Ivy League Bunnies:
When Playboy came to Brown

Natalie Villacorta B’13

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By Natalie Villacorta ’13

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“PLAYBOY is scanning the IVY LEAGUE for a cross section of women for the upcoming 1979 September issue,” read a small advertisement in the lower left corner of page nine in the *Brown Daily Herald*. This relatively inconspicuous ad, printed on December 11, 1978, incited a campus-wide controversy. *Playboy* photographer David Chan was coming to Brown seeking models for the magazine’s “Girls of the Ivy League” issue after leaving Harvard, where his arrival had not been welcomed. The Harvard *Crimson* had refused to print the ad on the grounds that it was “too offensive” and “grossly at odds with the paper’s stated policy of condemning sexism and the exploitation of women.”

Chan, in his 14 years as a *Playboy* photographer, had successfully placed ads in college newspapers across the country and had never before been refused. When *Playboy* eventually published the 11-page spread, the magazine also ran an article that chronicled the controversy behind it. “Whatever the philosophical merits of the *Crimson*’s argument, the journalistic naïveté of that conclusion will stand, in retrospect, as one of the most boneheaded editorial opinions of recent years,” the *Playboy* writer noted. “If Chan’s ad had run for four days, as planned, and produced no response at Harvard, *Playboy* would then have abandoned the entire Ivy League Project; but thanks to the *Crimson*, the case of David Chan was featured in every major Boston newspaper, on every Boston television news broadcast and in newspapers around the world.” Fifty Harvard women and 30 impostors claiming to be Harvard students showed up for interviews.

After hearing from staffers at *Playboy*’s Chicago headquarters that Brown was the most conservative school in the Ivy League, Chan was surprised when the *Herald* agreed to print his ad. But the paper received much criticism for this decision. Two days after the advertisement’s debut, the *Herald* received a letter from several campus women’s groups: “We, the undersigned, feel that even the decision to condone the *Playboy* ad is harmful to all people, especially women, and misleading about Brown.” Though the advertisement merely stated where and when interviews for prospective models would be held, the authors of the letter claimed “*Playboy* would portray Brown as having admitted its female students for their bodies, not for their maturity, intelligence or creativity. Beyond slandering us as Brown students and as women, the idea behind the ad sets us all up as targets for sexual violence.” In 1978, Brown had been co-ed for only eight years, and perhaps some women felt the need to prove they deserved to be on campus. One female student, Beth Castelli ’79, even went on the *Phil Donahue*
Show to debate with Chan. Feminist organizations were not the only ones upset — Providence Police Chief Angelo Ricci threatened to arrest Chan for shooting pictures of Brown students because he thought it “was morally wrong.”

The editors of the Herald responded the next day, defending their decision. “We do have a policy of rejecting ads that we consider harmful or misleading; we did not believe, however, that the Playboy advertisement posed such a threat. … We felt that running the ad was particularly appropriate in an open academic community like Brown — a community whose members say they both tolerate and encourage differences of opinion.” Several other students and community members submitted letters in support of the Herald in the following days.

One student said that bodies are just bodies, and there is nothing offensive in displaying them. Another student brought up the fact the Herald had printed a Playboy ad seeking male models in the previous spring. Why did the women’s groups not object then, he asked, claiming their concern for female students and indifference towards the males were sexist themselves. A female student also chided the women’s groups for “trying to take away the Brown woman’s right to know what options are available to her and therefore, her right to choose.”

Despite the outcry from some of their fellow sex and the chatter in the Ratty, 100 Brown women showed up for interviews, and five eventually posed in the “Women of the Ivy League” issue, which sold for $2.50 the following September. The spread was originally entitled “Girls of the Ivy League.” But Chan heard from a colleague that the word “girls” was a source of growing controversy in the Ivy League. He decided to cross out the word “girls” in the title and scribble “women” on top of it.

The first large picture in the 11-page spread is of Eliana Lobo ’80 from São Paolo, Brazil, in her bra and panties, standing at the window of what might be her dorm room. She is quoted as saying that she wanted to pose in the magazine because she wanted “Brown to be able to show it has really pretty girls.” She also said that she “wants to be able to tell her grandchildren that she appeared in Playboy.”

On the adjacent page is a picture of Angela Stone ’79, who was paid $400 to pose topless, her tan lines exposed under a collegiate cardigan. In the photo, she smiles confidently, pulling down the band of her gym shorts to reveal a hint of her pubic region, like she’s daring critics to attack her. But notably, she does not go by her real name. The spread identifies her as Angela Ray, “the only woman at Brown to live in a fraternity.” The piece goes on to say that she “handles the scoreboard chores for her baseball-playing frat brothers, but dates none of them seriously.” In an interview with the Herald seven years later, she said she posed because she thought it would be fun. The shoot was “a ball,” and she had “nothing but good feelings about Playboy.”

On the next page is a topless photo of Amy Petronis ’81, who leans on the arm of a chair and gives the camera a sultry stare. The caption mentions that she is a National Merit Scholar and that she “hopes to build spare parts for humans as a biomedical engineer.” Petronis’s grandmother was apparently so “tickled” that her granddaughter was appearing in Playboy that she bought a subscription for all of her friends.
“I changed my mind about posing semi-nude at least a hundred times,” Hillary Clayson ’82 told Playboy at the time. “I’m not extremely modest, and anyway this isn’t Town and Country. Sure, I have some weird feelings knowing how many people will see the magazine. The way Brown’s feminists focused on this thing was much weirder, though; one told me this was a step up from prostitution. I hope this annoys them, so they’ll know exactly where I stand.”

