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Cultural Representations of Lillian Russell in
Turn-of-the-Century America

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“R.I.P. Anna Nicole Smith” read the text message I received at work. Immediately I went online to find out whether this piece of information my friend had sent me was indeed true. Sadly, it was. In retrospect, it seems as if Anna Nicole, whose persona was so much “larger than life” and “over the top,” whose life had been filled with drama which, like a car wreck, we could not help watching, could never have lived to old age but had to live fast and die young. She compared herself to Marilyn Monroe, but journalists quickly took her down a peg by noting her true predecessor was the voluptuous B-movie starlet Jayne Mansfield, another bawdy blonde who loved the company of gay men and died young in a brutal car wreck. Anna Nicole, once a Playboy centerfold and Guess jeans model, who then packed on some pounds and starred in her own reality show, was our most recent example of American excess. She was the so-called ideal—a Texas blonde with killer curves—just turned up a few notches past acceptable and thus laughable. She was “too much”: too blonde, too big, too loud, too sexually aggressive, to be consumable in this age of size-zero actresses. We loved and feared Anna Nicole because she dared to make visible her appetites—for fame, food, sex, money, for all things Texas-sized.

According to Susan Bordo, the contemporary ideal feminine figure is either muscular or extremely slender, but in either case, the female body must be regulated. Contemporary women are supposed to exercise control through

careful self-monitoring of their bodily boundaries.¹ Many in the prosperous West can eat whatever they want when they want; nonetheless, those who make this abundance visible through their bodies—as Anna Nicole did—are punished. Fat people are desexualized, or simply mocked for having sexual desires at all; they are viewed as gluttonous, slovenly, and lazy. All of this even though most white collar jobs encourage a sedentary lifestyle, in which many of us sit at our desks for eight hours or more, pick up fast-food through the drive-thru window on our way home, and then spend the evening watching television or surfing the Internet. In a cultural moment when one does not need to leave the house to rent a movie or purchase food, when convenience trumps exertion, fat people are the ones punished for the hypocritical, indulgent, consumer-based lifestyle so many Americans, fat *and* thin, enjoy.

Ironically, even though many in the United States can theoretically consume whatever they desire, the ample, well-fed body, which would in some way signal this consumption, is not currently in vogue, nor has it been so for over a hundred years. This is enough to make a non-self-loathing fat girl want to take a trip back in time, to an era when fat was in fashion, when big blondes were not derided, but often praised and desired. This chapter is concerned with Lillian Russell, one of the most famous American actresses at the turn-of-the-twentieth century. Rumored to have weighed up to 200 pounds, but more likely to have been between 165 and 180 pounds at the height of her career, “The American Beauty,” as Russell was known, was *the* symbol of American decadence in the 1890s, when wealth for the captains of industry exploded. The changing responses to her larger-than-life body help us see the conflicting and contradictory attitude toward American excess.

In what follows, I will examine representations of Russell on and off stage in order to explore what she meant to Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. Her size and love of splendor, as well as health and exercise, make her an important character in the timeline of American women’s changing body ideals. Some historians consider her an anomaly, whose popularity alone is responsible for the survival of a voluptuous model of feminine beauty into the twentieth century, whereas others see her as representing the general public taste of her time.² No matter which is the case, Lillian Russell embodied an ideal that was soon fleeting in American culture, even if it has reemerged from time to time in figures like Anna Nicole Smith. A flashy, outsized, hyper-feminine figure, she could participate in activities that a less feminine woman of the period would have been censured for. In her larger-than-life figure, Russell flaunted her larger-than-life tastes. She married four times, often spending her wedding night smoking and gambling; she enjoyed physical exercise and flaunted her “man-sized” appetite for food. Despite

such excesses, or perhaps because of them, she was widely reputed to be the most beautiful, desirable woman in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. Lillian Russell's large size coupled with her excessive femininity led her to become a symbol of American prosperity, and in addition made it acceptable for her to take part in activities usually defined as masculine. Indeed, for several decades, Americans widely believed that Miss Russell could do no wrong.

