Out from Under Occupation
Transforming Our Relationships with Our Bodies

by Carla Rice

Dans cet article, l'auteure démontre comment le corps des femmes est devenu le champ de bataille privilégié des puissances économiques, sociales et politiques. Conséquemment, il n'est pas étonnant que les femmes ressentent leurs corps comme une source de conflits. D'après l'auteure, l'idéal féminin de beauté actuel reflète des valeurs culturelles sexistes et racistes, il fait fi des personnes âgées et handicapées et, finalement, il détermine la relation que les femmes ont avec leurs corps.

Everday, everywhere, millions of women engage in routine acts of self harm.

I have often experienced a distressing physical sensation which I know is related to my sense of my body and self in the world. It stems from an overwhelming desire to escape my skin. Of literally wanting to eject myself from my body—to flee a shameful, painful presence. The need is to deliver myself from some unexpressed, wordless reality, which threatens to invade and consume me. When I think about the sensation of wanting to escape my own skin, I wonder if I am alone in this feeling. When I look around and observe many women silently hurting, I realize these private feelings are not solely personal ones.

Everyday, everywhere, millions of women are engaged in chaotic, controlled, ritualized and routine acts of self-harm. We are quietly depriving ourselves, starving ourselves, bingeing, purging, and exercising excessively, equating emotional well-being with meeting an unattainable ideal. We are also numbing ourselves with drugs or alcohol, cutting, bruising and burning ourselves, or dissociating, in an attempt to survive by escaping our bodies entirely. Most of us bear this suffering silently, afraid of being labeled crazy or sick. Why do so many of us punish our bodies? From what sources do these feelings of inadequacy, this striving, this pain, stem?

I believe these feelings stem from personal life experiences which have left legacies of self and body loathing. At the same time, I believe such personal experiences have deep political meaning. I believe these feelings stem from a collective displacement of much that is wrong with this culture onto the terrain of women's bodies and that such feelings have their roots in an age old attempt to control and colonize women. I believe our collective feelings of loathing, shame, and alienation are the fall-out of a war—a conflict waged on the landscape of our bodies. This conflict, played out on the terrain of that which defines us as female, is fought through the regulation, control, suppression, and occupation of virtually every aspect of our physical being—sexuality, dress, appearance, deportment, strength, health, reproduction, shape, size, space, expression, and movement. The effects of such struggle on our bodies, minds, and spirits are similar to the effects of violence on the landscape of any other war—suffering, chaos, starvation, mutilation, devastation, and even death.

If this notion seems too extreme, too drastic, too radical, too rabid, think about our shared cultural and personal legacies as women. Think about the numbers of women who feel the yoke and fall-out of violence everyday, those who are held down by the weight of shame and self-loathing, those unable to live freely and fully in the boundaries of their skin, who are alienated from their bodies, and living outside themselves. Remember the 38 per cent of women who walk with the scars of sexual abuse, the 25 per cent who bind and stem the wounds of rape, the 80 per cent of us cut and bruised by daily acts of sexual violation, and the countless women who are being raped, abused, and coerced as you read this sentence. And, think about the hostility that surrounds us, the degrading images, the documentation of our powerlessness, and our private responses, the intimate acts of self-harm in which we engage and the shame we carry in our bodies like a heavy load that binds and chains us to unknown enemy.

Remember those of us for whom food is poison, who cannot live in our bodies, who are depriving ourselves, starving ourselves, and doing everything in our power to achieve an increasingly artificial, ever-changing, and ever-shrinking ideal. Consider the women who have found refuge from the battle in a bleak and somber haze of alcohol and drugs, lost in a downward cycle of self-destruction; and those of us who have escaped our consciousness, who are fragmented, dissociated, split off, cut off, and who are driven, literally, out of our minds. And think about the woman who cuts her own skin, who bruises and burns herself in rage and fear, because she lacks the words to speak her torment. Think about the woman who binges, purges, and starves herself because she knows no other means of expressing the pain and despair she feels. And remember the woman who has survived the abuse but is lost to this war, who has ended the nightmare in the definitive act of ending her life.

