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Sexual Spectacles
Saleswomen in Canadian Department Store Magazines between 1920 and 1950

DONICA BELISLE

In "Feminism and Femininity: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Thong" (2004), Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards argue that so-called second-wave feminists created a feminist mystique. This mystique "made [young feminists] feel guilty for embellishing ourselves with girlie things," such as "having boyfriends, shaving, Brazilian bikini waxes, getting married, wanting to have a body like Gwyneth Paltrow, [and] being into fashion." According to the authors, it is time to move beyond debates about the implications of girls' and women's interests in, variously, clothes, heterosexual romance, the pursuit of mainstream beauty, and sex toys. Whereas feminists of the 1960s and 1970s were raised in an environment that defined all feminine interests as weak, feminists of the early twenty-first century grew up in a world that was more accepting of consumerism as well as of women's right to be powerful, not only in the workforce but also in the bedroom and the state. For this reason, they advocate a new kind of feminism, one that recognizes that it is possible to be both feminine, in the heterosexual sense, and feminist.[1]

Baumgardner and Richards's article highlights a growing trend within contemporary feminist writing: a dissatisfaction with the assumption that sexual objectification – or the practice of judging women according to their abilities to please the heterosexual, male gaze – is exploitative, oppressive, and alienating.[2] This dissatisfaction stems partly from the reasons that Baumgardner and Richards identify, including a decreased interest in

Marxist theories of commodification, internal conflicts among feminists over the appropriateness of heterosexuality, the wishes of many young women for beautiful bodies, and the shame young feminists have experienced for "wear[ing] high heels."[3] It also arises from the influence of Judith Butler's notion of gendered performativity. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler offers "a theory of subject formation" in which "the subject becomes culturally intelligible through the assumption of a sexed body." Only by performing that sexed body does it become possible for the subject to craft an identity that will be intelligible to both the self and to others.[4] This performance, many scholars have since argued, is not inherently alienating. As Liz Conor states, rather than denoting a "loss of self-determination," it represents a means by which subjects construct visual cues that convey their individuality, confidence, and social success.[5]

This chapter calls for an alternative feminist perspective, one that is cognizant of both the exploitative elements that can be inherent within sexual objectification as well as the yearnings for transformation and empowerment that can exist among those who participate in it. It employs a case study approach, inquiring into the presentation of female employees' bodies in Canadian retailers' magazines between 1920 and 1950. During this period, all of Canada's biggest shops – Eaton's, Simpson's, the Hudson's Bay Company, and other department stores – published internal periodicals. Carrying news of employees' personal lives, photographs of staff and stores, reminders of company policies, and announcements of promotions and events, these periodicals were designed to increase loyalty and efficiency. What makes these magazines especially relevant to feminist analyses of sexualization is that they often printed overtly sexual comments about female employees' bodies. They also printed photographs of women workers posing in provocative manners.

Asking not only why department stores offered sexualized commentary regarding female employees' appearances but also why female employees posed for photographs designed to please the heterosexual, male gaze, this chapter suggests that scholarly understandings of the sexual aestheticization of women are best attained by combining critical perspectives on objectification with those provided by research into performativity. So doing, it demonstrates the continuing relevance of so-called second-wave approaches to Canadian feminist historical inquiry. It also contributes to a central theme of this volume: exploring departures and linkages among different generations of Canadian feminist historical research. Although earlier approaches to women's objectification emphasize the ways in which

sexualization serves capitalism and patriarchy while more recent ones play up women's agency in the construction of alluring appearances, both generations of research ultimately ask the same questions. How has sexualization influenced women's quests for dignity, fulfillment, and respect? Does the sexual objectification of women enable or, by contrast, hinder the achievement of gender equality? And, in what ways does the creation of sexualized female spectacles influence women's quests for empowerment?

Department Stores in Twentieth-Century Canada

Department stores arose in Canada during the latter half of the nineteenth century.[6] Their emergence was part of an international transformation in retailing. By departmentalizing their stock, buying in bulk, and undergoing constant expansion, department stores in Canada, the United States, and western Europe outpaced their competitors and became world merchandising leaders.[7] During the early twentieth century, Eaton's and Simpson's in Toronto distinguished themselves among North American department stores by pursuing an aggressive branch-store strategy, and by 1930, each of them was operating stores in Halifax, Montreal, and Regina. Simpson's also had a store in London, Ontario, and Eaton's had branches in Hamilton, Port Arthur, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Red Deer, Edmonton, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Such activity, combined with the stores' mail order departments, enabled the two companies to become Canada's most powerful retailers. They did, however, have competition. Morgan's in Montreal was a strong regional force, as was another Montreal store, the Dupuis Frères. Holman's on Prince Edward Island was significant, and on the West Coast, Woodward's of Vancouver and Spencer's of Victoria cornered the markets. Western Canada's largest store, however, was the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). Formed in 1670 as a fur-trading enterprise, it moved into retail in 1913, when it opened a department store in Winnipeg. By the Second World War, it was the country's third largest retailer and had stores in Saskatoon, Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, and Victoria.