To understand the cultural phenomenon that was Lillian Russell, I will turn briefly to two important works that help us understand the history of the voluptuous ideal in femininity that became established in the United States in the late nineteenth century. Together, they show that the period displayed significant ambivalence toward the voluptuous female body, which could at times be a symbol of a much-desired prosperity and at other times a symbol of a dangerous excess. In *American Beauty*, historian Lois Banner charts the advent of the "voluptuous woman" as an icon of national beauty in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. The archetype is widely thought to have first appeared on American shores with the English burlesque troupe known as the British Blondes. During their U.S. tours in the 1860s and 1870s, the British Blondes charmed the crowds with their bleached tresses and hefty, curvaceous bodies, as well as confident, outgoing personalities. Banner argues that these years were especially auspicious for the excessive or fat female body. Their fleshy bodies were popular in the late nineteenth century, Banner argues, because they fed a hedonism that came into vogue after the traumatic, lean years of the Civil War.³ Just as physicians began by the 1870s to associate plumpness with good health, so too the newly wealthy in this era of industrialization associated their size, including their fat, with their prosperity. Fat, then, came to be acceptable and even admirable because it was a quality that displayed excess of all kinds.⁴ As urbanization continued and new technology led to the dissemination of reproduced images of female performers, the voluptuous woman was on her way to becoming the height of fashion. She was embraced by a culture eager to escape into earthly delights, in a time when female performers were starting to become household names as the average American began to have more leisure time to attend the theater, be it the highbrow theater of opera or the lowbrow theater of burlesque.⁵

Historian Hillel Schwartz charts the development of a more negative view of the same body, as it comes to be seen as that which impedes the progress of modernization. In his *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat*, Schwartz argues that the American fixation with dieting is the modern expression of an industrial society confused by its own desires. Until the late nineteenth century, when material and economic abundance tended to

be limited to a small elite, fat was widely associated with success and wealth. This association changed as industrialization led to the growth of the middle and upper classes. As more of the population could afford to be well fed, fat not only became less of a status marker, but also became increasingly more stigmatized. As Schwartz explains, “the major economic issue in the 1880s was the surplus in the treasury and what to do with it. The problem was over-production and under-consumption.”⁶ Fat became a marker of abundance that was increasingly viewed with suspicion as such abundance was within the reach of more segments of the population.

Increased modernization and urbanization, as well as the related rise of new ready-to-wear clothes and other consumer goods, led to new cultural associations of thin with modernity and fat with a bygone past, often associated with the old ways and even the Old World. As this implies, the fat body was increasingly seen as the non-American or even un-American body, and as such, it was especially associated with the immigrant. By the turn of the twentieth century, Schwartz notes, “fat men and women were increasingly self-conscious, and society was becoming more embarrassed for [and by] them. Cartoons showed them to be at odds with the scale of modern life: a fat woman plugs up the aisle of a streetcar or an elevator.”⁷ Just as clothing could serve a disciplinary function as it became standardized in the form of ready-to-wear, so too did seats in public transportation help to regulate body size by enforcing a new standardized norm. The fat, who could not fit into the allotted space, were forced either to stand and thus to make themselves into obvious encumbrances or to pass up on society’s new conveniences altogether. In the age of increased industrialization and technology, the modern body was more appropriately the thin or streamlined body, and the fat body was the body that was dragging or slowing the collectivity down. And yet, as Banner notes, the era also appreciated excess of every kind, hence the ambivalent responses to the voluptuous female body.

The voluptuous body embodied the societal ambivalence toward consumption and excess. Indeed, this ambivalence works itself out around the figure of Lillian Russell, the very embodiment of a certain type of excessive femininity in this period. Russell (figure 6.1) was one of the most famous American performers for several decades spanning the turn of the twentieth century. She began her career on the New York vaudeville stage in 1880 at the age of eighteen, where she was introduced by showman Tony Pastor as a British songbird, despite the fact that she hailed from Iowa. Her pale skin, curly blonde hair, doll-like features, and then-waifish body led her father to nickname her “airy, fairy Lillian.”⁸ By the 1890s, the star of comedic opera had begun to come into the voluptuous figure for which she was well known.