Remember these women, your sisters, friends, neighbours, acquaintances, relatives, co-workers, mothers, daughters, yourself. Remember these women and think again about the metaphor of occupation. Hatred of women—expressed both in images and everyday acts of violence—drives us out of our bodies. It also drives us out of our minds. Hatred of women, which is played out on the terrain of

our bodies, is directed towards us precisely because of these bodies. In other words, such hatred finds its roots and home in the female body. The female body becomes the battleground of the war against women, and the battleground itself, our own worst enemy.

Taking up space

The war waged on women's bodies is first a conflict over size and shape, over the terrain and territory of our bodies, played out in deeply entrenched cultural taboos and a powerful patriarchal dictate against women taking up space and claiming room of our own.

We have desperately, and hopelessly, tried to take up less and less actual, physical space.

Ironically, as women have moved more and more into the public realms of life in the twentieth century, in western culture, we have desperately, urgently, and hopelessly, tried to take up less and less actual, physical space. In fact: 90 per cent of us dislike the size and shape of our bodies; 70 per cent are continually dieting; up to 20 per cent of us develop serious struggles around food and weight. With a shocking 50 per cent of girls in Canada dieting before the age of nine, and many, many girls as young as three already expressing dissatisfaction with their bodies, we are passing our struggles on to a new generation of women and witnessing them bare our most intimate pain (Hutchison, Canadian Gallop Poll, Holmes and Silverman).

We have been raised in a culture where body size is of paramount importance, where thinness is equated with health, attractiveness, morality, sexuality. Where, in fact, a woman's essential value is based on her ability to attain a thin body size. Marilyn Monroe, the icon of female attractiveness in the 1950s, would probably be considered 20 pounds overweight by today's standards. The emaciated ideal of beauty for women gained prominence only in the 1960s, with the explosion of the super model Twiggy onto the fashion scene. At the peak of her fame, Twiggy was reported to be 5'8" and weigh 97 pounds. Today, the ideals of beauty are as emaciated as ever before, embodied in waif-like models such as Kate Moss, who is reported in the popular media to be 5'7" or 5'8" and weigh anywhere from 98 to 105 pounds.

Messages about the importance of achieving thinness are rife in popular advertising, particularly in advertisement campaigns for the beauty and weight loss industries. These are multi-billion dollar industries in North America, with markets that can be sustained and expanded only through the spread of body insecurity among larger and larger numbers of consumers. It doesn't take a trained eye to note that popular magazine, newspaper, and television advertising promote an ideal of beauty that is young, white, able-bodied, flawless, and above all, thin. Women especially are continually assaulted by advertisements which claim "You can never be too rich or too thin," "I'm afraid I'll lose him if I don't lose weight," and "Get the shape that guys love in 14 days."

Research supports these observations. One study found that almost 70 per cent of the female characters on 33 top-rated TV shows were slender; only 17 per cent of the male characters were thin (Silverstein, *et al.*). A study of three women's magazines reported that the percentage of thin female models rose from three per cent in the 1950s to 46 per cent in the 1980s (Gagnard). Another study of five women's magazines found the degree of fatness of female models decreased by 55 per cent from the 1950s to the 1980s, while the space devoted to weight-loss articles increased five-fold (Snow and Harris). Finally, research has shown that the ideal of beauty became 23 per cent lighter over a twenty-year period while women in general actually became four percent heavier (Garner *et al.*).

How does this focus on thinness affect women? An increase in the prevalence of anorexia and bulimia has been closely linked to socio-cultural pressures on women to reduce the size of their bodies. Anorexia was rare until this century, when its incidence increased dramatically. The related problem of bulimia was virtually unknown until the last three decades. Not only do anorexia and bulimia appear to be culturally and historically specific problems, but they are also gendered ones: 90 to 95 per cent of those with serious eating problems are women. Early research suggested anorexia and bulimia were primarily problems of upper middle class, white women. However, these statistics were often collected in treatment centres, school districts, and geographic areas which were not accessible to or representative of low income and non-white women. Research is now documenting an increases in the numbers of Black and Asian women struggling with eating problems (see Rosen *et al.*, Hsu). These new findings reflect my own work experience. I have found that some of the most devastating food and weight struggles are experienced by doubly-marginalized groups of women.