Into the 1950s, Eaton's, Simpson's, and the HBC dominated Canada's retailing scene. Their shares of the national consumer dollar, however, declined steadily. After the Second World War, the increased popularity of the automobile transformed consumers' spending patterns. During the 1920s, Canadians' per capita expenditure shifted from food, clothing, and furnishings to buying cars.[8] Chain stores, too, gained strength. By 1925, they were earning the same share of the retail market as department stores, and in 1930 they surpassed them. The arrival of the shopping mall in the 1950s

was further detrimental. Opening in the suburbs and catering to affluent consumers, their low-priced chain stores, increased goods assortments, and ample parking spaces shifted shopping away from downtowns and away from department stores. Thus, although some department stores anchored within shopping malls, during the 1950s, the department stores' share of the Canadian retail market dropped to an all-time low.[9]

Notwithstanding such challenges, department stores remained Canada's largest retailers well into the 1950s. Bigger than such major US department stores as Marshall Field's and Macy's, Eaton's in particular was Canada's largest retailer and was, according to some estimates, the eighth largest in the world.[10] In addition to being Canada's most powerful retailers, department stores were among the nation's largest employers. In fact, at mid-century, Eaton's massive operations employed the nation's third largest workforce. Only the federal government and the railways employed more staff. With over forty locations across the country, Eaton's had 4,962 men and 5,981 women working in its flagship Toronto store alone; this location also had 355 male and 1,200 female employees who worked on Saturdays only.[11]

Women made up the majority of Canadian department store workforces. Managers assumed that saleswomen could relate better than salesmen to female customers; they also perceived women to be more courteous, quiescent, and affordable.[12] In 1893, Eaton's had 200 female buyers, 308 salesmen, and 463 saleswomen.[13] On the eve of the Great War, 2,432 women laboured for Eaton's, the HBC, Robinson's, and Carsley's in Winnipeg.[14] Into the postwar years, the female labour-force numbers remained steady. According to one survey of thirty-eight Canadian department stores conducted in 1971, "50 per cent of all full-time employees and 79 per cent of part-timers were women," and the "number of women on the selling floor" was even "higher," with "women making up 67 per cent of full-time and 87 per cent of part-time regular employees."[15]

Department stores might have viewed female employees as friendly, docile, and inexpensive, but women had their own reasons for working in retail. Unlike domestic, factory, and restaurant work, most department store positions enabled staff to keep their clothes and hands clean. With the exception of the vast armies of women hired as extras at Christmastime, many women also considered department stores secure employers. Some of them, such as Eaton's and Simpson's in Toronto, also closed earlier than most shops and thus allowed employees to keep their evenings free. Unlike most other workplaces, department stores also offered some, albeit slim, opportunities for advancement. In 1925, Miss Verona Hibberd obtained a job in the gloves

and hosiery department office at Eaton's in Toronto, and by 1935 she had become head of the Stock Control Office.[16] Nevertheless, and despite the giant stores' willingness to promote a handful of women to management, most women who worked for Canada's largest retailers between 1920 and 1960 remained in low-level jobs.[17] According to a chart called "Supervisors, Group Managers, Heads of Departments and Assistants," produced by Eaton's in 1929, for example, out of Eaton's approximately 240 supervisory positions in Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, Calgary, and Edmonton, only one was held by a woman.[18]

In addition to being characterized by limited opportunities for women's advancement, department store work was also distinguished by a highly visual work environment. As displayers and sellers of goods, department stores were key institutions in the rise of what Guy Debord calls the "society of the spectacle," or a modern, vision-centred culture.[19] Using the strategies of "color, glass, and light," they "moved" shopping, as Lorraine O'Donnell writes, from pre-existing "personalized" relationships between sellers and customers to a new and impersonal "realm of signs and appearances and looking." When customers stepped into these shopping environments, their sight was stimulated by electric lights, large galleries, floor-length mirrors, glass display cases, and spacious show windows.[20] Within this visual selling scene, salespeople's bodies took on heightened significance. Prior to the 1960s, department stores kept much of their stock in storage rooms. Customers lined up at counters, and clerks retrieved merchandise, answered queries, tallied up sales totals, arranged deliveries, and attempted to sell more articles.[21] So important were salespeople to the selling process that when shoppers were pleased with their interactions with clerks, they sometimes sent thank-you letters to the stores.[22] Salespeople were also key to selling and shopping in the sense that customers tended to interpret clerks' bodies and habits as indicators of the style and quality of merchandise offered for sale. For this reason, all of Canada's large retailers encouraged employees to develop mannerisms, patterns of speech, postures, grooming habits, hairstyles, and fashion choices that would promote their stores and products to their full advantage.[23] As an article called "Look Neat, Be Lovely," which appeared in Simpson's *Staff News* in 1947, stated, "For more customers" and "more sales ... appearance is essential!"[24]

Sexualizing Female Employees

Just as department stores sought to increase sales by making their employees' bodies as pleasing as possible in a general sense, so did they attempt to

extract value from female employees' sexual allure. That is, department store managers and trainers encouraged female employees to develop an appearance both respectable and mildly titillating. In these ways, they attempted to construct female sales staff whose appearance would suggest not only that the stores were reputable but also that they were exciting, pleasurable, and accommodating. By exploring the giant retailers' training literature, particularly magazines, it is possible to gain in-depth insights into how this form of sexualization operated, as well as into why managers and trainers pursued this approach to female employee management.