Figure 6.1 Lillian Russell. Digital Image Collection of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Everything surrounding Lillian, from her body to the stories about her body, was excessive. A fan of exercise since her youth, she took up the bicycle when it came into vogue in the late 1890s. She performed her vigor for all to see on an appropriately ostentatious bicycle; thus she could often be seen riding around Central Park on a gold and jewel encrusted model, given to her by dear friend, the *nouveau riche* railroad tycoon, Diamond Jim Brady. She and Jim Brady consumed lavish, multi-course meals, and Russell was famously described as eating as much as any man. Whether or not she ate as much as she was reputed to have is less important than the fact that she came to embody a new model of American celebrity in which excess of all kinds was celebrated. In her lifetime, a historical shift would occur which would make her excessive consumption and excessive, voluptuous body, once the object of admiration, increasingly an object of censure.

The insights of anthropologists can explain in part this dramatic shift in aesthetic tastes. Historian Arthur Marwick gives voice to a widely held anthropological belief, albeit in a somewhat problematic fashion. In his *Beauty in History: Society, Politics and Personal Appearance*, Marwick observes that “cultures which value fatness are cultures which in fact value wealth and status above human beauty.”⁹ His binary argument does not account for the fact that different cultures view beauty differently across time and space. Relatedly, he also seems to assume that what he takes to be “human beauty” is what others would take it to be, which, given his statements, seems to take the thin body as the de facto beautiful one. Despite these shortcomings, he gives voice to a belief shared by many anthropologists: namely, that societies with less abundance hold fat bodies in more esteem. When scarcity prevails, those who are able to secure food and comfort in hard times are much more likely to survive. Claire Cassidy writes in “The Good Body: When Bigger is

Better” that prosperous societies can move beyond the survival mentality of “look how much abundance I have” to the privileged notion that “I’m so safe I can afford to ignore abundance.”¹⁰

Such a transformation happened in the years in which Lillian Russell was famous, and it explains why her excessive appetite and body came under increasing scrutiny as American society became more prosperous. As more people experienced material success due to increase in industrialization, guilt came to surround consumption and waste. This guilt both fueled and was fueled by the reducing-diet industry that took off in the last years of Russell’s popularity. While she was not born into a period of American scarcity per se in the 1860s, the war years saw less material gain than the coming decades. Her biographer Parker Morrell explains,

the Nineties were the climax of three post-war decades, the joyous, sprawling close of America’s pioneer age. The great railroad expansion era had come to an end. A virgin continent, with an incalculable wealth of natural resources, was being wastefully exploited; and the swaggering, blustering men whose fortunes it was making were eager to play.¹¹

The decade of the 1890s was nicknamed “the Flash Age,” when newly successful businessmen showed off their recent gains in many ways: from wearing expensive clothes and jewelry, to keeping the company of expensively clad women in the theater, to eating large restaurant meals and making their wealth visible through their large bodies. Lillian showed these men that she too could play at that game, and unlike Anna Nicole, she was not ridiculed for this behavior. No doubt social class also plays a role in the different reception between these two blondes: whereas Russell was raised solidly middle class, Smith’s poor Southern roots and “gold digging” tendencies have been well documented by the press. The fact still remains that culturally the type of excess that Russell embodied was more in keeping with the period she inhabited.

Russell’s excess probably had very different meanings to different people. True, an economic boom occurred in the period that made many prosperous, but the widening class divide left many out in the cold. As Russell’s biographer later notes, “the Nineties had been gay, and at intervals even golden. But their gilded pleasures cannot with any degree of accuracy be said to have been enjoyed by the masses.”¹² Russell was popular with many people who did not benefit so obviously from the increased prosperity. In this same period, many struggled for the American dream, hoping to increase their prosperity, but many struggled just as much to survive as to thrive. Southern blacks

were beginning to come north in greater numbers, and European immigrants swelled Lower Manhattan and other urban enclaves all in hopes of increased prosperity. In this environment, Russell's image of flamboyant excess was a fantasy to many. In observing her on stage, in the street, or in simply retelling some of those stories, she offered these struggling men and women an escape into the excess otherwise denied them. In admiring her beauty, her dazzling outfits, or her voice, which many critics were captivated by, they too could perhaps partake of her excessive consumption they so desired.