Many women who are not anorexic or bulimic struggle with related problems such as yo-yo dieting, compulsive eating, or a constant preoccupation with food and weight. In the last ten years, researchers have begun to address the negative effects of the diet craze and look critically at the claims of diet programs. The most glaring problem is that virtually all weight loss programs have dismal results. Studies show that up to 95 per cent of dieters will regain all weight lost at the end of one year (Polivy and Herman). Not only are diets ineffective in the long-run, but it is now clear they have their own set of haz-

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ards. In addition to inadequate nutrition, dieting has been implicated in the development of weakness, fatigue, bingeing, bulimia, weight gain, obesity, and sudden death from damage to the heart (Ciliska). Dieting may also be associated with diabetes and heart disease.

Regardless of age, ethnicity, race or class, most women who grow up in North America learn we are unworthy, unhealthy, and even immoral, if we cannot maintain a low body weight. The irony of this is profound. Historically and cross-culturally, many societies have associated fatness with desirable social status as fat is a symbol of wealth where food is not abundant. Approximately 25,000 years ago, goddess figures were revered throughout much of the world. In many cultures, fatness has been viewed with admiration as a sign of fertility, strength and prosperity, all of which are related to human survival (Sheinin). Even in western culture, fat has been associated with youth and beauty as demonstrated in the nineteenth century paintings of fleshy, plump women, depicted by artists such as Renoir. While it may be difficult for us to believe today, advertisements from the 1930s actually promoted weight gain. Advertisers for weight enhancement products attracted women consumers with enticing slogans such as "Dangerous to be Skinny," and "No Skinny Woman Has an Ounce of Sex Appeal."

Fat women are the butt of jokes by many comics and vulnerable to public ridicule.

Despite these values, we have learned to despise fat. Fat people, especially fat women, are the butt of jokes by many comics and are vulnerable to public humiliation and ridicule. Health professionals rate fat people as more "disturbed" than thin people and have an insulting tendency to blame all health conditions on fat. Fat people have lower rates of acceptance to university, reduced likelihood of being hired for jobs, and lower rates of pay (see Bray, Canning and Mayer, Gortmaker *et al.*). Why has our culture declared a war on fat? Hatred of fat is justified by health reasons. Fat is despised because it is seen to be under an individual's voluntary control. Yet, fatness is not a disease or a symptom of weakness and moral decay. It is a genetically inherited trait, much like height. Fat women may be as healthy as those who are thin and the health risks of fat are not only grossly over-exaggerated, but they may even be caused by dieting (Ernsberger and Haskew). In addition, women have a higher percentage of body fat than men, because fat is necessary for menstrual and reproductive functioning.

The attack on fat can be seen as a compelling means of undermining confidence in ourselves, of subverting the potential power of our bodies, as well as of utterly devaluing our reproductive abilities. All women whether fat, average or thin learn that fat must be the underlying and justified cause of our pain, and thinness our ticket out of oppression. The cult of thinness offers women an alternative and persuasive means of accessing power—manipulating our bodies to achieve a pre-pubescent, boyish shape, in the hope of gaining the power that being a man will bring. This is an illusory means of accessing such power. For instead of lifting us out of pain and struggle, the pursuit of thinness brings us even closer to our own despair. It causes us to divert precious time and energy from the search for meaning and substance in our lives to a empty preoccupation with appearance; it divides each one of us by driving a destructive wedge between our bodies and minds, by pitting one against the other; and it traps us in an invisible prison, a stark cycle of endless self-criticism and punishment.

The oppressive power of whiteness

The war waged on women's bodies is also a conflict over race and skin colour, played out in deeply held stereotypes about the value and beauty of whiteness that saturate our culture and language, and are used to colonize non-white peoples and non-western societies.

