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The Anthropometry of Barbie: Unsettling Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture.

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DEVIANT BODIES

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The Anthropometry of Barbie

Unsettling Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture

Jacqueline Urla and Alan C. Swedlund

IT IS NO secret that thousands of healthy women in the United States perceive their bodies as defective. The signs are everywhere: from potentially lethal cosmetic surgery and drugs to the more familiar routines of dieting, curling, crimping, and aerobicizing, women seek to take control over their unruly physical selves. Every year at least 150,000 women undergo breast implant surgery (Williams 1992), while Asian women have their noses rebuilt and their eyes widened to make themselves look "less dull" (Kaw 1993). Studies show that the obsession with body size and the sense of inadequacy start frighteningly early; as many as 80 percent of 9-year-old suburban girls are concerned about dieting and their weight (Bordo 1991: 125). Reports like these, together with the dramatic rise in eating disorders among young women, are just some of the more noticeable fallout from what Naomi Wolf calls "the beauty myth." Fueled by the hugely profitable cosmetic, weight-loss, and fashion industries, the beauty myth's glamorized notions of the ideal body reverberate back upon women as "a dark vein of self hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control" (Wolf 1991: 10).

It is this conundrum of somatic femininity, that female bodies are never feminine enough, that they must be deliberately and oftentimes painfully remade to be what "nature" intended—a condition dramatically accentuated under consumer capitalism—that motivates us to focus our inquiry into deviant bodies on images of the feminine ideal. Neither universal nor changeless, idealized notions of both masculine and feminine bodies have a long history that shifts considerably across time, racial or ethnic group, class, and culture. Body ideals in twentieth-century North America are influenced and shaped by images from classical or "high" art, the discourses of science and medicine, and

increasingly via a multitude of commercial interests, ranging from mundane life insurance standards to the more high-profile fashion, fitness, and entertainment industries. Each have played contributing, and sometimes conflicting, roles in determining what will count as a desirable body in the late-twentieth-century United States. In this essay, we focus our attention on the domain of popular culture and the ideal feminine body as it is conveyed by one of pop culture's longest lasting and most illustrious icons: the Barbie doll.

Making her debut in 1959 as Mattel's new teenage fashion doll, Barbie rose quickly to become the top-selling toy in the United States. Thirty-four years and a woman's movement later, Barbie dolls remain Mattel's best-selling item, netting over one billion dollars in revenues worldwide (Adelson 1992), or roughly one Barbie sold every two seconds (Stevenson 1991). Mattel estimates that in the United States over 95 percent of girls between the ages of three and eleven own at least one Barbie, and that the average number of dolls per owner is seven (E. Shapiro 1992). Barbie is clearly a force to contend with, eliciting over the years a combination of critique, parody, and adoration. A legacy of the postwar era, she remains an incredibly resilient visual and tactile model of femininity for prepubescent girls headed straight for the twenty-first century.

It is not our intention to settle the debate over whether Barbie is a good or bad role model for little girls or whether her unrealistic body wrecks havoc on girls' self-esteem. Though that issue surrounds Barbie like a dark cloud, such debates have too often been based on literal-minded, decontextualized readings of popular culture. We want to suggest that Barbie dolls, in fact, offer a much more complex and contradictory set of possible meanings that take shape and mutate in a period marked by the growth of consumer society, intense debate over gender and racial relations, and changing notions of the body. Building on Marilyn Motz's (1983) study of the cultural significance of Barbie, and fashion designer extraordinaire BillyBoy's adoring biography, *Barbie, Her Life and Times*, we want to explore not only how it is that this popular doll has been able to survive such dramatic social changes, but also how she takes on new significance in relation to these changing contexts.

We begin by tracing Barbie's origins and some of the image makeovers she has undergone since her creation. From there we turn to an experiment in the anthropometry of Barbie to understand how she compares to standards for the "average American woman" that were emerging in the postwar period.¹ Not surprisingly, our measurements show Barbie's body to be thin—very thin—far from anything approaching the norm. Inundated as our society is with conflicting and exaggerated images of the feminine body, statistical measures can help us to see that exaggeration more clearly. But we cannot stop there. First, as our brief foray into the history of anthropometry shows, the measurement and crea-

tion of body averages have their own politically inflected and culturally biased histories. Standards for the "average" American body, male or female, have always been imbricated in histories of nationalism and race purity. Secondly, to say that Barbie is unrealistic seems to beg the issue. Barbie is fantasy: a fantasy whose relationship to the hyperspace of consumerist society is multiplex. What of the pleasures of Barbie bodies? What alternative meanings of power and self-fashioning might her thin body hold for women/girls? Our aim is not, then, to offer another rant against Barbie, but to clear a space where the range of her contradictory meanings and ironic uses can be contemplated: in short, to approach her body as a meaning system in itself, which, in tandem with her mutable fashion image, serves to crystallize some of the predicaments of femininity and feminine bodies in late-twentieth-century North America.

A Doll Is Born

Parents thank us for the educational values in the world of Barbie. . . . They say that they could never get their daughters well groomed before—get them out of slacks or blue jeans and into a dress . . . get them to scrub their necks and wash their hair. Well, that's where Barbie comes in. The doll has clean hair and a clean face, and she dresses fashionably, and she wears gloves and shoes that match.

—Ruth Handler, 1964, quoted in Motz

Legend has it that Barbie was the brainchild of Mattel owner Ruth Handler, who first thought of creating a three-dimensional fashion doll after seeing her daughter play with paper dolls. As an origin story, this one is touching and no doubt true. But Barbie was not the first doll of her kind, nor was she just a mother's invention. Making sense of Barbie requires that we look to the larger sociopolitical and cultural milieu that made her genesis both possible and meaningful. Based on a German prototype, the "Lili" doll, Barbie was from "birth" implicated in the ideologies of the Cold War and the research and technology exchanges of the military-industrial complex. Her finely crafted durable plastic mold was, in fact, designed by Jack Ryan, well known for his work in designing the Hawk and Sparrow missiles for the Raytheon Company. Conceived at the hands of a military-weapons-designer-turned-toy-inventor, Barbie dolls came onto the market the same year that the infamous Nixon-Krushchev "kitchen debate" took place at the American National Exhibition in Moscow. Here, in front of the cameras of the world, the leaders of the capitalist and socialist worlds faced off, not over missile counts, but over "the relative merits of American and Soviet washing machines, televisions, and electric ranges" (May 1988: 16). As Elaine Tyler May has noted in her study of the Cold War, this much-

celebrated media event signaled the transformation of American-made commodities and the model suburban home into key symbols and safeguards of democracy and freedom. It was thus with fears of nuclear annihilation and sexually charged fantasies of the perfect bomb shelter running rampant in the American imaginary, that Barbie and her torpedo-like breasts emerged into popular culture as an emblem of the aspirations of prosperity, domestic containment, and rigid gender roles that were to characterize the burgeoning postwar consumer economy and its image of the American Dream.

Marketed as the first "teenage" fashion doll, Barbie's rise in popularity also coincided with, and no doubt contributed to, the postwar creation of a distinctive teenage lifestyle.² Teens, their tastes, and their behaviors were becoming the object of both sociologists and criminologists as well as market survey researchers intent on capturing their discretionary dollars. While J. Edgar Hoover was pronouncing "the juvenile jungle" a menace to American society, retailers, the music industry, and moviemakers declared the thirteen to nineteen-year-old age bracket "the seven golden years" (Doherty 1988:51-52).

Barbie dolls seemed to cleverly reconcile both of these concerns by personifying the good girl who was sexy, but didn't have sex, and was willing to spend, spend, spend. Amidst the palpable moral panic over juvenile delinquency and teenagers' new-found sexual freedom, Barbie was a reassuring symbol of solidly middle-class values. Popular teen magazines, advertising, television, and movies of the period painted a highly dichotomized world divided into good (i.e., middle-class) and bad (i.e., working-class) kids: the clean-cut, college-bound junior achiever versus the street-corner boy; the wholesome American Bandstander versus the uncontrollable bad seed (cf. Doherty 1988; and Frith 1981, for England). It was no mystery where Barbie stood in this thinly disguised class discourse. As Motz notes, Barbie's world bore no trace of the "greasers" and "hoods" that inhabited the many B movies about teenage vice and ruin. In the life Mattel laid out for her in storybooks and comics, Barbie, who started out looking like a somewhat vampy, slightly Bardot-esque doll, was gradually transformed into a "'soc' or a 'frat'—affluent, well-groomed, socially conservative" (Motz 1983:130). In lieu of backseat sex and teenage angst, Barbie had pajama parties, barbecues, and her favorite pastime, shopping.

Every former Barbie owner knows that to buy a Barbie is to lust after Barbie accessories—that pair of sandals and matching handbag, canopy bedroom set, or country camper. Both conspicuous consumer and a consumable item herself, Barbie surely was as much the fantasy of U.S. retailers as she was the panacea of middle-class parents. For every "need" Barbie had, there was a deliciously miniature product to fulfill it. As Paula Rabinowitz has noted, Barbie dolls, with their focus on frills and fashion, epitomize the way that teenage girls and girl

culture in general have figured as accessories in the historiography of post-war culture; that is as both essential to the burgeoning commodity culture as consumers, but seemingly irrelevant to the central narrative defining cold war existence (Rabinowitz 1993). Over the years, Mattel has kept Barbie's love of shopping alive, creating a Suburban Shopper Outfit and her own personal Mall to shop in (Motz 1983: 131). More recently, in an attempt to edge into the computer game market, we now have an electronic "Game Girl Barbie" in which (what else?) the object of the game is to take Barbie on a shopping spree. In "Game Girl Barbie," shopping takes skill, and Barbie plays to win.