The first staff periodical produced by a Canadian department store was *The Beaver,* introduced by the HBC in 1920. Until 1934, when it ceased publishing employee news, *The Beaver* contained information designed to appeal to employees, shareholders, and the general public alike. Other major magazines of the 1920s included *Le Duprex,* published by the Dupuis Frères; *Store Topics,* published by Spencer's in Vancouver; and *Staff News,* published by Simpson's in Toronto. During the 1930s, Eaton's began putting out staff bulletins, including *Flash* (Toronto), *Chinook Winds* (Calgary), and *Contacts* (Winnipeg), and the HBC began printing one magazine per location. Its many offerings included *Bay Builder* (Vancouver), *Bay Window* (Victoria), *Beaver Tales* (Calgary), *Bay Breeze* (Edmonton), and *Bayonet* (Winnipeg).[25]

Canada's largest department store magazines were edited by both male and female staff. Most articles were anonymous, though it is probable that the editors were also the magazines' chief contributors. Despite the presence of female editors, however, most of the magazines' content pertaining to women's bodies suggested their chief function was pleasing the male, heterosexual gaze. Several magazine articles complimented female workers, for example, on their cultivation of physical attributes pleasing to men. They did not, however, make comments about male employees' bodies. They also did not compliment men for physical attributes that may have been pleasing to heterosexual women, and despite the possible presence of gays and lesbians within department stores' vast workforces, the magazines never complimented men or women for being attractive to a homosexual gaze.[26]

Early instances of women's sexualization occurred in *The Beaver* and *Store Topics.* Reflecting the former's primarily male perspective, the publication frequently suggested that it featured female staff in the magazine, and by corollary in the workplace, for ornamental purposes. A report on a staff sports' day in Edmonton in 1923, for example, included a photograph of female employees holding up a large ball. The women in the photograph

might have been enjoying both camaraderie and physical exertion, but the caption – "A Bevy of H.B.C. Girls at the Sports" – indicates that the editors chose not to focus on women's well-being but rather on their physical attractiveness.[27]

Spencer's *Store Topics* also conceived of female staff in primarily ornamental terms. In an article about the different types of fruit available in the Vancouver store, the magazine included one photograph of four women from the Produce Department. The women stand in a line holding up various fruits, including watermelon and pineapple. The caption reads: "Some Peaches from Department 64" (Figure 1). Given that the employees are not, in fact, holding peaches and that the term *peaches*, when applied to women, calls attention to their physical attractiveness, there is no mistaking the caption's intent. It aims to both amuse and encourage the reader to imagine all young working women at Spencer's, including those who work in the Produce Department, in terms both visual and sexual.[28]

Sexual aestheticization continued during the 1930s. In her examination of the Dupuis Frères' treatment of its staff during this period, Joan Sangster rightly points out that "allusions to sexuality were almost non-existent" in training materials. Nevertheless, *Le Duprex* did occasionally comment on its female employees' appearances. A 1931 article about an in-store hairstyle show titled "Jolis mannequins à notre Exposition de Coiffures" includes both a description of the show as well as a photograph of nine female models,



Some Peaches from Department 64.

Figure 1 "A Trip through Fruitland," *Store Topics*, June 1927, 11. City of Vancouver Archives, Spencer's fonds. *Courtesy of Sears Canada Inc.*

two of whom worked for Dupuis Frères.[29] Although this title is certainly more innocuous than remarks made in the anglophone magazines of western Canadian stores in the 1920s, it does invite readers to interpret female employees' bodies in visual, aesthetic, and subtly sexual terms. Another reference to female employees' agreeability occurred in *Le Duprex* six years later, in an article about the francophone store's female tennis players titled "Nos gentilles midinettes," which included a photograph of fifteen smiling women. The word *gentilles* does not impart a sexual connotation, but the title's use of the pronoun *nos*, together with the inclusion of the photograph, invites readers to interpret the women in the snapshot in a way that is both proprietary and appreciative.[30]

When the number of department store magazines expanded in Canada during the 1930s, examples of visual aestheticization increased apace. In Easter 1938, Vancouver's HBC magazine included a photograph of a woman who worked at the transfer desk. The caption read: "This attractive young lady is Bernice Potts ... We are indebted to Bernice for the tricky crossword puzzle in this issue." Rather than thanking Potts solely for her contribution, the piece also congratulated her for her beauty. By doing so, it downplayed Potts's intelligence and transformed her into an object of sexual aestheticization.[31] The 1930s also witnessed the sexualization of female elevator workers. To ensure the smooth operation of their elevators, department stores employed operators; to ensure that customers could easily distinguish the operators from shoppers, they made them wear uniforms. In many cases, managers inspected these women's uniforms at the beginning of each shift. This practice gave rise to a unique form of spectacularization, namely, photographing lined-up elevator employees and then printing their photographs in staff magazines. Between 1936 and 1948, internal HBC publications included at least eight instances of spectacularization. The text accompanying the pictures described female elevator employees as lovely, charming (this adjective appeared three times), neat, neat looking, fascinating, beautiful, and belles.[32]

In the 1940s, this spectacularization accelerated, partly because of the expansion of publications throughout the decade. In a bid to promote employee loyalty during the war and postwar era, Eaton's *Flash*, Simpson's *Staff News*, and the HBC's various publications became longer and more frequent, and all of them began featuring lengthier descriptions of employee events. They also began presenting more detailed biographies of individual workers. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that references to the attractiveness of their female employees became more frequent. However, it is

also possible that anxieties caused by the shipment of significant numbers of male wage earners overseas, as well as by postwar attempts to reintegrate men back into the Canadian labour force, encouraged the magazines' staff to intensify the sexualization and objectification of female workers. As Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich point out in their study of representations of female munitions workers in Can Car's staff magazine, the sexual objectification of female staff promoted a view of working women's roles as decorative. Portrayals of women as sex objects distracted male readers from women's workplace skills and confirmed the belief that, despite women's wartime incursions into the workplace, wage earning was still masculine.[33]