For evidence of this, open up any popular fashion magazine. Black women, Latin American women, Southeast Asian women, South Asian women, Native women, are almost completely invisible. Overwhelmingly, the dominant image promoted in North American culture is a eurocentric one, having white skin, blond hair, blue eyes and European facial features. When images of women of colour appear in the mainstream media, they are either as close as possible to this white ideal, or they are images which reinforce racist stereotypes about the people being depicted. Think, for example, of models such as Naomi Campbell and actresses such as Jasmine Guy or Hallie Berry. Why does Naomi often appear on runways sporting long, blond locks? Why are black women with straight hair and light-skin overwhelmingly those represented in popular magazines and on television? Why do we rarely see variations in hair texture and the full range of skin colours depicted? While a wave of more empowering and diverse images of black women is emerging, this movement exists only at the fringes of popular culture.

Underlying western conceptions of beauty are deeply held stereotypes about the meaning of whiteness and blackness. Whiteness is associated not only with physical attractiveness but with purity, goodness, wealth, intellectual superiority, and morality. Blackness, on the other hand, is seen to connote ugliness, evil, poverty, inferiority and lack of morality (see Hooks, Morrison). Both the English language and the culture are infused with these values, as is our popular imagery. Think about the advertisement campaign that ran a few years ago for a multi-national, youth-oriented clothing company. The company actually ran an ad that featured a blond-haired, blue-eyed white child dressed as an angel. Along side her was a brown-eyed, black child whose hair was cut to resemble horns.

Advertising also places non-western women in roles that are subservient to people from the west. One ad for an airline company states "We admit, we do train our hostesses rather young." Depicted in the ad are young Pakistani girls who look as though they are between the ages of four and nine, and who appear delighted to serve travelers and businessmen. The advertisement contains a hidden reference to the international sex trade and its sexual exploitation of young girls. The image both alludes to and supports the parallel processes of western and male colonization: the occupation of women's bodies in the third world by western men and the colonization of the economies and cultures of the third world by the west. Another example of this trend is a recent advertisement depicting a Chinese woman who is reduced from carrying her "little red book to carrying a little red lipstick." This advertisement would not have seemed possible only ten years ago. However, with China's move towards a market driven economy, it seems not only possible, but somehow inevitable.

Flaws in appearance have become diseases, needing proper medical intervention.

Feelings of shame, self-loathing, humiliation, and unworthiness are commonly felt by women who are pressured to conform to an ideal that reinforces a myth of non-white inferiority as it enforces the superiority of white culture (see Morrison, Hooks). One older black woman I know said that she felt so ugly and unacceptable growing up, that she wished her hair would fall out and grow back in curly and soft. Another young women told me about how she was harassed at school because of the size of her lips and shape of her nose. And still another described how she was taunted by other kids in her school and called degrading names because of the shape of her nose and texture of her hair. A Hispanic friend remembered having her conceptions of beauty shaken through her socialization in school where she learned to feel ashamed of looking like her mother and aunts. Western ideals of beauty create more than a value system; they re-create and perpetuate stereotypes that destroy the validity and integrity of non-western and non-white peoples. Ultimately, they reinforce the economic, social and political dominance of the west.

In pursuit of perfection

The war waged on women's bodies is a war waged over our right to exist as we are, with all our imperfections and flaws, bumps, sags, wrinkles, and lines, the traits with which we were born and the evidence of life being lived out, of age and mortality. The war on women's bodies is also a war waged over our right to exist at all, with our all our strengths, limitations, abilities, and vulnerabilities, in our full diversity and common humanity.

In the past decade, the number of North American women electing to go under the surgeon's knife for cosmetic reasons has more than doubled. It has been estimated that the number of women having plastic surgery in 1991 was approximately 1.5 million. Yet cosmetic surgery is not without its risks. Some women die. Many others experience debilitating complications. One women having a "tummy tuck," for example, suffered a stroke as a result of complications from the surgery. Another had her eyesight permanently damaged and face scared from a chemical peel that was supposed to remove wrinkles. And then there was the story of a Toronto woman who probably died from the complications of a botched liposuction operation.