Perhaps what makes Barbie such a perfect icon of late capitalist constructions of femininity is the way in which her persona pairs endless consumption with the achievement of femininity and the appearance of an appropriately gendered body. By buying for Barbie, girls practice how to be discriminating consumers knowledgeable about the cultural capital of different name brands, how to read packaging, and the overall importance of fashion and taste for social status (Motz 1987: 131-32). Being a teenage girl in the world of Barbie dolls becomes quite literally a performance of commodity display, requiring numerous and complex rehearsals. In making this argument, we want to stress that we are drawing on more than just the doll. "Barbie" is also the packaging, spin-off products, cartoons, commercials, magazines, and fan club paraphernalia, all of which contribute to creating her persona. Clearly, as we will discuss below, children may engage more or less with those products, subverting or ignoring various aspects of Barbie's "official" presentation. However, to the extent that little girls *do* participate in the prepackaged world of Barbie, they come into contact with a number of beliefs central to femininity under consumer capitalism. Little girls learn, among other things, about the crucial importance of their appearance to their personal happiness and to their ability to gain favor with their friends. Barbie's social calendar is constantly full, and the stories in her fan magazines show her frequently engaged in preparation for the rituals of heterosexual teenage life: dates, proms, and weddings. A perusal of Barbie magazines, and the product advertisements and pictorials within them, shows an overwhelming preoccupation with grooming for those events. Magazines abound with tips on the proper ways of washing hair, putting on makeup, and assembling stunning wardrobes. Through these play scenarios, little girls learn Ruth Handler's lesson about the importance of hygiene, occasion-specific clothing, knowledgeable buying, and artful display as key elements to popularity and a successful career in femininity.

Barbie exemplifies the way in which gender in the late twentieth century has become a commodity itself, "something we can buy into . . . the same way we buy into a style" (Willis 1991: 23). In her insightful analysis of the logics of

consumer capitalism, cultural critic Susan Willis pays particular attention to the way in which children's toys like Barbie and the popular muscle-bound "He-Man" for boys link highly conservative and narrowed images of masculinity and femininity with commodity consumption (1991: 27). In the imaginary world of Barbie and teen advertising, observes Willis, being or becoming a teenager, having a "grown-up" body, is inextricably bound up with the acquisition of certain commodities, signaled by styles of clothing, cars, music, etc. In play groups and fan clubs (collectors are a whole world unto themselves), children exchange knowledge about the latest accessories and outfits, their relative merit, and how to find them. They become members of a community of Barbie owners whose shared identity is defined by the commodities they have or desire to have. The articulation of social ties through commodities, is, as Willis argues, at the heart of how sociality is experienced in consumer capitalism. In this way, we might say that playing with Barbie serves not only as a training ground for the production of the appropriately gendered woman, but also as an introduction to the kinds of knowledge and social relations one can expect to encounter as a citizen of a post-Fordist economy.

Barbie Is a Survivor

A field trip in 1991 to Evelyn Burkhalter's Barbie Hall of Fame, located just above her husband's eye, ear, and throat clinic in downtown Palo Alto, California, revealed a remarkable array of Barbie dolls from across the globe. With over 1,500 dolls on display, several thousand more in storage, and an encyclopedic knowledge about Barbie's history, Mrs. Burkhalter proudly concluded her tour of the dolls with an emphatic, "Barbie is a survivor!" Indeed! In the past three decades, this popular children's doll has undergone numerous changes in her fashion image and "occupations" and has acquired a panoply of ethnic "friends" and analogues that have allowed her to weather the dramatic social changes in gender and race relations that arose in the course of the sixties and seventies.

As the women's movement gained strength in the seventies, the media and popular culture felt the impact of a growing self-consciousness about sexist imagery of women. The toy industry was no exception. Barbie, the ever-beautiful bride-to-be, became a target of some criticism and concern for parents who worried about the effects such a toy would have on their daughters. Barbie buffs like BillyBoy describe the seventies as the doll's dark decade, a time when sales dipped, quality worsened as production was transferred from Japan to Taiwan, and Barbie was lampooned in the press (BillyBoy 1987). Mattel responded by trying to give Barbie a more diversified wardrobe and a more "now" image. A

glance at Barbie's resumé, published in *Harper's* magazine in August 1990, while incomplete, shows Mattel's attempt to expand Barbie's career options beyond the original fashion model:

| Positions Held | |
|----------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1959-present | Fashion model |
| 1961-present | Ballerina |
| 1961-64 | Stewardess (American Airlines) |
| 1964 | Candy striper |
| 1965 | Teacher |
| 1965 | Fashion editor |
| 1966 | Stewardess (Pan Am) |
| 1973-75 | Flight attendant (American Airlines) |
| 1973-present | Medical doctor |
| 1976 | Olympic athlete |
| 1984 | Aerobics instructor |
| 1985 | TV news reporter |
| 1985 | Fashion designer |
| 1985 | Corporate executive |
| 1988 | Perfume designer |
| 1989-present | Animal rights volunteer |

It is only fitting, given her origin, to note that Barbie has also had a career in the military and aeronautics space industry: she has been an astronaut, a marine, and, during the Gulf War, a Desert Storm trooper. Going from pink to green, Barbie has also acquired a social conscience, taking up the causes of UNICEF, animal rights, and environmental protection. According to Mattel, the doll's careers are chosen to "reflect the activities and professions that modern women are involved in" (quoted in *Harpers*, August 2, 1990, p. 20). Ironically, former Mattel manager of marketing Beverly Cannady noted that the doctor and astronaut uniforms never sold well. As Cannady candidly admitted to *Ms.* magazine in a 1979 interview, "Frankly, we only kept the doctor's uniform in line as long as we did because public relations begged us to give them something they could point to as progressive" (Leavy 1979: 102). Despite their efforts to dodge criticism and present Barbie as a liberated woman, it is clear that glitz and glamour are at the heart of the Barbie doll fantasy.³ Motz reports, for example, that in 1963 only one out of sixty-four outfits on the market was job-related. There is no doubt that Barbie has had her day as astronaut, doctor, rock

star, and even presidential candidate. She can be anything she wishes to be, although it is interesting that the difference between occupation and outfit has never been entirely clear. As her publicists emphasize, Barbie's purpose is to let little girls dream. And that dream continues to be fundamentally about leisure and consumption, not production.

For anyone tracking Barbiana, it is abundantly clear that Mattel's marketing strategies are sensitive to a changing social climate. Just as Mattel has sought to present Barbie as a career woman with more than air in her vinyl head, they have also tried to diversify her otherwise lily-white suburban world. About the same time that Martin Luther King was assassinated and Detroit and Watts were burning in some of the worst race riots of the century, Barbie acquired her first black friend. "Colored Francie" appeared in 1967, failed, and was replaced the following year with Christie, who also did not do terribly well on the market. In 1980, Mattel went on to introduce Black Barbie, the first doll with Afro-style hair. She, too, appears to have suffered from a low advertising profile and low sales (Jones 1991). Nevertheless, the eighties saw a concerted effort on Mattel's part to "go multicultural," coinciding with a parallel preference in the pages of high-fashion magazines, such as *Elle* and *Vogue*, for racially diverse models. With the expansion of sales worldwide, Barbie has acquired multiple national guises (Spanish Barbie, Jamaican Barbie, Malaysian Barbie, etc.).⁴ In addition, her cohort of "friends" has become increasingly ethnically diversified, as has Barbie advertising, which now regularly features Asian, Hispanic, and African American little girls playing with Barbie. Today, Barbie pals include a smattering of brown and yellow plastic friends, like Teresa, Kira, and Miko, who appear in her adventures and, very importantly, can share her clothes. This diversification has not spelled an end to reigning Anglo beauty norms and body image. Quite the reverse. When we line the dolls up together, they look virtually identical. Cultural difference is reduced to surface variations in skin tone and costumes that can be exchanged at will. Like the concomitant move toward racially diverse fashion models, "difference" is remarkably made over into sameness, as ethnicity is tamed to conform to a restricted range of feminine beauty.

Perhaps Mattel's most glamorous concession to multiculturalism is their latest creation, Shani. Billed as tomorrow's African American woman, Shani, whose name, according to Mattel, means "marvelous" in Swahili, premiered at the 1991 Toy Fair with great fanfare and media attention. Unlike her predecessors, who were essentially "brown plastic poured into blond Barbie's mold," Shani, together with her two friends, Asha and Nichelle (each a slightly different shade of brown), and boyfriend, Jamal, created in 1992, were decidedly Afrocentric, with outfits in "ethnic" fabrics rather than the traditional Barbie pink (Jones 1991). The packaging also announced that these dolls' bodies and facial

features were meant to be more like those of real African American women, although they too can interchange clothes with Barbie.

A realization of the growing market share of African American and Hispanic consumers has no doubt played a role in the changing face of Barbie. However, as *Village Voice* writer Lisa Jones has pointed out, there is a story other than simple economic calculus here. On the one hand, Mattel's social consciousness reflects the small but significant inroads black women have made into the company's top-level employee structure. It also underscores the growing authority of and recourse to expert knowledge, particularly psychological experts, as a way of understanding the social consequences of popular culture. As it turns out, Mattel product manager Deborah Mitchell and the principal fashion designer, Kitty Black-Perkins, are both African American (Barbie's hair designer is also non-Anglo). Both women had read clinical psychologist Dr. Darlene Powell-Hopson's *Different and Wonderful: Raising Black Children in a Race-Conscious Society* (Powell-Hopson and Hopson 1987), and, according to Jones's account, became interested in creating a doll that could help give African American girls a positive self-image. Mattel eventually hired Powell-Hopson as a consultant, signed on a public relations firm with experience in targeting black consumers, and got to work creating Shani. Now, Mattel announced, "ethnic Barbie lovers will be able to dream in their own image" (*Newsweek* 1990: 48). Multiculturalism cracked open the door to Barbie-dom, and diversity could walk in, so long as she was big-busted and slim-hipped, had long flowing hair and tiny feet, and was very, very thin.

