasy woman of transformative advertising—here to have an increased bustline—she is ever out of reach as an unattainable ideal, continuing to hold many black women outside definitions of beauty, femininity and womanhood.

\(^{106}\) “Now...all women are made equal,” Exquisite Form Brassieres, 1952.
Figure 19. Taking transformative advertising to new heights, the Equalizer bra promises figure perfection and references the dreams of civil equality. Equalizer bra for Exquisite Form in *Ebony*, 1952.
In the late 1960s, the African-American pin-up appeared to have come full circle to join the ranks of wartime beauties. Alberto Vargas, who moved on from his popular Esquire gatefolds to paint ladies for Playboy magazine (1959-1976), eventually painted African-American pin-ups. These pin-ups respond to the prominence of African-American women as vital contributors to the Civil Rights movement by depicting them as merely sexual objects.\textsuperscript{107} Indeed, these illustrations differ from the World War II pin-ups who were a central part to the war effort and the symbol of America itself and thus had some subjectivity. Black pin-ups such as those in \textit{Jet} and \textit{Hue} during the mid-50s though the 60s embodied racial pride, progress and self-determination, while the Vargas pin-up imagines the African-American pin-up within the legacy of the hypersexual Jezebel.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{107} Beyond the sexualized visual depiction of Vargas’ African-American pin-up, the caption read “I believe in black pride, but there are some things I’d rather take lying down.” (emphasis in original). Additionally a 1967 black Playboy pin-up depicted nude and straddling a pillow declared “And that, Mr. Bigelow, is yet another definition of black power!”

Figure 20. Vargas employs his classic pin-up style to depict African-American beauty (and sexuality). The caption reads: “I believe in black power, but there are some things I’d rather take lying down.” Playboy, 1970.

The pin-up and girdle pin-up served as repositories of the ideals of the American lifestyle that straddled fantasy and reality. The Phil Stack poem “Miss America” speaks to this loyalty as well as the yearning for post-war peace. A portion of this poem illuminates the importance of the pin-up as a symbol of American womanhood, as an emblem of the war effort and wartime fidelity.

This lovely creation has earned a vacation
For she is a symbol, today
Of all the career girls, those deadly sincere girls
Who fight the for the old U.S.A.

109 “Miss America,” Esquire, September 1942, 13.
She’s not out romancing or dining or dancing…
Her heart has already been won,
And her recreation throughout the duration
Is writing a lad with a gun.

The pin-up can be said to have been Miss America for the duration. She symbolized the war effort, adorning foxholes and gracing B-19s. Her devotion to her country and her soldier made her an ideal icon for women on the home front as well, giving them an example and model of self-sacrificing patriotism. Just as the Varga pin-up carried these ideals along with letter-writing and dreams of soldier sweethearts, victory and peace furnished by Stack’s pen, so too did the girdled pin-up serve as a model of national and gendered identity.

Post-script: My Grandmother, the Pin-Up

The resonance of the pin-up for the average American woman was most poignantly evident when women posed for pin-up style photographs to send to their soldier sweethearts. Posing for these images positioned the women as representatives of American beauty, as fantasies that would keep up morale and thus as both a willful declaration of sexual appeal and a patriotic act. Powerful testaments of that the pin-up held an appealed that women were encouraged to emulate, these images reveal that American women of all shapes and sizes fashioned themselves as pin-ups (with the help of their girdles). For example, this image of Irene Vera Burkett (my grandmother) was one of many pin-up style photographs that Irene would send to her Sam, a 5th class Army technician stationed in the Philippines, over the course of the war (Figure 21). Irene’s elongated and bare legs are accentuated with pointed toes in the manner of Varga Girls and her chin is tucked to her shoulder in a coy but flirtatious way. Her friendly smile and
raised eyebrow mimics the come-hither expressions of popular pin-up girls who looked approachable, but just a little bit dangerous. Her sweater calls to mind another popular pin-up, Lana Turner, who was dubbed “The Sweater Girl.” Irene likely posed at Bradley Beach near the boardwalk where she met Sam Brown, ensuring that this picture of lovely Irene would bring back sweet memories of their time together. The powerful messages in advertising for transformative beauty aids like girdles combined with the call of Hollywood icons like Ann Sothern and Betty Grable who encouraged woman to pose for their men and envision themselves as pin-up girls to instill the belief that every woman could be a pin-up. Irene Burkett’s own beautiful pin-up photographs show that the pin-up held appeal even for women who did not fit into the idealized female body type.

Figure 21. Irene Vera Burkett, my pin-up grandmother.
Wearing garments that became synonymous with morale and the triumph of American ingenuity over wartime material scarcity and while promoting the war bond and stamps drives, the girdle pin-up not only represented women during the war, but women afterwards. The appeal of working hard for victory and looking good while doing it resonated with American women who sought to become pin-ups. In their aims to reinvent themselves as pin-ups, women found inspiration in the girdle pin-up. Armored with their foundation garments and bolstered by the advertising campaigns that suggested that girdles were essential to the war effort; women were able to provide the patriotic support for their country via the support that their girdles afforded them.
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