Assuaging latent male fears about women's secondary workplace status was certainly the intent behind one of the most provocative pictures to appear in any internal department store magazine. In August 1948, the magazine cover for Eaton's Toronto store featured a young woman looking coyly over her shoulder while feeding a calf. The caption invited the reader to "Come and Get It" (Figure 2). This statement perhaps referred to the phrase that farmers used when they wanted to alert their cattle to the availability of new food. More likely, however, the statement was a double entendre, suggesting not only that the calf should come and get its nourishment but also that readers should come and get their sexual stimulation by perusing the publication.

In addition to soothing gender anxieties, the sexualization of women in department store literature promoted an image of female beauty pleasing to both male workers and male customers. Research on department stores between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries commonly portrays retail as designed primarily for women's pleasure, but it is also true that saleswomen served as models of consumerist female beauty, which department stores defined as heterosexual: women were to appear not only elegant but also attractive to men. Although women were the big stores' largest consumer group, men, too, visited them. Retailers thus encouraged saleswomen to present themselves both as paragons of feminine elegance and as pleasing to the male gaze.[34] The April 1943 issue of the HBC magazine for Edmonton blatantly betrayed this desire to please male customers. An article about US servicemen who had visited the store, titled "American Pilots Like Fort Garry Coffee," began by asserting: "They also like Edmonton girls – especially 'Bay' girls." Noting that the "birdmen" had stopped in at the workers' lunchroom, where they had coffee with three young ladies, the article concluded that the pilots were "particularly impressed with the friendliness of The Bay" (Figure 3).[35] When considered alongside the photograph that accompanied this article, which depicts the servicemen and employees

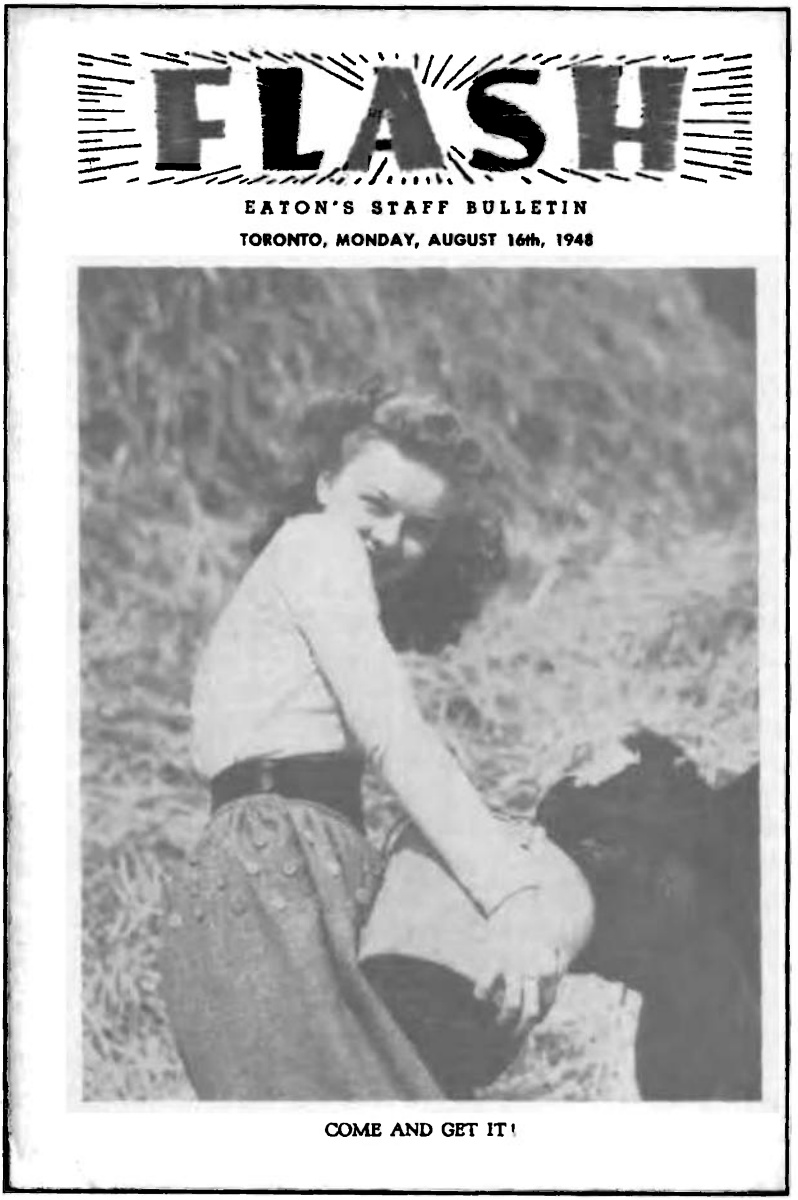


Figure 2 *Flash* front cover, 16 August 1948. *Courtesy of Sears Canada Inc.*



Figure 3 Front cover of the *Bayonet*, June 1946. Photo by Paul Hunter. *Courtesy of Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba.*

having coffee, the line "They also like Edmonton girls" invites the reader to see the female employees as attractive objects and to assume that the pilots also regarded the employees in these terms. By pointing out that the men were "impressed with the friendliness of The Bay," the article implies that female employees should appear both attractive and acquiescent so as to please not only the male reader but also the male customer.