In a sane world, even one death would be enough to call into serious question the ethics of performing unnecessary operations like cosmetic surgeries. Yet this has not been the case. Debates on plastic surgery see regulation—who gets to perform the operation—as *the* crucial issue, not whether it should be performed at all. Flaws in appearance have even become "diseases," needing proper medical intervention. A few years ago, the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons lobbied to have breast implantation classified as a *necessary* procedure. "There is a common misconception that the enlargement of the female breast is not necessary for maintenance of health or treatment of disease...[T]hese deformities [small breasts] are really a disease which...result 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."

Notions of beauty within this industry are, like the ideal itself, based on racist values. Lighter skin is better than darker skin, a straight nose is more "refined" than a broad one and oval eyes more beautiful than almond shaped ones. In the film *Two Lies* one of the main characters decides to have cosmetic surgery in order to "enhance" the shape of her eyes. Her two daughters experience a complex range of feelings, from rage to shame and sadness that their mother would decide to have her eyes altered. The film painfully demonstrates how western conceptions of beauty are internalized by an Asian woman. In one scene, the daughters read from a cosmetic surgery textbook which suggests that "Oriental" women should consider opening their windows on the world by having the "hooded" sheath of skin above their eyes removed. It is my understanding that cosmetic eye operations are not only common in North America, but are the most popular form of cosmetic surgery in countries such as Japan.

Beauty is a harsh task master and judge of women's worth.

Beauty is a harsh task master and judge of women's worth, and the ideal is one that insists on superhuman perfection. This magnifies its

effects on women with disabilities. In fact, women with disabilities are perceived and portrayed as being even more "flawed" than those without disabilities (Driedger and D'Audin). For evidence of this, think about the number of disabled women on television or in the movies. How many times do we see a woman with a disability being portrayed as powerful and sexual? As attractive, desirable women? A few months ago, I learned that a flyer for a local Toronto department store had featured a model in a wheel chair. While at first glance the image seemed positive, the picture next to it featured the same women modeling a new outfit, only this time she was shown standing! (Personal communiqué, DAWN)

For many women, the body is a mirror of the self.

In our culture, women with disabilities are almost completely invisible. This is related to the fact that they are considered "damaged goods," women who are so undesirable because of their physical flaws that they will "never get a man" (Driedger and D'Audin). When women with disabilities are represented, they are depicted as children or victims to be pitied, patronized or taken care of. Think about the depiction of women and girls with disabilities on the posters for some charities. The images are meant to inspire benevolence and generousity, while they simultaneously evoke guilt and pity. This has had an absolutely devastating impact on disabled women, leaving many feeling unattractive, ashamed, and sexless.

The popularity of cosmetic surgery is an example of our western obsession with immortality as is our preoccupation with youth and difficulty dealing with aging. The treatment of women with disabilities is an example of our preoccupation with perfection and our collective denial of our common humanity. Women's bodies, being the repository of prevailing conflicts and desires, become the landscape where the illusive pursuit for everlasting youth, perfection, and beauty is played out. Thus, it is taboo for women's bodies to age, to be less than "godlike," to demonstrate that we as individuals will grow old and die, and that we have, in fact, little control over our own mortality.

The assault

Finally, the war on women's bodies is a desperate conflict over our humanity, and right to exist free of domination and violation; it is a literal state of siege, the invasion of our most intimate selves, where our bodies are the occupied territories, where the risks are our minds, hearts and souls and the stakes, our very existence.

Virtually all women in our society are raised to associate self-worth with appearance. From infancy, we are encouraged to invest in appearance and are rewarded for successfully achieving the ideal of beauty. In fact, most women in North America grow up learning that having power is intimately connected to how well we can approximate prevailing ideals of beauty. We learn that beauty is both our primary commodity and spiritual mission in life, that our power is located in our bodies and in our ability to attract men. The caption of one ad reads: "Dave whistled at another woman, so I got even." How does she get even? The young black woman purchases special cream to even out and lighten her skin tone, getting "even" with her body, her skin colour and another woman. In this way, the man is absolved of any responsibility for harassment, and a competition is set up between the two women for his attention and approval.