"The icons of twentieth-century mass culture," writes Susan Willis, "are all deeply infused with the desire for change," and Barbie is no exception (1991: 37). In looking over the course of Barbie's career, it is clear that part of her resilience, appeal, and profitability stems from the fact that her identity is constructed primarily through fantasy and is consequently open to change and re-interpretation. As a fashion model, Barbie continually creates her identity anew with every costume change. In that sense, we might want to call Barbie the prototype of the "transformer dolls" that cultural critics have come to see as emblematic of the restless desire for change that permeates postmodern capitalist society (Wilson 1985: 63). Not only can she renew her image with a change of clothes, Barbie also is seemingly able to clone herself effortlessly into new identities—Malibu Barbie; Totally Hair Barbie; Teen Talk Barbie; even Afrocentric Barbie/Shani—without somehow suggesting a serious personality disorder. Furthermore, Barbie's owners are at liberty to fantasize any number of life choices for the perpetual teenager; she might be a high-powered fashion executive, or she just might marry Ken and "settle down" in her luxury condo. Her history is a barometer of changing fashions and changing gender and race re-

lations, as well as a keen index of corporate America's anxious attempts to find new and more palatable ways of selling the beauty myth and commodity fetishism to new generations of parents and their daughters. The multiplication of Barbie and her friends translates the challenge of gender inequality and racial diversity into an ever-expanding array of costumes, a new "look" that can be easily accommodated into a harmonious and illusory pluralism that never ends up rocking the boat of WASP beauty.

What is striking, then, is that, while Barbie's identity may be mutable—one day she might be an astronaut, another a cheerleader—*her hyper-slender, big-chested body has remained fundamentally unchanged over the years*—a remarkable fact in a society that fetishizes the new and improved. Barbie did acquire flexible arms and legs, as we know, and her hair, in particular, has grown by leaps and bounds, making Superstar Barbie the epitome of a "big-hair girl." Collectors also identify three distinctive changes in Barbie's face: the original cool, pale look with arched brows, red, pursed lips, and coy sideways glance gave way in the late sixties to a more youthful, straight-haired, teenage look. This look lasted about a decade, and in 1977 Barbie acquired the exaggerated, wide-eyed, smiling look associated with Superstar Barbie that she still has today (Melosh and Simmons 1986). But her measurements, pointed toes, and proportions have not altered significantly in her thirty five years of existence. We turn now from Barbie's "persona" to the conundrum of her body and to our class experiment in the anthropometry of feminine ideals. In so doing, our aim is deliberately subversive. We wish to use the tools of calibration and measurement—tools of normalization that have an unsavory history for women and racial or ethnic minorities—to destabilize the ideal. In this way, our project represents a strategic use of scientific measurement and the authority it commands against the powerfully normative image of the feminine body in commodity culture. We begin with a very brief historical overview of the anthropometry of women and the emergence of an "average" American female body in the postwar United States, before using our calipers on Barbie and her friends.

The Measured Body: Norms and Ideals

The paramount objective of physical anthropology is the gradual completion, in collaboration with the anatomists, the physiologists, and the chemists, of the study of the normal white man under ordinary circumstances.

—Ales Hrdlicka, 1918

As the science of measuring human bodies, anthropometry belongs to a long line of techniques of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries concerned

with measuring, comparing, and interpreting variability in different zones of the human body: craniometry, phrenology, physiognomy, and comparative anatomy. Early anthropometry shared with these an understanding and expectation that the body was a window into a host of moral, temperamental, racial, or gender characteristics. It sought to distinguish itself from its predecessors, however, by adhering to rigorously standardized methods and quantifiable results that would, it was hoped, lead to the "complete elimination of personal bias" that anthropometrists believed had tainted earlier measurement techniques (Hrdlicka 1939: 12).⁵ Although the head (especially cranial capacity) continued to be a source of special fascination, by the early part of this century, physical anthropologists, together with anatomists and medical doctors, were developing a precise and routine set of measurements for the entire body that would permit systematic comparison of the human body across race, nationality, and gender.⁶

Under the aegis of Earnest Hooton, Ales Hrdlicka, and Franz Boas, located respectively at Harvard University, the Smithsonian, and Columbia University, anthropometric studies within U.S. physical anthropology were utilized mainly in the pursuit of three general areas of interest: identifying racial and or national types; the measurement of adaptation and "degeneracy"; and a comparison of the sexes. Anthropometry was, in other words, believed to be a useful technique in resolving three critical border disputes: the boundaries between races or ethnic groups; the normal and the degenerate; and the border between the sexes.

As is well documented by now, women and non-Europeans did not fare well in these emerging sciences of the body (see the work of Blakey 1987; Gould 1981; Schiebinger 1989, 1993; Fee 1979; Russett 1989; also Horn and Fausto-Sterling, this volume); measurements of women's bodies, their skulls in particular, tended to place them as inferior to or less intelligent than males. In the great chain of being, women as a class were believed to share certain atavistic characteristics with both children and so-called savages. Not everything about women was regarded negatively. In some cases it was argued that women possessed physical and moral qualities that were superior to those of males. Above all, woman's body was understood through the lens of her reproductive function; her physical characteristics, whether inferior or superior to those of males, were inexorably dictated by her capacity to bear children. These ideas, none of which were new, were part of the widespread scientific wisdom that reverberated throughout the development of physical anthropology and informed a great deal of what many of its leading figures had to say about the shape and size of women's bodies. Hooton, in his classic *Up From the Ape* (1931) was to regularly compare women, and especially non-Europeans of both sexes, to primates. Similarly, Hrdlicka's 1925 comparative study of male and female skulls

went to rather extraordinary lengths to explain how it could be that women's brains (and hence, intelligence) were actually smaller than men's, even though his measurements showed females to have a cranial capacity relatively larger than that of males.⁷ Boas stood alone as an exception to this trend toward evolutionary ranking and typing. Although he did not address sex differences per se, his work on European migrants early in the century served to refute existing hypotheses on the hereditary nature of perceived racial or ethnic physical differences. As such, his work pushed physical anthropology and anthropometry toward the study of human adaptability and variation rather than the construction of fixed racial, ethnic, or gender physical types.

It is striking that, aside from those studies specifically focused on the comparison of the sexes, women did not figure prominently in physical anthropology's attempt to quantify and typologize human bodies. In the studies of race and nationality, anthropometric studies of males far outnumbered those of females in the pages of the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*. And where female bodies were measured, non-European women far outnumbered white women as the subjects of the calipers.⁸ Although Hrdlicka and others considered it necessary to measure both males and females, textbooks reveal that more often than not it was the biologically male body that stood in as the generic and ideal representative of the race or of humankind. It is, in fact, somewhat unusual that, in the quote from Hrdlicka given above, he should have called attention to the fact that physical anthropology's main object of study was indeed the "white male," rather than the "human body." With males as the unspoken prototype, women's bodies were frequently described (subtly or not) as deviations from the norm: as subjects, the measurement of their bodies was occasionally risky to the male scientists,⁹ and as bodies they were variations from the generic or ideal type (their body fat "excessive," their pelvises maladaptive to a bipedal [i.e., more evolved] posture, their musculature weak.) Understood primarily in terms of their reproductive capacity, women's bodies, particularly their reproductive organs, genitalia, and secondary sex characteristics, were instead more carefully scrutinized and measured within "marital adjustment" studies and in the emerging science of gynecology, whose practitioners borrowed liberally from the techniques used by physical anthropologists (see Terry, this volume).

In the United States, an attempt to elaborate a scientifically sanctioned notion of a normative "American" female body, however, was taking place in the college studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1860s, Harvard and other universities had begun to regularly collect anthropometric data on their male student populations, and in the 1890s comparable data began to be collected from the East Coast women's colleges as well. Conducted by departments of hygiene, physical education, and home economics, as well as phys-

ical anthropology, these large-scale studies gathered data on the elite, primarily WASP youth, in order to determine the dimensions of the "normal" American male and female. The data from one of the earliest cosexual studies, carried out by Dr. Dudley Sargent, a professor of physical education at Harvard, were then used to create two life-sized statues that were exhibited at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 and put on display at the Peabody Museum. Effectively excluded from these attempts to define the "normal" or average body, of course, were those "other" Americans—descendants of African slaves, North American Indians, and the many recent European immigrants from Ireland, southern Europe, and eastern Europe—whose bodies were the subject of racist, evolution-oriented studies concerned with "race crossing," degeneracy, and the effects of the "civilizing" process (see Blakey 1987).

Standards for the average American male and female were also being elaborated in a variety of domains outside of academia. By the early part of the twentieth century, industry began to make widespread commercial use of practical anthropometry: the demand for standardized measures of the "average" body manifested in everything from Taylorist designs for labor-efficient workstations and kitchens to standardized sizes in the ready-to-wear clothing industry (cf. Schwartz 1986). Certainly, one of the most common ways in which individuals encountered body norms was in the medical examination required for life insurance. It was not long before such companies as Metropolitan Life would rival the army, colleges, and prisons as the most reliable source of anthropometric statistics. Between 1900 and 1920, the first medicoactuarial standards of weight and height began to appear in conjunction with new theories linking weight and health. The most significant of these, the Dublin Standard Table of Heights and Weights, developed in 1908 by Louis Dublin, a student of Franz Boas and statistician for Metropolitan Life, became the authoritative reference in every doctor's office (cf. Bennett and Gurin 1982: 130–38). However, what began as a table of statistical averages soon became a means of setting ideal norms. Within a few years of its creation, the Dublin table shifted from providing a record of statistically "average" weights to becoming a guide to "desirable" weights that, interestingly enough, were notably below the average weight for most adult women. In her history of anorexia in the United States, Joan Brumberg points to the Dublin table, widely disseminated to doctors and published in popular magazines, and the invention of the personal, or bathroom, scale as the two devices most responsible for popularizing the notion that the human figure could be standardized and that abstract and often unrealistic norms could be uniformly applied (1988: 232–35).