Scholars seem unsure how to treat the fat body she gained in her middle years. Marwick, for example, argues that Russell continued to have her "enormous celebrity" (no pun intended?) even after she became fat later in life only because she had established her popularity before gaining weight.¹³ This argument ignores the fact that plump Lillian was not merely tolerated but adored. Notably, Russell was not referred to as "fat" *in a negative sense* until she became much older. If on her first night performing at Tony Pastor's variety show, the event which began the road to her success, she had been plumper than she was in her youth, would she still have reached the heights of success that she did? Of course, we can only speculate, but given that she was admired for her larger-than-life presence and voice, it seems possible. She came to fame in a period in which many viewed plumpness in women as a defining quality of youthfulness and health. For example, an oft-quoted Lillian Russell fan reminisced in later years about seeing her perform in New Haven: "she was a voluptuous beauty, and there was plenty of her to see. We liked that. Our tastes were not thin, ethereal. We liked flesh in the Nineties. It didn't have to be bare, and it wasn't, but it had to be there."¹⁴

The above author, who was a student at Yale at the time, sneaked into a performance of Russell's with friends and commented:

Miss Russell was worth it. We . . . didn't see very much of her, but what we did see was ravishing. Maybe her waist wasn't so small as some of the others, but it looked even smaller, her hips were so gorgeous and stately and her broad, white bosom so ample. She threw back her golden head and caroled coquettishly when the hero made love to her, she caroled severely at the villain, and she danced till the old Hype stage shook.¹⁵

This description brings to mind the image of an Amazonian woman of both large proportions and large voice. Today, one rarely sees a performance by a large, sensual, aggressive woman, throwing her weight around on stage. Russell was plump, desired, and bold—she was not mere decoration, but a voice and personality to be reckoned with. Further examples will reveal her agency

and subjectivity in an era when many “proper” women still did not work outside the house, and women did not yet have the right to vote.

Russell said in later years that when she heard her first opera, she decided to become a grand-opera singer: “I had no doubt of my success. I awaited with patience the day when I should burst upon the world in all my effulgent splendor and show it what it had been missing during the years it had taken me to grow up.”¹⁶ Russell’s mother, Cynthia Leonard, was an ardent feminist, who moved with Lillian to New York from Iowa not only to help Lillian make a living on the stage, but also to work for Susan B. Anthony and the cause of women’s rights.¹⁷ She no doubt raised her daughters to believe in their dreams and talents, and clearly Lillian felt from a young age that she was capable of making something of herself, and not just marrying the first young man to come along on the farm. As she became successful and then famous, her confidence increased to the point where people referred to her as a queen, she held herself so regally. Although detractors pointed to her showy image as trumping her performance abilities, she was widely known for being extremely hard-working, for always being on time for rehearsals, and for treating stage hands and chorus girls just as well as her costars and directors. A queen she may have been, but she was firmly a queen of the people.

If the stories are any indications, the people relished her larger-than-life tastes and appetite. Many are the tales of the royal banquet-like spreads that Russell and Diamond Jim Brady feasted on, in Broadway restaurants after late-night performances, yet few stories of the massive appetites of these two characters come directly from Lillian’s mouth. One story from their contemporary, restaurateur Jacques Bustanoby, is too rich to ignore:

I’ll never forget the night that Diamond Jim bet Lillian Russell that he could eat more than she could. . . . If she could match him, he said, he would give her a huge diamond ring the next day. Lillian slipped out to the ladies’ room and came out with a heavy bundle under her arm, wrapped up in a tablecloth. . . . She told me to keep it for her until the next day. “But do not look,” she told me. And then she went back to the table and ate plate-for-plate with big Diamond Jim Brady. . . . And she beat him fair and square . . . that bundle? What was in it? Yes, I wanted to know, too. The curiosity of a Frenchman could not stand it. . . . So I looked to see what Lillian Russell had handed me before she went back to out-eat Mr. Brady. It was her corset!¹⁸

Bustanoby is clearly pleased with her spectacular appetite, as he is with her body, and he also assumes that the listener shares this appreciation. Moreover, just as Lillian and other women took off their corsets for activities such

as exercise and bicycle riding, so too must the device be removed for eating-as-sport.