Lisa Cobb ’79, who posed in a bathing suit, had a similar “screw you” attitude. She felt ostracized by other Brown women, like “a fish out of water” as one of the few blondes on campus. Nobody wore make up, and many rocked their father’s frayed shirts and uncombed hairdo, Cobb says now. “It’s almost like the women back then took 20 extra minutes in the morning to look as bad as they could because they wanted everybody to know how smart they were.” Cobb had grown up in Mexico City, where she says it was the norm for women to dress up and pay more attention to their appearances. As a result, she says people often assumed she wasn’t smart and was “kind of a bitch.” Since women on campus already judged her, she felt she had nothing to lose or be ashamed about, especially because she was graduating and she had her clothes on in the photo. “You could hear the whispers,” she says. “But that wasn’t anything new to me. My whole experience there had been like that.”

Cobb expected the hostile reaction. There were not as many girls on campus, and it still felt male dominated. According to her, female students wanted to prove that they belonged at Ivy League schools, and the prevailing thought was that someone who was academic would never do something like pose for Playboy — “you have this education, but you’re basically selling out,” Cobb says.

Barbara Tannenbaum, senior lecturer in Theater, Speech, and Dance, was director of the Sarah Doyle Women’s Center at the time. She reflects, “It wasn’t highlighting the reason people were in school, which was to learn.” She opposed the Herald’s decision to run the advertisement, saying that if a racist magazine wanted to advertise for the KKK member of the month, the Herald wouldn’t advertise that. Tannenbaum says there was a lot of debate about women’s issues on campus at the time. The advertisement and Brown women’s decision to pose for Playboy contributed to the idea that “we’re all bunnies,” she says, quoting Gloria Steinem.

Playboy returned to campus in the spring of 1986 to seek models for its second Ivy League issue. Again, the Crimson rejected the ad and the Herald chose to run it. This time the advertisement was big and bold: “IVY LEAGUE WOMEN: PLAYBOY WANTS YOU!” above the recognizable Playboy bunny cartoon. Again, women’s groups opposed the decision. The Rape and Incest Survivor’s Group submitted a letter that included personal testimonies about Playboy’s ability to harm. “I was raped by a Brown football player who decorates his walls with Playboy centerfolds,” one girl said. Another described being sexually abused by her babysitter when she was 7 years old. The boy brought pornographic pictures similar to those found in Playboy and “molded” and “posed” her body to match them.

Student outcry against Playboy was louder than it was in 1978. Several students staged a protest outside of the hotel where David Chan was holding interviews. Twelve
women dressed as dolls while a handful of male students pretended to take their photographs. “We stand here today in outrage, and in mockery of Playboy’s mockery of women. We are not your Barbie dolls,” they wrote in a flier distributed around campus.

Another group of students assembled to publish Positions, a feminist pornography journal. The editors’ took issue with Playboy because of its male-dominated production and readership. The journal looked no different from Playboy on the surface, but women took the photographs and did the production. Though the editors claimed the journal was “feminism’s response to pornography,” some female students accused its editors of perpetuating the exploitation of women and the belief in female submissiveness.

Women from all eight Ivy League schools joined forces to publish their own version of “Women of the Ivy League” magazine, which featured writing and artwork instead of pornographic images. The idea for the magazine came out of Yale’s Women’s Center, which sent out letters to feminist organizations at the eight schools. “We want to show that there’s a lot more to women of the Ivy League women than breast size,” said Rachael Sheinkin ’89, one coordinator of the Brown effort. The goal was to “question the ethic that defines all women as marginal beings, as mere entertainment for men.”

These Ivy League bunnies have now grown older. Their cheekbones and jaw lines have softened. They have lost their slender figures that they were once so eager to show off. Many of them are married and have families. Eliana Lobo now has children; perhaps one day she will tell them about the time she posed for Playboy in her underwear. Lisa Cobb is still keeping up her good looks through her own salon, called Luxury on Lovers.

If Playboy came to Brown today, how would the campus react? The organization Feminists at Brown has recently revamped its mission of empowering campus feminists through effecting change in the real world. Members Lily Goodspeed ’13 and Julia Dahlin ’12 both say that the group would likely start a discussion rather than taking a unified stance. Both agree that the group would not criticize women who posed but rather the magazine itself. “Playboy equates sexual liberation with a very specific kind of sexuality,” Goodspeed says. “A heterosexual and female body-based sexuality.” She would not pose in the magazine because it would “be consumed as a sexual product by male buyers.”

Given current gender politics at Brown, it seems more likely that students would have a problem with the magazine’s limited view of sexuality and perpetuation of traditional gender roles, rather than with its alleged objectification of women. Maybe boys dressed in drag would turn out for the interviews. For now, it’s just speculation. If BrownBares — a website where Brown students post nude or semi-nude photos of themselves posing in recognizable spots around campus — is any indication, though, Playboy would probably find plenty of volunteers.