By the 1940s the search to describe the normal American male and female bodies in anthropometric terms was being conducted on many fronts. Data on

the average measurements of men and women were now available from a number of different sources, including surveys of army recruits from World War I, the longitudinal college studies, sample measurements from the Chicago World's Fair, actuarial data, and extensive data from the Bureau of Home Economics, which had amassed measurements to assist in developing standardized sizing for the garment industry. Between the two wars, nationalist interests had fueled eugenic interests and provoked a deepening concern about the physical fitness of the American people. Did Americans constitute a distinctive physical "type"; were they puny and weak as some Europeans had alleged, or were they physically bigger and stronger than their European ancestors? Could they defend themselves in time of war? And who did this category of "Americans" include? Questions such as these fed into an already long-standing preoccupation with defining a specifically American national character and, in 1945, led to the creation of one of the most celebrated and widely publicized anthropometric models of the century: Norm and Norma, the average American male and female. Based on the composite measurements of thousands of young people, described only as "native white Americans," across the United States, the statues of Norm and Norma were the product of a collaboration between obstetrician-gynecologist Robert Latou Dickinson, well known for his studies of human reproductive anatomy, and Abram Belskie, the prize student of Malvina Hoffman, who had sculpted the Races of Mankind series.¹⁰ Of the two, Norma received the greatest media attention when the Cleveland Health Museum, which had purchased the pair, decided to sponsor, with the help of a local newspaper, the YWCA, and several other health and educational organizations, a contest to find the woman in Ohio whose body most closely matched the dimensions of Norma. Under the catchy headline, "Are You Norma, Typical Woman?" the publicity surrounding this contest instructed women in how to measure themselves at the same time that it extolled the virtues of Norma's body compared to those of her "grandmother," Dudley Sargent's composite of the 1890s woman.¹¹ Within ten days, 3,863 women had sent in their measurements to compete for the \$100 prize in U.S. War Bonds that would go to the woman who most resembled the average American girl.

Although anthropometric studies such as these were ostensibly descriptive rather than prescriptive, the normal or average and the ideal were routinely conflated. Nowhere is this more evident than in the discussions surrounding the Norma contest. Described in the press as the "ideal" young woman, Norma was said to be everything an American woman should be in a time of war: she was fit, strong-bodied, and at the peak of her reproductive potential. Commentators waxed eloquent about the model character traits—maturity, modesty, and virtuousity—that this perfectly average body suggested. Curiously, although

Norma was based on the measurements of living women, only about one percent of the contestants came close to her proportions. Harry Shapiro, curator of physical anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History, explained in the pages of *Natural History* why it was so rare to find a living, breathing Norma. Both Norma and Norman, he pointed out:

... exhibit a harmony of proportion that seems far indeed from the usual or the average. One might well look at a multitude of young men and women before finding an approximation to these normal standards. We have to do here then with apparent paradoxes. Let us state it this way: the average American figure approaches a kind of perfection of bodily form and proportion; the average is excessively rare. (Shapiro 1945: 51)

Besides bolstering the circulation of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the idea behind the contest was to promote interest in physical fitness. Newspaper articles emphasized that women had a national responsibility to be fit, if America was to continue to excel after the war. Commenting on the search for Norma, Dr. Bruno Gebhard, director of the Cleveland Health Museum, was quoted in one of the many newspaper articles as saying that "if a national inventory of the female population of this country were taken there would be as many '4Fs' among the women as were revealed among the men in the draft" (Robertson 1945:4). The contest provided the occasion for many health reformers to voice their concern about the need for eugenic marital selection and breeding. Beside weakening the "American stock," Gebhard claimed, "the unfit are both bad producers and bad consumers. One of the outstanding needs in this country is more emphasis everywhere on physical fitness" (ibid). Norma was presented to the public as a reminder to women of their duty to the nation, and, not incidentally, Norma could also serve as a hypothetical standard in women's colleges for the detection of faulty posture and "so that students who need to lose or gain in spots or generally may have a mark to shoot at" (ibid).

Norma and Norman were thus more than statistical composites, they were ideals. It is striking how thoroughly racial and ethnic differences were erased from these scientific representations of the American male and female. Based on the measurements of white Americans, eighteen to twenty-five years old, Norm and Norma emerged carved out of white alabaster, with the facial features and appearance of Anglo-Saxon gods. Here, as in the college studies that preceded them, the "average American" of the postwar period was to be visualized only as a youthful white body.

However, they were not the only ideal. The health reformers, educators, and doctors who approved and promoted Norma as an ideal for American women were well aware that her sensible, strong, thick-waisted body differed signifi-

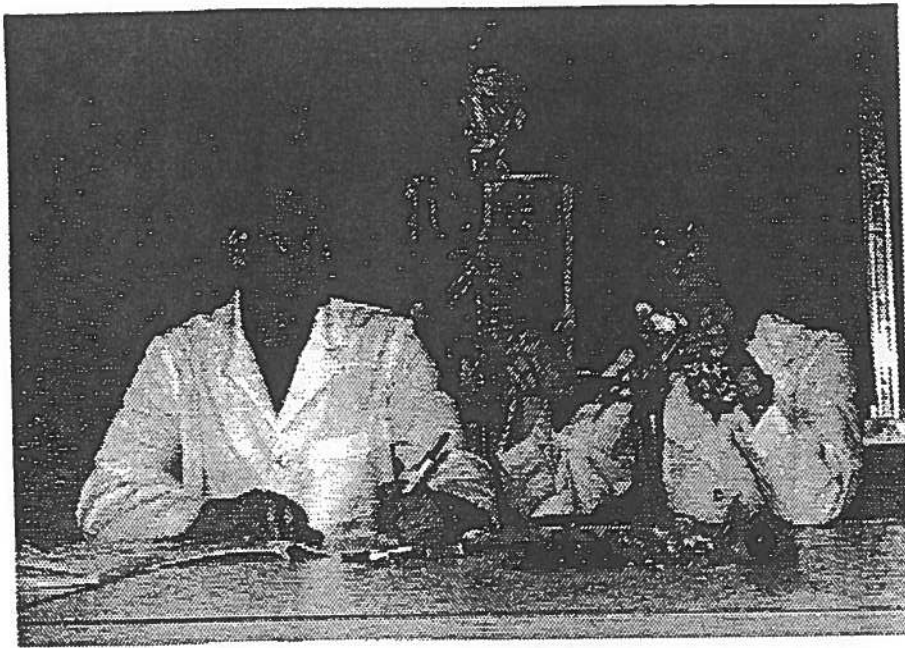


Figure 10.1. Measuring Barbie. (Photo by Ann Marie Mires)

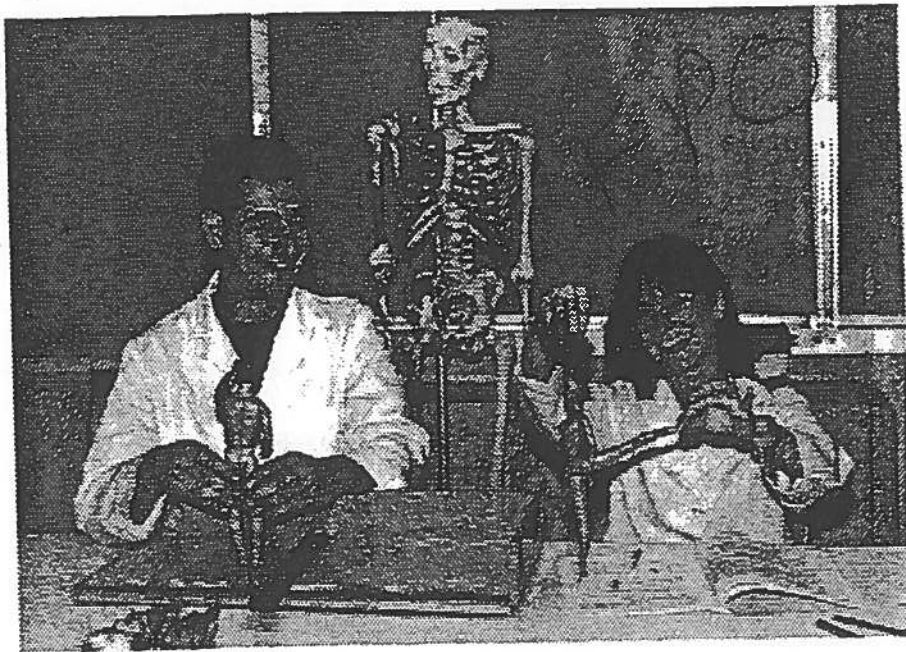


Figure 10.2. Anthropometry Fun. (Photo by Ann Marie Mires)

cantly from the tall, slim-hipped bodies of fashion models in vogue at the time.¹² Gebhard and others tried through a variety of means to encourage women to ignore the temptations of "vanity" and fashion, but they were ill equipped to compete with the persuasive powers of a rapidly expanding mass media that marketed a very different kind of female body. As the postwar period advanced, Norma would continue to be trotted out in home economics and health education classes. But in the iconography of desirable female bodies, she would be overshadowed by the array of images of fashion models and pinup girls put out by advertisers, the entertainment industry, and a burgeoning consumer culture. These idealized images were becoming, as we will see below, increasingly thin in the sixties and seventies while the "average" woman's body was in fact getting heavier. With the thinning of the American feminine ideal, Norma and subsequent representations of the statistically average woman would become increasingly aberrant, as slenderness and sex appeal—not physical fitness—became the premier concern of postwar femininity.

The Anthropometry of Barbie: Turning the Tables

As the preceding discussion makes abundantly clear, the anthropometrically measured "normal" body has been anything but value-free. Formulated in the context of a race-, class-, and gender-stratified society, there is no doubt that quantitatively defined ideal types or standards have been both biased and oppressive. Incorporated into weight tables, put on display in museums and world's fairs, and reprinted in popular magazines, these scientifically endorsed standards produce what Foucault calls "normalizing effects," shaping, in not altogether healthy ways, how individuals understand themselves and their bodies. Nevertheless, in the contemporary cultural context, where an impossibly thin image of women's bodies has become the most popular children's toy ever sold, it strikes us that recourse to the "normal" body might just be the power tool we need for destabilizing a fashion fantasy spun out of control. It was with this in mind that we asked students in one of our social biology classes to measure Barbie to see how her body compared to the average measurements of young American women of the same period. Besides estimating Barbie's dimensions if she were life-sized, we see the experiment as an occasion to turn the anthropometric tables from disciplining the bodies of living women to measuring the ideals by which we have come to judge ourselves and others. We also see it as an opportunity for students who have grown up under the regimes of normalizing science—students who no doubt have been measured, weighed, and compared to standards since birth—to use those very tools to unsettle a highly popular cultural ideal.