His story reveals Russell's lack of, as well as need for, convention. She did not want anyone to know she had removed her corset, and yet to compete with an eater unfettered by such restraint, she had to take off the contraption that created the illusion of her extreme hourglass figure. In order to compete in the unladylike game of an eating competition—indeed, in order to compete in the presumptively male arena, such trappings of femininity must come off. She could take off her corset and still remain feminine, however, because she so clearly embodied the contemporary ideals of an outsized femininity. A less conventionally feminine woman would be viewed in a grotesque light for competing in an eating contest with her corset off. Russell's flamboyant performance of excess, however, merely contributed to her legend because her conventional beauty outshone her excessive appetite. The story would figure very differently when she got older because the ideal of female beauty had changed so drastically.

The modern reader, who inherits a very different ideal of female beauty in which the body and appetite must be contained, finds Lillian Russell an anomaly insofar as she flaunted her excessive body and appetite with none of the seeming guilt that would later surround such abundance. Yet, it is not as if women of her day could not be suspect in their excess. Indeed, Lillian's excess could have been problematic if she had been marked as working-class or ethnic. Her middle-class roots in all-American Iowa, success in New York, which brought her financial prosperity, and Anglo looks all defied the common stereotype of the voluptuous woman as coming from working-class and/or "ethnic" roots. Because of this, there was less of a stigma attached to her size and appetite, which could be viewed as symbols of success in an era when many wealthy men had large bellies and jewels encrusting their lapels, watches, and canes. Furthermore, Banner notes that Lillian Russell helped keep the plump woman on stage in the spotlight even after most Americans had turned from this ideal to a slimmer one, because her "reputation for gentility obscured the connection of voluptuousness with sensuality."¹⁹ Even in the era when bigger bodies were considered healthy, the larger female body, with its visible curves, still carried a semblance of sensuality that threatened the middle and upper classes. Women of these classes were not supposed to be sexual beings, but rather moral and pure domestic nurturers, who kept their daughters proper and their husbands and sons in check.

Russell's association with high fashion, wealth, and opera—light, comedic opera, but a form of opera nonetheless—ensured that she would be viewed as respectable, despite her association with the theater world and her revol-

ing cast of husbands. Modern negative stereotypes, which associate fatness with ugliness and undesirability, do not apply to Lillian, who oozed feminine sexuality and had male suitors and flower arrangements awaiting her after each performance. Relatedly, she was not viewed as lazy, unclean, or uncouth—eating contests aside. Her desirability was never questioned. The following review is slightly more outlandish than some, but consistent with others written about her in her first two decades on stage: “If Lillian Russell does not cease to take on new phases of beauty every month or so, there will be no reason why the flowers of spring should bloom. . . . In *The Grand Duchess* she fills the eye like the splurge of roses, and amazes the ear with the abundance of melody equal to a virgin wood at a summer sunrise.”²⁰ The description makes Lillian larger-than-life with a sexuality that is nothing less than a life-force.

Images from her performance in *The Grand Duchess*, the same piece the Yale students sneaked in to view, show Lillian to cut quite a substantial figure (figure 6.2), and a very royal one at that. Her ability to take up space, bodily, through her extravagant costumes, and through her voice—she was known to reach eight high Cs each performance—created a very powerful image of femininity, and it was clear she affected female fans just as much as male. Her mother once noted that “Miss Russell’s popularity did not depend upon the young or old men of New York. She had as many admirers among women as men, and while she was ill last winter many of the baskets of fruit, flowers, and wine came from ladies—some of the finest ladies in the city.”²¹ Even as women viewed her as an icon of beauty—“you’re no Lillian Russell, yourself” was a popular retort in the decades during and after her reign—they also viewed her as a role model; if she could take off her corset, pull up to the table, and gorge with the men, perhaps they too could relish and display their appetites with as much gusto. In her unique life of freedom, earned by her success on stage, she set an example of the new liberties women were learning to take as the decades came closer to suffrage and new possibilities for the other half of the population.