Magazines also sought to compliment female staff by drawing attention to their attractiveness. This flattery served two purposes: it created employee loyalty, and it made female employees aware of their bodies' ornamentality. The cover of Winnipeg's HBC magazine for June 1945, for example, featured a collage of women workers' smiling faces. Regarding "Our Front Picture," the article on page two declared:

> You'd travel a long way before finding a more attractive group of young people than we have working in this store. To prove our point we are showing a few of their smiling faces on the cover ... girls picked here and there from the various departments. Typical Bay employees, well-groomed, alert and ambitious they go about their work with poise and confidence. Off duty they bowl and "bike," golf and ride horseback, play tennis and baseball, swim and paddle ... *to build up healthy bodies.*[5]

Drawing attention to the beauty of specific women workers, together with their amiability, the *Bayonet* compliments specific members of the HBC's staff for fulfilling their bodily labour requirements. In addition, by congratulating these women on their physical pursuits, the magazine makes a subtle connection between attractiveness and job success. Healthy bodies, the article implies, serve the women well, not only in their spare time but also on the job.

A final indication of the purposeful sexualization of female staff is the fact that although female employees often posed for photographs in contexts that had little to do with sexual objectification, the photographs that appeared within the magazine presented their bodies in almost exclusively aestheticized terms. Female members of Simpson's Swimming Club, for example, posed in their bathing suits on a diving board after receiving their life saving certificates. The photograph appeared above the caption "They Can Swim Too!" and the article declared, "Girls from the Toronto Simpson Swimming Club are known for their attractiveness as well as their prowess in the swim tank."[37] The biographies of staff newcomers also drew attention to women's bodies, even when the photographs that accompanied them did not explicitly draw attention to their attractiveness or sexuality. In 1947, the HBC's Edmonton magazine described new staff member Jean Huffman as "five feet, 4 inches. Irish ... and shouldn't we add – very easy on the eyes," and in 1948 the same publication called new employee Jacquie Scott a luscious blonde and a gorgeous creature. Each article included photographs of the employees.[38] This inclusion, combined with the presentation of text that called attention to the featured workers' bodies, encouraged both the reader and the women themselves to imagine women's beings in strictly visual and aestheticized terms.

Employees' Self-Spectacularization

Between 1920 and 1950, then, department stores spectacularized their staff within employee magazines for a number of reasons: to spur female workers to cultivate appearances that would stimulate sales, to encourage employees to view women as secondary members of the labour force, and to uphold male authority and privilege in the workplace. It is also important to consider why many female workers participated in their own spectacularization. By exploring specific instances when women struck sexualized poses, it is possible to pinpoint the particular yearnings for success and liberation that underlay their performances.

Beginning in the 1930s, store magazines began printing vacation snapshots sent in by employees. Some of these photographs were innocuous



Figure 4 "People and Places," *Bay Builder*, 15 June 1937, 2. *Courtesy of Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba.*

and depicted urban and outdoor scenery as well as employees engaged in specific activities, such as cycling, hiking, or fishing. Others, though, featured female employees striking alluring poses. A collage of pictures from the HBC's Vancouver magazine in 1936 includes images with the following captions: "Some of the girls from the Elevator Staff" (4), "A happy party from the Grocery Section" (5), and "Guess who?" (8) (Figure 4). In each of these pictures, the women strike relaxed, passive poses, smiling happily and wearing much less attire than was expected of them at work. During the following decade, these types of photographs became more common. One pictures three smiling women standing in a lake, while another shows a woman leaning against a tree. Both images appeared in the Winnipeg HBC's summer issue of 1945.[39] Women also sent in photographs of themselves striking relaxed, glamourous poses in urban locales, as the image of Olga Laruska in Edmonton in 1947 demonstrates (Figure 5). A particularly striking vacation photograph appeared in 1941, when Victoria's HBC store printed a snapshot of an employee's posterior (Figure 6).

To determine the motives that compelled female workers to send photographs of themselves to their employers' magazines, it is important to understand the culture of heterosexuality that existed within Canadian department stores. These retailers had mixed-gender labour forces that



Figure 5 "Candidly Speaking," *Bay Breeze,* August 1947, 13. *Courtesy of Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba.*



Figure 6 *Bay Breeze,* October 1941, 4. *Courtesy of Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba.*

numbered in the thousands; they offered single women and men the opportunity to meet, mingle, and develop relationships.[40] Many employees met their future spouses at work, and their marriages were often announced in staff magazines.[41] Recognizing the prevalence of flirting and courtship among staff, department stores held dances, picnics, and other events that would attract the attendance of those seeking not only diversion and sociability but also heterosexual mingling. In this way, Canada's retailers incorporated heterosexual interaction into their broader attempts to secure staff loyalty and cohesion.[42]

When female employees sent photographs of themselves striking flirtatious poses to corporate magazines, they did so within a workplace culture of heterosexual banter. In these photographs, women portrayed themselves as fun and appealing, as potentially attractive romantic partners. But the photographs operated on another level as well. As Lisa Sanders argues, "Shop assistants, like factory hands, worked in an environment defined by repetition and routine, performing the same tasks on a daily basis and expected to reproduce an attitude of deference and readiness upon each encounter with a new customer."[43] More than this, their immersion in the sales environment made female department store employees experts in fashion, self-presentation, and beauty. Their job, however, required them to dress in dark, subdued, and business-like clothing; to maintain an erect posture; and to behave with decorum and docility.[44] Small wonder, then, that when female employees went on holidays, they revelled in dressing up, having fun with friends, and behaving flirtatiously. Sending photographs of themselves to store magazines enabled these women to communicate their "off-work" personas to their co-workers.