Initially, this foray into the anthropometry of Barbie was motivated by an exercise in a course entitled Issues in Social Biology. Since one objective of the course was to learn about human variation, our first task in understanding more about Barbie was to consider the fact that Barbie's friends and family do represent some variation, limited though it may be. Through colleagues and donations from students or (in one case) their children we assembled seventeen dolls for analysis. The sample included:

- 1 early '60s Barbie
- 4 mid-'70s-to-contemporary Barbies, including a Canadian Barbie
- 3 Kens
- 2 Skippers
- 1 Scooter
- Assorted Barbie's friends, including Christie, Barbie's "black" friend
- Assorted Ken's friends

To this sample we subsequently added the most current versions of Barbie and Ken (from the "Glitter Beach" collection) and also Jamal, Nichelle, and Shani, Barbie's more recent African American friends. As already noted, Mattel introduced these dolls (Shani, Asha, and Nichelle) as having a more authentic African American appearance, including a "rounder and more athletic" body. Noteworthy also are the skin color variations between the African American dolls, ranging from dark to light, whereas Barbie and her white friends tend to be uniformly pink or uniformly suntanned.

Normally, of course, before undertaking the somewhat invasive techniques of measuring people's bodies, we would have written a proposal to the Human Subjects Committees of the department and the university; submitted a written informed consent form detailing the measurements to be taken and seeking permission to use the data, by name, in subsequent reports; and, finally, discussed the procedures and the importance of the research with each of the subjects. However, since our subjects were unresponsive, these protocols had to be waived.

Before beginning the actual measurements, we discussed the kinds of data we thought would be most appropriate. Student interest centered on height and chest, waist, and hip circumference. Members of the class also pointed out the apparently small size of the feet and the general leanness of Barbie. As a result, we added a series of additional standardized measurements, including upper arm and thigh circumference, in order to obtain an estimate of body fat and general size.

After practicing with the calipers, discussing potential observational errors,

TABLE 1 Measurements of Glitter Beach Barbie, African American Shani, and the average measurements of the 1988 U.S. Army women recruits.^a

| Meas. | Barbie | Shani | U.S. Army "Norma" |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|-------------------|
| Height | 5'10" | 5'10" | 5'4" |
| Chest circum. | 35" | 35" | 35.7" |
| Waist circum. | 20" | 20" | 31" |
| Hip circum. ^b | 32.50" | 31.25" | 38.10" |
| Hip breadth | 11.6" | 11.0" | 13.49" |
| Thigh circum. | 19.25" | 20.00" | 22.85" |

^a"Norma" is based on 2,208 army recruits, 1,140 of whom were white, 922 of whom were black.

^bHip circumference is referred to as "buttock circumference" in anthropometric parlance.

TABLE 2 Measurements of Glitter Beach Ken, African American Ken, and the average measurements of the 1988 U.S. Army male recruits.^a

| Meas. | Ken | Jamal | U.S. Army "Norm" |
|--------------------------|-------|--------|------------------|
| Height | 6'0" | 6'0" | 5'9" |
| Chest circum. | 38.4" | 38.4" | 39.0" |
| Waist circum. | 28.8" | 28.8" | 33.1" |
| Hip Circum. ^b | 36.0" | 36.0" | 38.7" |
| Hip breadth | 12.2" | 12.2" | 13.46" |
| Thigh circum | 20.4" | 20.04" | 23.48" |

^a"Norm" is based on 1,774 males, 1,172 of whom were white and 458 of whom were black.

^bHip circumference is referred to as "buttock circumference" in anthropometric parlance.

and performing repeated trial runs, we began to record. All the measurements were taken in the Physical Anthropology Laboratory at the University of Massachusetts under clean, well-lit conditions. We felt our almost entirely female group of investigators would no doubt have pleased Hrdlicka, since he believed women anthropometrists to be more skilled at the precise, small-scale measurements our experiment required.¹³ In scaling Barbie to be life-sized, the students decided to translate her measurements using two standards: (a) if Barbie were a fashion model (5'10") and (b) if she were of average height for women in the United States (5'4"). We also decided to measure Ken, using both an average male stature, which we designated as 5'8", and the more "idealized" stature for men, 6'.

For the purposes of this chapter, we took measurements of dolls in the cur-

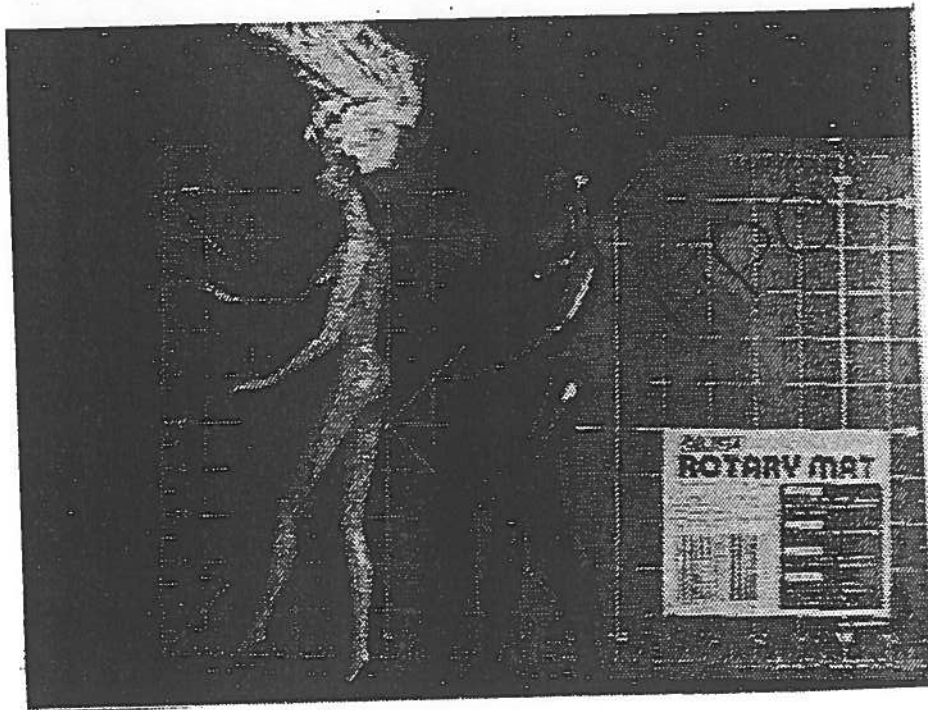
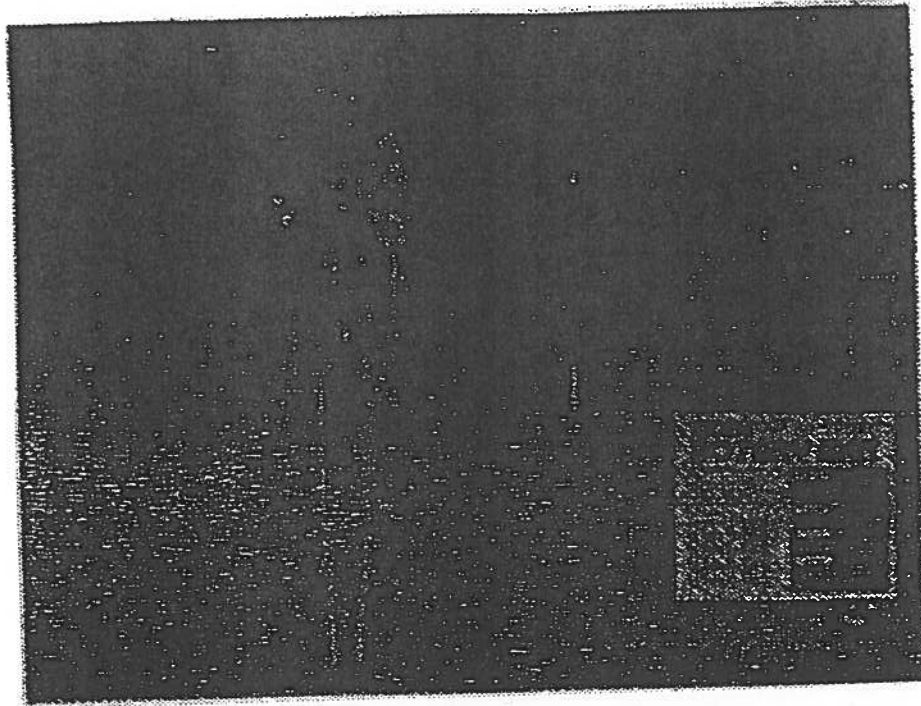


Figure 10.3. & 10.4. (Photos by Ann Marie Mires)

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rent Glitter Beach and Shani collection that were not available for our original classroom experiment, and all measurements were retaken to confirm estimates. We report here only the highlights of the measurements taken on the newer Barbie and newer Ken, Jamal, and Shani, scaled at their ideal fashion-model height. For purposes of comparison, we include data on average body measurements from the standardized published tables of the 1988 Anthropometric Survey of Army Personnel. We have dubbed these composites for the female and male recruits Army "Norma" and Army "Norm," respectively.

Barbie and Shani's measurements reveal interesting similarities and subtle differences. First, considering that they are six inches taller than "Army Norma," note that their measurements tend to be considerably less *at all points*. "Army Norma" is a composite of the fit woman soldier; Barbie and Shani, as high-fashion ideals, reflect the extreme thinness expected of the runway model. To dramatize this, had we scaled Barbie to 5'4", her chest, waist, and hip measurements would have been 32"-17"-28", clinically anorectic to say the least. There are only subtle differences in size, which we presume intend to facilitate the exchange of costumes among the different dolls. We were curious to see the degree to which Mattel had physically changed the Barbie mold in making Shani. Most of the differences we could find appeared to be in the face. The nose of Shani is broader and her lips are ever so slightly larger. However, our measurements also showed that Barbie's hip circumference is actually larger than Shani's, and so is her hip breadth. If anything, Shani might have thinner legs than Barbie, but her back is arched in such a way that it tilts her buttocks up. This makes them appear to protrude more posteriorly, even though the hip depth measurements of both dolls are virtually the same (7.1"). Hence, the tilting of the lumbar dorsal region and the extension of the sacral pelvic area produce the visual illusion of a higher, rounder butt (see Figures 10.3 and 10.4). This is, we presume, what Mattel was referring to in claiming that Shani has a realistic, or ethnically correct, body (Jones 1991).