In his book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger has stated: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves." Berger suggests that women are taught to see our bodies as reflective of our being, and at the same time, relate to our bodies as objects. For many women, the body is a mirror of the self. It is also an object that women become profoundly alienated from. This paradox leads many of us to experience our bodies as a primary site of conflict and distress. We learn to be objectified and to objectify ourselves. In being rendered objects, we are stripped of our humanity. Over and over, we see the female body dismembered, cut up and cut off; in one ad the female body is used as a prop for a bottle of skin cream; in another, we only see the woman's torso; in a third she is blind-folded by a scarf; and in a forth, she is silenced by a man's hands which encircle her mouth.

Beautifying the body can be seen as eroticized act of violence against the self. Starving, trimming, tucking, and purging are all acts of self-harm. They are culturally condoned forms of self-mutilation that condition us to police our bodies, and that teach us to take pleasure in our own objectification, violation, and pain. One advertisement for a weight loss centre illustrates this point graphically. In it, a woman's torso and limbs are attached to a "passive exercise" machine (a machine designed to send small currents through the body, passively stimulating the muscles). Electric pads are affixed to different "problem areas" of the woman's body, including her breasts, and wires are running from each pad. She is standing, her legs are spread apart, and the picture is cut off just below her eyes. Looking at the advertisement, a number of questions immediately jump to mind. Why are her eyes cut out of the image? (to dehumanize?) Why are her legs spread apart? (To make her look more sexually vulnerable?) Why can't we see her hands and her feet? (Is she being held against her will?) The picture obviously alludes to bondage and sadomasochism. But it also connects the pursuit of beauty with the pain and suffering, and further eroticizes both.

I believe this theme is a common thread that is woven through the fabric of many cultures with a patriarchal tradition. In the Victorian Era,

there were great public debates regarding the merits and risks of corseting. Middle and upper class girls started wearing stays at the age of 12 or 13. Gradually, over a period of time, the strings would be pulled tighter and tighter until the young woman achieved a tiny waist. The practice had an obviously detrimental effect on developing bones and skeletal structure as well as on the development of vital internal organs. Given the health risks and physical pain associated with corseting, why would so many women endure it? Delving into the underbelly of Victorian society provides some disturbing clues. Images of women stripped to their corsets, with waists spanning 14 and 15 inches are found in Victorian pornography, suggesting that Victorian men were excited by the distorted, hour-glass shape. While faded and slightly ridiculous, the once-pornographic images transcend time and place—shocking reminders of the mundane ways in which women's suffering is sexualized.

We learn that our power is located in our bodies and in our ability to attract men.

Foot binding is another example of this theme. For over a thousand years in Imperial China foot binding was practiced by upper class women. At the ages of merely three or four, girls had their feet wrapped in cloth bindings by their mothers and female relatives. The practice was extremely painful and many young girls died as a result of infection. Yet achieving a tiny lotus foot was essential for any child who was not of a peasant class or whose parents had social aspirations for her. While incapacitating, the bound foot was a powerful symbol of status and leisure. It was also a compelling symbol of captivity and immobility. It has been suggested that the practice was also sexualized. Recently, I had the chance to hold the shoes that had been worn by a Chinese woman who had had her feet bound. Spanning no more than four inches with a width of only one or two, they linger as an empty legacy of over a thousand years of pain.

Yet violence perpetrated on our bodies is not solely or even primarily self-inflicted. The objectification of our bodies and sexualization of our pain creates a culture of permissiveness towards violence against women. A few years ago a famous jeans company ran an advertisement that used an eroticized rape as a means of selling their product. Currently, a famous model is featured in an advertisement. She is crouched on all four limbs, with her breasts almost completely exposed to the viewer. Mounting her is a man whose face and torso is cut off. He is pulling her hair. The look on her face is one of pain mingled with ecstasy. Seeing women splattered across magazines in this way as less than human, as inanimate objects or sexual slaves, makes it easier for men to insult, degrade, use, abuse, and even kill us (Rice and Langdon). Male violence is the inevitable culmination of these forces—the most graphic of weapons used to occupy and subjugate us.