Participating in beauty contests was another way for women to demonstrate stylishness, poise, and attractiveness. In 1922, four "salesladies" at HBC Edmonton entered a citywide beauty contest sponsored by the local newspaper. In its coverage of the event, *The Beaver* included a picture of the women, noting that they were "easy to look at and pretty hard to beat" (Figure 7). In 1946, Simpson's *Store News* boasted that Marion Saver of the Hamilton toilet goods department had been chosen by local judges to represent Hamilton at the Miss Canada contest. In 1943, noted the article, the "lovely young lady" had been Miss Toronto.[45] Other photographs of beauty contestants appeared in a 1948 issue of Calgary's HBC magazine. The company held beauty pageants at its annual summer picnic, and the women who participated posed for photographs. So impressed were store reporters with the beauty of the winners that they featured close-ups of the women on



Figure 7 "Beauty Contest," *The Beaver* (now *Canada's History*), February 1922, 25. *Courtesy of* Canada's History.



Figure 8 "Beaver Club Picnic," *Beaver Tales*, March 1949, 10-11. *Courtesy of Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba.*

the covers of subsequent issues (Figure 8).[46] By drawing attention to female workers' bodies, these articles and photographs objectified and spectacl[illegible]ized female employees. Yet, unlike instances discussed in the previous section, they did so within a context sanctioned by the female employees themselves.

By featuring photographs of beauty contestants in store magazines, and especially on their covers, as did *Beaver Tales*, both Simpson's and the HBC suggested that it was appropriate for female employees to parade their bodies and compete for beauty titles. Through their magazines, they implied that women's beauty could be measured and objectified, and they encouraged their female staff to cultivate a slim, poised, and agreeable appearance. In the case of swimsuit competitions, they also suggested to staff that beauty standards included smooth and unblemished skin, the ability to walk in heels, and toned muscles. More than this, they encouraged readers to gaze upon contestants' bodies and to judge them on their attractiveness.[47]

Beauty contests did, however, have other meanings. As historian Joan Sangster notes of beauty pageants in the postwar labour movement, young working-class women participated in these contests because "femininity, style, and appearance" were a form of cultural capital to which young women had access.[48] In other words, beauty contests enabled women to showcase their achievement of heterosexual attractiveness. Doing so was especially important for women who spent much of their time performing routinized, low-status paid labour and who wanted to declare their inherent worth and femininity. Moreover, the HBC pictures demonstrate that beauty contests were fun. The contestants smiled for the camera not only because the action enhanced their prettiness, but also because they were likely enjoying the feeling of sun on their bodies, the camaraderie of friends, and the esteem of their co-workers, who were no doubt in the audience.

Pin-up photographs, a final type of sexualized image, also appeared in department store magazines. Pin-ups, posters that depict women in attractive poses, became popular during the Second World War; their purpose was to boost "men's morale on both the home and battle fronts."[49] As did Can Car's *Aircrafter* magazine, Simpson's and the HBC's magazines introduced pin-ups of female staff during the 1940s. In January 1945, Simpson's *Staff News* ran a pin-up of Jean Latta, who worked in the coffee shop. According to the caption, the servicemen in convalescence at the Chorley Park Hospital had chosen her as their official pin-up girl, and she visited the men often at the wards, where her "picture is posted up ... as their most popular visitor." In comparison to the photographs of beauty contestants smiling and wearing bathing suits that appeared in HBC Calgary's magazine in 1947 and 1948, Latta presents herself as sultry and glamourous. The caption states that she looks "for all the world like a movie starlet." In keeping with the pin-up tradition, the caption also includes Latta's age (nineteen), height (five feet, seven inches), weight (120 pounds), and hair and eye colour (dark



Figure 9 Jean Latta, in Simpson's *Staff News*, 19 January 1945, 8. *Courtesy of Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba.*

brown and blue). Latta's body conformed well to the mainstream beauty norms of the time, which favoured slim, relatively tall women (Figure 9).

In the spring of the same year, *Staff News* again printed pin-ups, this time for the benefit of returning Simpson's veterans. The first pin-up, which appeared in the Easter issue, featured "lovely, blonde Dorothy Groves of the store lingerie." Groves's image, the caption stated, would be the "first in a new series of pin-up girls for Simpson's lads in service." Having worked part-time as a model, Groves was twenty-four years old, 5 feet 4 inches tall, 110 pounds, and had "dancing hazel eyes": "She's not married and says her ideal man doesn't have to have curly hair!" (Figure 10). The second pin-up featured Mabel Findlay, a "piquant blonde" who was seventeen years old and 5 feet 2½ inches tall and who worked as an "apprentice in the advertising art department": "She has no special boy friend, but the navy lads hold a definite interest for her" (Figure 11).