One of our interests in the male dolls was to ascertain whether they represent a form closer to average male values than Barbie does to average female values. Ken and Jamal provide interesting contrasts to "Army Norm," but certainly not to each other. Their postcranial bodies are identical in all respects. They, in turn, represent a somewhat slimmer, trimmer male than the so-called fit soldier of today. Visually, the newer Ken and Jamal appear very tight and muscular and "bulkied out" in impressive ways. The U.S. Army males tend to carry slightly more fat, judging from the photographs and data presented in the 1988 study.¹⁴

Indeed, it would appear that Barbie and virtually all her friends characterize a somewhat extreme ideal of the human figure, but in Barbie and Shani,

the female cases, the degree to which they vary from "normal" is much greater than in the male cases, bordering on the impossible. Barbie truly is the unobtainable representation of an imaginary femaleness. But she is certainly not unique in the realm of female ideals. Studies tracking the body measurements of *Playboy* magazine centerfolds and Miss America contestants show that between 1959 and 1978 the average weight and hip size for women in both of these groups have decreased steadily (Wiseman et al. 1992). Comparing their data to actuarial data for the same time period, researchers found that the thinning of feminine body ideals was occurring at the same time that the average weight of American women was actually increasing. A follow-up study for the years 1979–88 found this trend continuing into the eighties: approximately sixty-nine percent of *Playboy* centerfolds and sixty percent of Miss America contestants were weighing in at fifteen percent or more below their expected age and height category. In short, the majority of women presented to us in the media as having desirable feminine bodies were, like Barbie, well on their way to qualifying for anorexia nervosa.

Our Barbies, Our Selves

I feel like Barbie; everyone calls me Barbie; I love Barbie. The main difference is she's plastic and I'm real. There isn't really any other difference.

—Hayley Spicer, winner of Great Britain's Barbie-Look-Alike competition

On the surface, at least, Barbie's strikingly thin body and the repression and self-discipline that it signifies would appear to contrast with her seemingly endless desire for consumption and self-transformation. And yet, as Susan Bordo has argued in regard to anorexia, these two phenomena—hyper-thin bodies and hyper-consumption—are very much linked in advanced capitalist economies that depend upon commodity excess. Regulating desire under such circumstances is a constant, ongoing problem that plays itself out on the body. As Bordo argues:

[In a society where we are] conditioned to lose control at the very sight of desirable products, we can only master our desires through a rigid defense against them. The slender body codes the tantalizing ideal of a well-managed self in which all is "in order" despite the contradictions of consumer culture. (1990:97)

The imperative to manage the body and "be all that you can be"—in fact, the idea that you can *choose* the body that you want to have—is a pervasive feature of consumer culture. Keeping control of one's body, not getting too fat or flabby—in other words, conforming to gendered norms of fitness and weight—

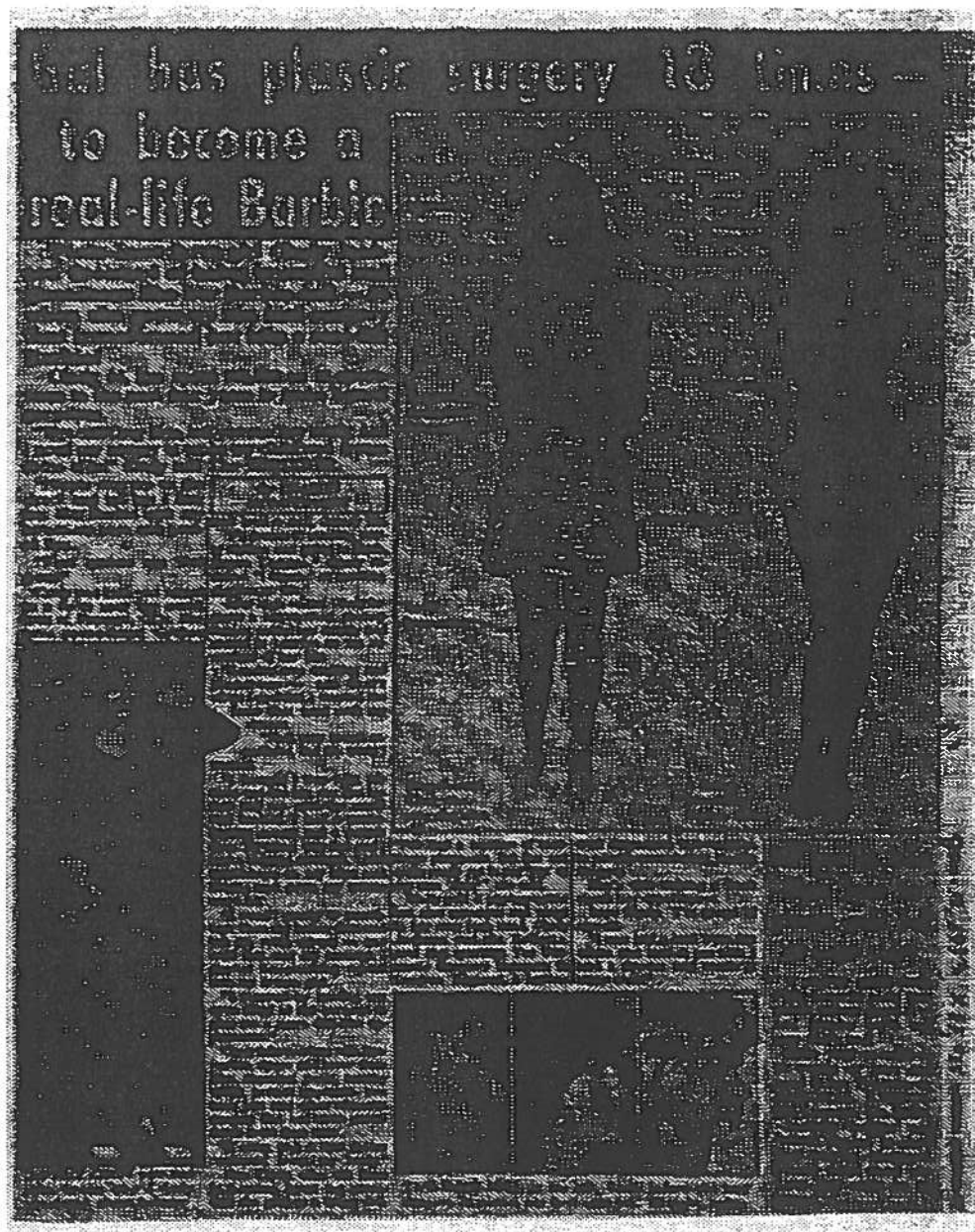


Figure 10.5. *National Enquirer*, January 12, 1993, vol. 67, no. 25, page 3. Reproduced with permission.

are signs of an individual's social and moral worth. But, as feminists Bordo, Sandra Bartky, and others have been quick to point out, not all bodies are subject to the same degree of scrutiny or the same repercussions if they fail. It is women's bodies and desires in particular where the structural contradictions—the simultaneous incitement to consume and social condemnation for overindulgence—appear to be most acutely manifested in bodily regimes of intense self-monitoring and discipline. “The woman who checks her make-up half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara run, who worries that the wind or rain may spoil her hairdo has become just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self surveillance” (Bartky 1990: 80). Just as it is women's appearance that is subject to greater social scrutiny, so it is that women's desires, hungers, and appetites are seen as most threatening and in need of control in a patriarchal society.

This cultural context is relevant to making sense of Barbie and the meaning her body holds in late consumer capitalism. In dressing and undressing Barbie, combing her hair, bathing her, turning and twisting her limbs in imaginary scenarios, children acquire a very tactile and intimate sense of Barbie's body. Barbie is presented in packaging and advertising as a role model, a best friend or older sister to little girls. Television jingles use the refrain, “I want to be just like you,” while look-alike clothes and look-alike contests make it possible for girls to live out the fantasy of being Barbie. And, finally, in the pages of the *National Enquirer*, where cultural fantasies have a way of becoming nightmare reality, we find the literalization of becoming Barbie, thanks to the wonders of modern medical technology (see Figure 10.5). In short, there is no reason to believe that girls (or adult women) separate Barbie's body shape from her popularity and glamour.¹⁵

This is exactly what worries many feminists. As our measurements show, Barbie's body differs wildly from anything approximating “average” female body weight and proportions. Over the years her wasp-waisted body has evoked a steady stream of critique for having a negative impact on little girls' sense of self-esteem.¹⁶ While her large breasts have always been a focus of commentary, it is interesting to note that, as eating disorders are on the rise, her weight has increasingly become the target of criticism. For example, the 1992 release of a Barbie aerobics workout video for girls was met with the following angry letter from an expert in the field of eating disorders:

I had hoped these plastic dolls with impossible proportions would have faded away in this current health-conscious period; not at all. . . . Move over Jane Fonda. Welcome again, ever smiling, breast-thrusting Barbie with your stick legs and sweat-free aerobic routines. I'm concerned about

the role model message she is giving our young. Surely it's hard to accept a little cellulite when the culture tells you unrelentingly how to strive for thinness and the perfect body. (Warner 1992)¹⁷

There is no doubt that Barbie's body contributes to what Kim Chernin (1981) has called "the tyranny of slenderness." But is repression all her hyper-thin body conveys? Looking once again to Susan Bordo's work on anorexia, we find an alternative reading of the slender body—one that emerges from taking seriously the way anorectic women see themselves and make sense of their experience:

For them, anorectics, [the slender ideal] may have a very different meaning; it may symbolize not so much the containment of female desire, as its liberation from a domestic, reproductive destiny. The fact that the slender female body can carry both these (seemingly contradictory) meanings is one reason, I would suggest, for its compelling attraction in periods of gender change. (Bordo 1990: 103)