What is the connection between body image problems and sexual violence? Statistics suggest 55 per cent to 75 per cent of women with eating/weight problems have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence, including assault, rape or sexual abuse. But what do these numbers mean? To understand the connection better, it is necessary to understand the nature of violence itself. The primary objective of any act of violence is to de-humanize. It is the attempt by one human being to invade, colonize, and enslave another. It's purpose is to turn a human being into an object, an extension or tool of another. Sexual violence involves the invasion of our most intimate selves. It transforms our bodies into a battleground, forcing us to exist in a state of siege against invasion and psychological annihilation, which is a form of death. Through the act of violence, we struggle to maintain our integrity and humanness, by retreating from this battleground. Through the act of violence and our retreat, our bodies become occupied territories, possessions of the perpetrators. Invasion and occupation drive a destructive wedge between our bodies, our minds and souls, which robs us of our humanity (Chandler).

We learn to cope with violence and the emotional repercussions of trauma by using our bodies to speak our pain. Violence drives us out of our bodies. The pain and horror of this crime is expressed through our troubled relationships with our bodies. So we develop eating and weight struggles, problems with alcohol and drugs, cut and burn ourselves, and refuse to live in our bodies or leave them entirely by dissociating. In this way, the site of our violation also becomes a vehicle through which we give voice to victimization experiences in a culture where we are otherwise silenced (Rice and Langdon).

Transformation

Whenever women look at ourselves through the lens of our culture, we are seeing ourselves through the dominant eye. We are comparing ourselves to impossible ideals of beauty which only reinforce a sexist, racist and ableist system. We are consuming images which occupy us and take our power away. When we watch ourselves through the dominant eye, we become self-critical and judgmental. We stop nurturing and loving ourselves. We end up feeling split in half—our bodies become objects to be manipulated and punished in order to be made more acceptable. We end up engaged in a war with our bodies, one that we cannot win. Society has inhabited our bodies and we

Our bodies are objects to be manipulated and punished in order to be acceptable.

have absorbed it into our skin and bones.

How do we escape this war with our bodies? I have personal experience of this struggle both as a woman who has been profoundly affected by popular images of degradation and as a woman who has personal experience of sexual violence. I have also spent many years of my life fighting to stay out of my body, relating to my body as an object, trying to protect myself by refusing to inhabit a body that I had, for a long time, ceased to call my own. How did I escape these struggles? How do any of us move beyond them? In our culture, most women have little experience of bodily integrity and affirmation, making it difficult to even conceive of liberation. Few of us have been able to survive whole in a world where there are powerful forces to undermine and divide us.

I see transformation as the dual processes of resistance and affirmation. In many ways, transformation requires us to see ourselves and the world around us through a double lens—to recognize the violence and oppression which threaten us while at the same time, acknowledge our potential, strengths and abilities. If each one of us could build our internal resources, learn to trust our expressive and creative spirits, and develop the capacity to truly support and respect each other in spite of our differences, we could collectively find our power. Rejecting the dominant lens, struggling to come out from under occupation, finding courage to speak the stories of trauma and oppression that are buried deep within our bodies, keeping faith with our individual strengths and potential, resurrecting hope for visions of what could be, and learning again to dream our banished dreams. These are ways of reclaiming lost territory, lost history, lost memory, lost humanity—ways of taking back what has been taken away.