The heterosexual aspect of their workplace culture; the monotonous, deferential nature of retail employment; the familiarity of retail workers with the latest fashions; the equation of attractiveness with accomplishment, both in the department store and in broader mainstream culture; and the visual scopic environment in which these women worked combined to create a context in which the successful display of one's own body – in an



Figure 10 Dorothy Groves, in "Happy Easter to You, Too!" Simpson's *Staff News*, 30 March 1945, 8. *Courtesy of Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba.*



Figure 11 Mabel Findlay, "The Second Pin-Up," Simpson's *Staff News*, 27 April 1945, 8. *Courtesy of Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba.*

appropriately sexualized, stylish, and alluring manner – became a method of proclaiming social success and distinction. In other words, women who displayed themselves as modern spectacles had learned that one path to success was the cultivation of a coy, alluring, slim, and fashionable appearance. This appearance, they knew, would win approval from male managers as well as from prospective suiters; it would serve them well in both the workplace and courtship.

Conclusion

During the first half of the twentieth century, Canada's largest department store magazines presented female employees' bodies as sexualized spectacles. Articles complimented employees on their attractive appearances and depicted their bodies as objects of male sexual attraction and appreciation. Through flattery, department stores tried to create feelings of loyalty among employees, and they encouraged female employees to continue presenting themselves in ways pleasing to both female and male customers. This sexual spectacularization at once amused male readers and reminded female employees that their primary function in the workplace was to be decorative.

Exploitation and oppression, however, are not the only categories through which women's sexual spectacularization in department store magazines can be understood. Female employees themselves sent in photographs that displayed their bodies in sexualized terms. They also took part in beauty contests, posed for provocative pictures, and agreed to serve as company pin-ups. These actions indicate that many women enjoyed performing beautiful and attractive personas, and they demonstrate that many women believed that the cultivation of beautiful bodies helped them achieve workplace success. They illustrate that many women viewed retail not only as a place where they could earn money and, possibly, advance their careers but also as a site where they could engage in heterosexual, romantic relationships. They imply that a certain longing existed among women for their coworkers to view them not as low-status drudges but as exciting, glamourous, flirtatious, and distinguished. Their participation in sexual spectacularization articulated a latent desire for liberation from hardship and toil.

When developing feminist perspectives on sexual objectification, it is crucial to recognize both the potential for exploitation and alienation that exists within women's ornamentalization and women's own motivations for self-spectacularization. Female department store employees who chose

to dress fashionably, use cosmetics, present themselves as glamorous, and please the male gaze were not necessarily submissive and conservative. Therefore, the recent feminist argument that feminists must be more accepting of girls and women who strive to meet prevailing capitalist and heterosexual beauty standards is significant. Rather than disparaging women's self-spectacularization, feminists should recognize the motivations behind women's pursuit of conventional femininity. But feminist scholars must also continue to explore how heterosexual beauty standards contribute to girls' and women's exploitation, oppression, and alienation. As this chapter reveals, spectacularization in the Canadian department store between 1920 and 1950 facilitated capitalist accumulation and male privilege; it also reinforced the hierarchies of class and gender that marginalized wage-earning women. Since department stores promoted versions of female sexuality that privileged youthfulness; slimness; toned muscles; smooth, white skin; a fashionable appearance; and the male, heterosexual gaze, women who did not meet such specifications would have had difficulty achieving workplace success. Finally, the pursuit of heterosexual attractiveness might have created a sense of competition among co-workers, most overtly when female employees participated in beauty contests but also within everyday workplace situations such as seeking promotions, securing desired work schedules, and obtaining raises. This competition, in turn, might have prevented solidarity from forming among female co-workers. Therefore, despite the empowering possibilities that may exist within women's spectacularization, it must be concluded that when it occurs within patriarchal and capitalist contexts – such as those that existed in Canadian department stores between 1920 and 1950 – it becomes a narrow and ultimately untenable path towards liberation.

NOTES

1 Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, "Feminism and Femininity: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Thong," *All about the Girl: Power, Culture, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004), 59–67, quote on 66.

2 See, for example, Linda Scott, *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

3 Baumgardner and Richards, "Feminism and Femininity," 66.

4 Liz Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 4.

5 Ibid., 3. Excellent examples in which theories of performativity have been deployed include Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) and Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999).

6 Donica Belisle, *Retail Nation: Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).

7 H. Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store: Its Origins, Evolution, and Economics* (New York: Arno Press, 1976 [1954]); Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869–1920* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 14–15.

8 David Monod, *Store Wars: Shopkeepers and the Culture of Mass Marketing, 1890–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 111–12, 211–13; Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, Vol. 10, *Merchandising and Service Establishments, Part I* (Ottawa: J. O. Patenaude, 1931), xix-xx, lxxxiii.

9 Monod, *Store Wars*, 124–27, 358; *Department Stores in Canada/Les grands magasins au Canada, 1923–1976* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1979), 16; Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), 85–86.

10 Monod, *Store Wars*, 123; H.H. Stevens, *Report of the Royal Commission on Price Spreads* (Ottawa: J.O. Patenaude, 1937), 202; Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, Vol. 10, Part 1, 10, xxiv–xxv; Ralph Hower, *History of Macy's of New York, 1858–1919* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943), 399.

11 Eileen Sufrin, *The Eaton Drive: The Campaign to Organize Canada's Largest Department Store, 1948–1952* (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1982), 14; Count of Toronto Staff, Statistics Notebook, 1939, Archives of Ontario (AO), F 229, Series 181, Box 1.

12 Theresa McBride, "A Woman's World: Department Stores and the Evolution of Women's Employment, 1870–1920," *French Historical Studies* 10 (Autumn 1978): 668–69.