Similar observations have been made about cosmetic surgery: women often explain their experience as one of empowerment, taking charge of their bodies and lives (Balsamo 1993; Davis 1991). What does this mean for making sense of Barbie? We would suggest that a subtext of agency and independence, even transgression, accompanies this pencil-thin icon of femininity. One could argue that, like the anorectic body she resembles, Barbie's body displays conformity to dominant cultural imperatives for a disciplined body and contained feminine desires. As a woman, however, her excessive slenderness also signifies a rebellious manifestation of willpower, a visual denial of the maternal ideal symbolized by pendulous breasts, rounded stomach and hips. Hers is a body of hard edges, distinct borders, self-control. It is literally impenetrable. Unlike the anorectic, whose self-denial renders her gradually more androgynous in appearance, in the realm of plastic fantasy Barbie is able to remain powerfully sexualized, with her large, gravity-defying breasts, even while she is distinctly nonreproductive. Like the "hard bodies" in fitness advertising, Barbie's body may signify for women the pleasure of control and mastery, both of which are highly valued traits in American society and predominantly associated with masculinity (Bordo 1990: 105). Putting these elements together with her apparent independent wealth can make for a very different reading of Barbie than the one we often find in the popular press. To paraphrase one Barbie-doll owner: she owns a Ferrari and doesn't have a husband—she must be doing something right!¹⁸

Invoking the testimonies and experiences of women caught up in the beauty myth is not meant to suggest that playing with Barbie, or becoming like

Barbie, is a means of empowerment for little girls. But it is meant to signal the complex and contradictory meanings that her body has in contemporary American society. Barbie functions as an ideological sign for commodity fetishism and a rather rigid gender ideology. But neither children nor adult consumers of popular culture are simply passive victims of dominant ideology. It is sensible to assume that the children who play with Barbie are themselves creative users, who respond variously to the messages about femininity encoded in her fashions and appearance. Not only do many children make their own clothes for their Barbie dolls,¹⁹ but anecdotes abound of the imaginative uses of Barbie. In the hands of their owners, Barbies have been known to occupy roles and engage in activities anathema to the good-girl image Mattel has carefully constructed. In the course of our research in the past year, we have heard or read about Barbies that have been tattooed, decapitated, and had their flowing locks shorn into mohawks. Knowing only the limits of a child's imagination, Barbies have become amazon cave warriors, dutiful mommies, evil axe-murderers, and *Playboy* models. As *Mondo Barbie*, a recent collection of Barbie-inspired fiction and poetry, makes clear, the possibilities are endless, and sexual transgression is always just around the corner (Ebersole and Peabody 1993; see also Rand, 1994).

It is clear that a next step we would want to take in the cultural interpretation of Barbie is an ethnographic study of Barbie-doll owners.²⁰ In the meanwhile, we can know something about these alternative appropriations by looking to various forms of popular culture and the art world. Barbie has become a somewhat celebrated figure among avant-garde and pop artists, giving rise to a whole genre of Barbie satire, known as "Barbie Noire" (Kahn 1991). According to Peter Galassi, curator of *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*, an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York "Barbie isn't just a doll. She suggests a type of behavior—something a lot of artists, especially women, have wanted to question" (quoted in Kahn 1991: 25). Perhaps the most notable sardonic use of Barbie dolls to date is the 1987 film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, by Todd Haynes and Cynthia Schneider. In this deeply ironic exploration into the seventies, suburbia, and middle-class hypocrisy, Barbie and Ken dolls are used to tell the tragic story of Karen Carpenter's battle with anorexia and expose the perverse underbelly of the popular singing duo's candy-coated image of happy, apolitical teens. It is hard to imagine a better casting choice to tell this tale of femininity gone astray than the ever-thin, ever-plastic, ever-wholesome Barbie.

For Barbiana collectors it should come as no surprise that Barbie's excessive femininity also makes her a favorite persona of female impersonators, alongside Judy, Marilyn, Marlene, and Zsa Zsa. Appropriations of Barbie in gay camp culture have tended to favor the early, vampier Barbie look: with the arched eyebrows, heavy black eyeliner, and coy sideways look—the later superstar version



Figure 10.6. "You Better Work!" Advertisement, Larry Baron and Linda Frisco, proprietors, The Best Little HairHouse in Boston. 1993. Reproduced with permission.

of Barbie, according to BillyBoy, is just *too* pink. But new queer spins are constantly popping up. For example, multiple layers of meaning abound in this image of Barbie that appeared in an advertisement for a hair salon in the predominantly gay South End neighborhood of Boston (see Figure 10.6). Here, superstar Barbie, good-girl teenage fashion model, is presented to us tattooed, dressed in leather, and painted over with heavy makeup. She is accompanied by lyrics from drag-queen performer Ru Paul's hit song, "Supermodel." A towering seven feet of gender-bending beauty in heels, Ru Paul opens and closes this wonderfully campy song about runway modeling, with the commanding phrase: "I have one thing to say: you better work!" In the song, "work" or "work your body," refers simultaneously to the work of moving down the runway with "savoir-faire" and to the work of illusion, the work of producing a perfect feminine appearance, a "million-dollar derrière." In the advertisement, of course, it is Barbie, with her molded-by-Mattel body, who stands in for the drag queen, commanding the spectator, whip in hand, to *work her body*. Barbie, in this fantasy-scape, becomes the mistress of body discipline, exposing simultaneously the artifice of gender and the feminine body.

In the world of Barbie Noire, the hyper-rigid gender roles of the toy industry are targeted for inversion and subversion. While Barbie is transformed into a dominatrix drag queen, Ken, too, has had his share of spoofs and gender bending. Barbie's somewhat dull steady boyfriend has never been developed into much more than a reliable escort and proof of Barbie's appropriate sexual orientation and popularity. In contrast to that of Barbie, Ken's image has remained boringly constant over the years. He has had his "mod," "hippie" and Malibu-suntan days, and he has gotten significantly more muscular. But for the most part, his clothing line is less diversified, and he lacks an independent fan club or advertising campaign.²¹ In a world where boys' toys are G.I. Joe-style action figures, bent on alternately saving or destroying the world, Ken is an anomaly. Few would doubt that his identity was primarily another one of Barbie's accessories. His secondary status vis-à-vis Barbie is translated into emasculation and/or a secret gay identity: cartoons and spoofs of Ken have him dressed in Barbie clothes, and rumors abound that Ken's seeming lack of sexual desire for Barbie is only a cover for his real love for his boyfriends, Alan, Steve, and Dave.

Inscrutable with her blank stare and unchanging smile, Barbie is thus available for any number of readings and appropriations. What we have done here is examine some of the ways she resonates with the complex and contradictory cultural meanings of femininity in postwar consumer society and a changing politics of the body. Barbie, as we, and many other critics, have observed, is an impossible ideal, but she is an ideal that has become curiously normalized. In a youth-obsessed society like our own, she is an ideal not just for young women,

but for all women who feel that being beautiful means looking like a skinny, buxom, white twenty-year-old. It is this cultural imperative to remain ageless and lean that leads women to have skewed perceptions of their bodies, undergo painful surgeries, and punish themselves with outrageous diets. Barbie, in short, is an ideal that constructs women's bodies as hopelessly imperfect. It has been our intention to unsettle this ideal and, at the same time, to be sensitive to other possible readings, other ways in which this ideal body figures and re-configures the female body. For example, implicit in the various strategies of technologically mediated body-sculpting and surveillance that women engage in to meet these ideals is not only a conception of the female body that is inherently pathological, but an increasingly imaginary body of malleable, replaceable parts. Fueled by an ideology demanding limitless improvement and an increasingly popular cyborgian science fiction, the modern paradigm of "body as machine," says Susan Bordo, is giving way to an understanding of the body as "cultural plastic." The explosion in technologically assisted modifications through cosmetic surgery, piercing, aerobics, and nautilus all point to a conception of the body as raw material to be fragmented into parts, molded, and reshaped into a more perfect form. Lacking any essential truth, the body has become, like Barbie, all surface, a ground for staging cultural identities.

What to make of this apparent denaturalizing of the feminine body is not clear. Feminists call attention to the way women use these techniques to take control over their bodies, while others are hesitant to join with current trends in cultural studies that would celebrate these as empowered acts of resistance. Our concern is not to decry the corruption of a fictitious "natural" body, but to underscore how these acts of self-re-creation are inflected by power and desire. "Fashion surgery," as Balsamo calls it, liberates one from the body one is born with, and as Nan Goldin's 1993 photo essays of transvestites and transsexuals make apparent, advances in this medical technology have made possible new permutations of the gendered body. What they do *not* do is erase the larger cultural matrix and power relations that propel women to undertake certain kinds of body transformations instead of others. The different matrices of power in which individuals are located make it such that, while all body transformations in some way treat the gender and the body as cultural plastic, they do not have similar meanings. Further, the potential to surgically alter bodies may challenge the naturalness of gender and the determining power of biological sex itself, but it has not unsettled the notion that gender is fundamentally located in the physical body, rather than in language, gesture, or other performative displays.²² Indeed, a variety of social and cultural forces conspire to make body modification so normal, so necessary, that "electing *not* to have cosmetic surgery is sometimes interpreted as a failure to deploy all available resources to maintain a youthful,

and therefore socially acceptable and attractive, body appearance" (Balsamo 1993: 216).²³ It is the complexity of this terrain that leads artists such as Barbara Kruger to describe the body, particularly the body of the socially disempowered, as a *battleground*, a terrain of multiple sites of conflict and resistances, where histories of racial, national, and gender inequalities come to bear upon the "choices" individuals make with regard to their bodies.