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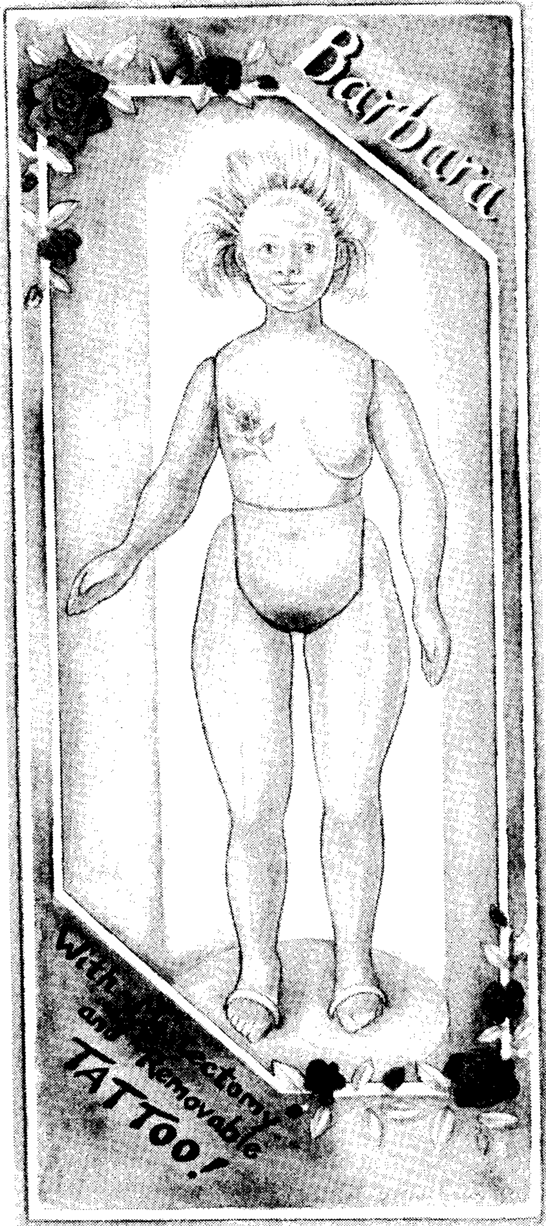

Tamara Thiebaux, Barbie Series, 1993
Part of the exhibit "Breaking Though the Stereotypes" held at Mt. Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Aug.1993

I Dream As A Warrior Does

by Tamara Steinborn

Suite à la perte d'un sein dû au cancer, l'auteure relate sa propre expérience ainsi que celle de sa mère et comment elles ont réagi face à leurs corps respectifs.

The one breasted woman was my mother. Often, I see her face in my dreams now, as if she were still here I waken, feeling alive with the need to cup her breast, caressing its importance. But this might shame her. I know this because she spent years of wasted dreams, scared into silence by her scarred emptiness. To make (w)hole she would cover this taut, child-like skin with a roundness meant to delight the eyes. She would undress in the dark, having long given up her gypsy dance in front of the mirror. She would melt into the shadows, locked behind bathroom doors, playing games with her mind, trying not to look.

So often now, I dream of the scar, so uniquely hers, as I remember helping her wash herself. Her trembling, imprisoned muscles unable to function, she wanting to scream in the frustration and agony of it all. It seemed raggedly beautiful to me, as it protested loudly from the regions of her skin. This testament to survival was quickly covered up, she not being comfortable with my naive vision of her body as some form of performance art. I fell in love then, with her weakness and her strength.

We went to specialty shops. The sales clerks flocking like protective matrons out of a health info documentary. They clipped their speech, impersonal being the best defense against weakening constitution. Many accommodating styles, we were told. And, my mother bought all this comfort, this acceptance, readily, hopefully. Later, every time she would wear these clothes, I could feel her eyes question me, and I grew embarrassed at the sight of so much need at once. I wanted to reach around, unclasp, unhook, and set free this lovely, timid woman.

I brought her pamphlets on self confidence. Fierce, passionate words meant to inspire, to replace the false comforts she wore. But, I think I saw her eyes become sad, as she gave up fighting me, and drifted away to a different space.

Waking, I come up from my dream to once again realize that I am now the one-breasted woman. And She before me has gone, leaving me unable to ask for help. She has left, having taken with her the chance for me to explain my sudden understanding, my shifting awareness. I have searched, but can find no beauty in this staple pattern, only an alien, red ugliness. I am unable to look at my one remaining breast properly. Everything seems to lean too heavily to one side. I have long since forgotten how to touch myself. Sometimes in the grey, hidden morning, I dare myself to sneak on a tight T-shirt and go out. Then, I catch a glimpse of myself, my half self, in the mirror and retreat back to turn off the lights.

Tamara Steinborn is completing her Master of Arts in English at the University of Manitoba. Her work focuses on women, sexuality, and the geneology of the body within the text. Her poetry has been published in Prairie Fire.