13 Joy Santink, *Timothy Eaton and the Rise of His Department Store* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 83, 114, 191.

14 University Women's Club Civic Committee, *The Work of Women and Girls in the Department Stores of Winnipeg* (Winnipeg: University Women's Club of Winnipeg, 1914), 8.

15 Joan Sangster, *Transforming Labour: Women and Work in Post-War Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 110–11.

16 "Welcome to the Quarter-Century Club," *Flash*, 17 April 1950, 11. All issues of *Flash* cited here are available at the Archives of Ontario (AO), F 229, Series 141.

17 See, for example, "Thirty-Five Years with Eaton's," *Flash*, 5 May 1950, 11.

18 "Supervisors, Group Managers, Heads of Departments and Assistants," June 1929, AO, F 229, Series 162, File 764.

19 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 2005 [1967]).

20 Theresa McBride, "A Woman's World," 665; Lisa Sanders, *Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure, and the London Shopgirl, 1880–1920* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 55; Lorraine O'Donnell, "Visualizing the History of Women at Eaton's, 1869 to 1976" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2002), 301; and William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 9.

21 In "Selling Your Personality," for example, customers line up at Eaton's hat counters, behind which saleswomen retrieve and discuss hats: "Selling Your Personality," 1948, AO, T. Eaton Papers, Sound and Moving Images Collection (SMI), Series 403.

22 See, for example, "Appreciative Customers," *Flash*, 3 September 1935, 4.

23 Donica Belisle, "A Labour Force for the Consumer Century: Commodification at Canada's Largest Department Stores, 1890 to 1940," *Labour/Le Travail* 58 (Fall 2006): 125–38.

24 *Staff News*, 12 September 1947, 7. All issues of *Staff News* cited are available at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA), Library Division.

25 All issues of *The Beaver* cited are available at Library and Archives Canada. *Le Duprex* is at the archives of HEC Montréal, and *Store Topics* is at the City of Vancouver Library, Spencer's fonds. Issues of *Bay Builder; Bay Window; Beaver Tales; Bay Breeze;* and *Bayonet* can be found at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Library Division.

26 Evidence of gays and lesbians within the workforces of Canadian department stores has not been found. Anecdotes related to the author by former employees and customers, however, indicate that gay men in particular found employment in the big stores, especially in such fashion-related areas as window dressing.

27 "Hudson's Bay Company Field Day," *The Beaver*, June 1921, 356.

28 "A Trip through Fruitland," *Store Topics*, June 1927, 11.

29 Sangster, *Transforming Labour*, 122; "Jolis manneqins à notre Exposition de Coiffures," *Le Duprex*, January 1931, 55, Archives of HEC Montréal.

30 "Nos gentilles midinettes," *Le Duprex*, July 1937, 51.

31 *Bay Builder*, Easter 1938, unpaginated.

32 "'Chosen for Their Courtesy," *Bay Builder*, June 1936, unpaginated; *Bay Builder*, February 1938, unpaginated; *Bay Builder*, Easter 1938, unpaginated; "Up and Down with a Christmas Smile," *Beaver Tales*, December 1940, unpaginated; "'The Up and Down Brigade,'" *The Bayonet*, February 1940, unpaginated; "The Elevator Girls in Their Neat Summer Uniforms," *The Bayonet*, March 1943, 18; and "Going Up?" *Beaver Tales*, Christmas 1948, 5.

33 Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich, "'Beauty and the Helldivers': Representing Women's Work and Identities in a Warplant Newspaper," *Labour/Le Travail* 44 (1999): 90.

34 Sanders, *Consuming Fantasies*, 55.

35 "American Pilots Like Fort Garry Coffee," *Bay Breeze*, April 1943, 3.

36 "Our Front Picture," *Bayonet*, June 1945, 2, emphasis added.

37 "They Can Swim Too!" *Staff News*, 26 October 1945, 59.

38 "We Welcome to the Bay," *Bay Breeze*, December 1947, 8, and "Interviewing Jacquie Scott," *Bay Breeze*, June 1948), 15.

39 *Bayonet*, Summer 1945, unpaginated.

40 Suzanne Morton, *Ideal Surroundings: Domestic Life in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 147.
41 "Here and There with Eatonians," *Flash,* July 1937, 3, and "Eaton Marriages," *Flash,* July 1955, 18.
42 "Spring Frolic," *Store Topics,* April 1927; "A Good Time Was Had by All," *Bay Breeze,* April 1944, 5; "Cruising Down the River," *Bay Breeze,* September 1949, 12.
43 Sanders, *Consuming Fantasies,* 98.
44 For example, "Are You Easy on the Eyes," *Beaver Tales,* March 1948, 14; "Smile Contest Winners," *Bay Window,* January 1949, 4; "Summer Dress Regulations," *Staff News,* 20 June 1947, 2.
45 "Miss Canada," *Staff News,* 12 July 1946, unpaginated.
46 *Beaver Tales,* March 1948, back cover, and *Beaver Tales,* March 1948, front cover.
47 Elizabeth Anne McCauley, as quoted in O'Donnell, "Visualizing the History of Women," 322.
48 Joan Sangster, "'Queen of the Picket Line': Beauty Contests in the Post-World War II Canadian Labor Movement, 1945–1970," *Labor* 5, 4 (2008): 102.
49 Smith and Wakewich, "'Beauty and the Helldivers,'" 86.