We have explored some of the battleground upon which the serious play of Barbie unfolds. If Barbie has taught us anything about gender, it is that femininity in consumer culture is a question of carefully performed display, of paradoxical fixity and malleability. One outfit, one occupation, one identity can be substituted for another, while Barbie's body has remained ageless, changeless, untouched by the ravages of age or cellulite. She is always a perfect fit, always able to consume and be consumed. Mattel has skillfully managed to turn the challenges of feminist protest, ethnic diversity, and a troubled multiculturalism to a new array of outfits and skin tones, annexing these to a singular anorectic body ideal. Cultural icon that she is, Barbie nevertheless cannot be permanently located in any singular cultural space. Her meaning is mobile as she is appropriated and relocated into different cultural contexts, some of which, as we have seen, make fun of many of the very notions of femininity and consumerism she personifies. As we consider Barbie's many meanings, we should remember that Barbie is not only a denizen of subcultures in the United States, she is also world traveler. A product of the global assembly line, Barbie dolls owe their existence to the internationalization of the labor market and global flows of capital and commodities that today characterize the toy industry, as well as other industries in the postwar era. Designed in Los Angeles, manufactured in Taiwan or Malaysia, distributed worldwide, Barbie™ is American-made in name only. Speeding her way into an expanding global market, Barbie brings with her some of the North American cultural subtext we have outlined in this analysis. How this teenage survivor then gets interpolated into the cultural landscapes of Mayan villages, Bombay high-rises, and Malagasy towns is a rich topic that begs to be explored.

Notes

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1. At the time of this writing, there was no definitive history of Barbie and the molds that have been created for her body. However, Barbie studies are booming, and we expect new work in press, including M. G. Lord's *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll* (1994), to provide greater insight into Barbie's history and the debates surrounding her body within Mattel and the press.

2. While the concept of adolescence as a distinct developmental stage between puberty and adulthood was not new to the fifties, Thomas Doherty (1988) notes that it wasn't until the end of World War II that the term "teenager" gained standard usage in the American language.

3. The most recent upset, for example, surrounded the release of "Teen Talk" Barbie in the summer of 1992. A formal complaint from the American Association of University Women over one of the doll's preprogrammed phrases, "Math class is tough," resulted in Mattel's apology and discontinuation of the potentially offensive comment. It also generated a flurry of jokes, cartoons, and commentaries that seized the opportunity to alternately bash and embrace feminist critiques of traditional gender stereotypes. As with the many other controversies that have enveloped the doll since the seventies, the "Barbie-hates-math" brouhaha revealed Barbie to be a kind of litmus test of gender ideology in American society: a vehicle through which competing social constituencies air their differing views on appropriate gender roles and the status of feminism in a time of flux.

4. Recent work by Ann duCille promises to offer an incisive cultural critique of the "ethnification" of Barbie and its relationship to controversies in the United States over multiculturalism and political correctness (duCille 1995). More work, however, needs to be done on how Barbie dolls are adapted to appeal to various markets outside the U.S. For example, Barbie dolls manufactured in Japan for Japanese consumption have noticeable larger, rounder eyes than those marketed in the United States (see BillyBoy 1987). For some suggestive thoughts on the cultural implications of the transnational flow of toys like Barbie dolls, Transformers, and He-Man, see Carol Breckenridge's (1990) brief but intriguing editorial comment to *Public Culture*.

5. Closely aligned with the emergence of statistics, it was Hrdlicka's hope that the two would be joined, and that one day the state would be "enlightened" enough to incorporate regular measurements of the population with the various other tabulations of the periodic census, in order to "ascertain whether and how its human stock is progressing or regressing" (1939: 12).

6. Though measurements of skulls, noses, and facial angles for scientific comparison had been going on throughout the nineteenth century, it wasn't until the 1890s that any serious attempts were made to standardize anthropometric measurements of the living body. This culminated in the Monaco Agreement of 1906, one of the first international meetings to standardize anthropometric measurement. For a brief review of the attempts to use and systematize photography in anthropometry, see Spencer (1992).

7. Hrdlicka argued, rather fantastically, that there was more space between the brain and the cranium in women than in men. Michael Blakey refers to this as Hrdlicka's "air head" hypothesis (1987: 16).

8. In her study of eighteenth-century physical sciences, Schiebinger (1993) remarks that male bodies (skulls in particular) were routinely assumed to embody the prototype of their race in the various typologies devised by comparative anatomists of the period. "When anthropologists did compare women across cultures, their interest centered on sexual traits—feminine beauty, redness of lips, length and style of hair, size and shape of breasts or clitorises, degree

of sexual desire, fertility, and above all the size, shape, and position of the pelvis" (1993: 156). In this way, the male body "remained the touchstone of human anatomy," while females were regarded as a sexual subset of the species (1993: 159-60).

9. In *Practical Anthropometry* Hrdlicka goes to some trouble to instruct field-workers (presumably male) working among "uncivilized groups" about the steps they need to take not to offend, and thereby put themselves at risk, when measuring women (1939: 57-59).

10. Norma is described in the press reports as being based on the measurements of 15,000 "real American girls." Although we cannot be sure, it is likely this data come from the Bureau of Home Economics, which conducted extensive measurements of students "to provide more accurate dimensions and proportions for sizing women's ready-made garments" (Shapiro 1945). For further information on the Dickinson collection and Dickinson's methods of observation, see Terry (1992).

11. Norma was described thus by a reporter in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*: "She is taller, heavier, and more athletic than her grandmother of 1890. Her legs are longer, her waist is thicker, since it is no longer fashionable to have one so small that a man can girdle it with his two hands; her hips are slightly heavier and her bosom is fuller. She is not so voluptuous as the Greek ideal, Aphrodite of Cyrene, but she seems headed that way. Anthropologically she is considered an improvement on her grandmother. Whether she is an esthetic improvement is a matter of taste" (Robertson 1945: 1).

12. Historians have noted a long-standing conflict between the physical culture movement, eugenicists and health reformers, on the one hand, and the fashion industry, on the other, that gave rise in American society to competing ideals of the fit and the fashionably fragile woman (e.g., Banner 1983; Cogan 1989).

13. In *Practical Anthropometry* (1939), Hrdlicka states that males generally make better anthropometrists because they are more adept at handling the bigger instruments, but he believes women can be more precise and useful for measuring other women and children. We take the liberty of extending this practice to dolls.

14. One aspect of the current undertaking that is clearly missing is the possible variation that exists *within* individual groups of dolls that would result from mold variation and casting processes. Determining this variation would require a much larger doll collection than we had at our disposal. We are considering a grant proposal, but not seriously.

15. This process of identification becomes mimesis, not only in Barbie look-alike contests, but also in the recent Barbie workout video. In her fascinating analysis of the semiotics of workout videos, Margaret Morse (1987) has shown how these videos structure the gaze in such a way as to establish identification between the exercise leader's body and the participant-viewer. Surrounded by mirrors, the viewer is asked to exactly model her movements on those of the leader, literally mimicking the gestures and posture of the "star" body she wishes to become. In Barbie's video, producers use animation to make it possible for Barbie to occasionally appear on the screen as the exercise leader/cheerleader—the star whose body the little girls mimic.

16. In response to this anxiety, Cathy Meredig, an enterprising computer software designer, created the "Happy to Be Me" doll. Described as a healthy alternative for little girls, "Happy to Be Me" has a shorter neck, shorter legs, wider waist, larger feet, and a lot fewer clothes—designed to make her look more like the average woman ("She's No Barbie, nor Does She Care to Be." *New York Times*, August 15, 1991, C-11).

17. When confronted with these kinds of accusations, Mattel and the fashion industry protest that Barbie dolls, like fashion models, are about fantasy, not reality. "We're not telling you to be that girl" writes Elizabeth Saltzman, fashion editor for *Vogue*. "We're trying to show you fashion" (France 1992: 22).

18. "Dolls in Playland." 1992. Colleen Toomey, producer. BBC.

19. Who makes clothes for Barbie and what kinds of outfits are made is a fascinating subject for further study. Melosh and Simmons (1986) report that a survey at a Barbie doll exhibit revealed two-thirds of all doll owners made at least some clothes for their Barbie.

20. While not exactly ethnographic, Hohmann's 1985 study offers a sociopsychological view of how children experiment with social relations during play with Barbies.

21. Signs of a Ken makeover, however, have begun to appear. In 1991, a Ken with "real" hair that can be styled was introduced and, most dramatically, in 1993, he had his hair streaked and acquired an earring in his left ear. This was presented as a "big breakthrough" by Mattel and was received by the media as a sign of a broader trend in the toy industry to break down rigid gender stereotyping in children's toys (see Lawson 1993). It doesn't appear, however, that Ken is any closer to getting a "realistic" body than Barbie. Ruth Handler notes that when Mattel was planning the Ken doll, she had wanted him to have genitals—or at least a bump, and claims the men in the marketing group vetoed her suggestion. Ken did later acquire his bump (see "Dolls in Playland," Colleen Toomey, producer. BBC. 1993).

22. Thanks to Judith Halberstam for pointing this out. Her work on female masculinity and transsexualism points to the irony that, while improvements in cosmetic surgery underscore the "inventedness of sex," we do not see a corresponding disembodiment of gender. Halberstam writes, "One might expect . . . in these postmodern times that as we posit the artificiality of gender and sex with increasing awareness of how and why our bodies have been policed into gender identities, there might be a decrease in the incidence of such things as sex change operations. On the contrary . . . there has been, as I suggested, a rise in the discussions of, depictions of and requests for f to m sex change operations" (1994: 215).

23. Professional organizations and various cosmetic industries stand a lot to gain by redefining such body "adjustments" as medical problems. The Women's Health Network, which monitors and reports on health-care issues and abuses, reproduced the following excerpt from a statement by their American Society for Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery in a letter addressed to the FDA regarding the classification of breast implants:

There is a common misconception that the enlargement of the female breast is not necessary for maintenance of health or treatment of disease. There is a substantial and enlarging [*sic*] body of medical information and opinion, however, to the effect that these deformities [small breasts] are really a disease which in most patients results in feelings of inadequacy, lack of self confidence, distortion of body image and a total lack of well-being due to a lack of self-perceived femininity. The enlargement of the under-developed female breast is, therefore, often very necessary to insure an improved quality of life for the patient. (Sprague Zones 1989: 4)

For an interesting analysis of the language of cosmetic surgery, see Balsamo (1992).

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