Russell was known as a husband collector, who was usually found in the company of men, but she also had good female friends, such as vaudeville actress Marie Dressler, and was viewed fondly by one of the few female theater critics of her day, Amy Leslie of the Chicago *Daily News*. In her autobiography, Dressler said of Russell, “To know [her] was to love her. Hers was indeed the grand presence and she never failed to bring sunshine when she entered a room.”²² Leslie called Russell “an acknowledged comedienne of brilliant tact, charm and vivacity and delicious humor,” and in her final will, Russell left her lingerie collection to the also ample Leslie.²³ Known for being “saintly”



Figure 2 Lillian Russell in *The Grand Duchess*. Digital Image Collection of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

in her personal relationships, Russell would go the extra mile to help a fellow actress get a long deserved raise in salary, or to help keep a maid accused of stealing out of jail.²⁴ These small actions were connected to the larger picture for Russell; her mother was a dedicated feminist and in her later years Lillian took to the streets and the podium to demand rights for women. The American Beauty went as far as to say that when women got the vote, she would run for mayor of New York.²⁵ Not just eye candy for her audience members, Lillian Russell cared not only about her own success and personal freedoms but also about other women's as well. Historian Albert Auster goes so far as to say that Russell's success and image of glamorous femininity helped make feminism more appealing to men and women alike. As Russell put it, "the enjoyment of man's prerogative doesn't destroy a woman's womanliness."²⁶

Another "enjoyment of man's prerogative" that Russell helped make more acceptable for women was physical exercise. Into her thirties, Russell had continued to gain weight, and as the times began to change, the actresses

around her began to get younger and thinner. She responded by working hard to reduce her weight. There are minimal quotations by Russell discussing what she thought about her own body, but in 1892, at the age of 32, she “mournfully” told a *New York Times* reporter that she “would probably have to resume the ‘banting’ process,” a reducing-diet regime popularized by William Banting, an Englishman who advocated avoiding sweets and carbohydrates. The *Times* reporter observed, with what suggests disapproval, that she had grown “undeniably stout,” yet he also noted that she looked “exceedingly healthy” and her color was “unusually good.”²⁷ It is not clear from the article whether Russell was mournful about her weight gain, or merely the process of weight reduction. Also notable is the reporter’s thoughts that Russell’s weight gain did not undermine her healthy appearance. Such notions give credence to the idea that while a slender female body was coming more into vogue, there was not yet only one model of the normatively healthy body.

Aside from dieting and calisthenics, Russell turned to bicycle riding to shed pounds and keep up with the trend for exercise and the lither female ideal that was slowly starting to accompany this active lifestyle. Her favorite cycling partners were Diamond Jim Brady and Marie Dressler. Brady supplied her bike—gold plated, and supposedly encrusted with jewels that spelled her initials, but this tale too might be rather exaggerated.²⁸ The existence of these stories suggests as well that people still enjoyed admiring her body, whether she was exercising on her bicycle or performing on the stage. Lillian and Brady enjoyed riding bicycles, and even rode that most useless of leisure-items, the two-seater. Significantly, Russell continued to exercise in these ways even as the era of all things gaudy and outlandish was on its way out, replaced increasingly by a love of all that was “natural” and less conspicuous. Equally importantly, Russell was going to exercise in her flamboyant way, whether that was on a two-seater with Jim or on her own custom-accessorized bike. In her autobiography, Dressler recounts her and Lillian’s excursions:

Even in those far off days when curves were curves and no apologies to anybody, Lillian was afraid of getting fat. Bicycles were modish and she hit upon this new toy of the fashionables as a means of keeping us both trim. Every morning, rain or shine, we would climb on our wheels and bending low over our handlebars give an imitation of two plump girls going somewhere in a hurry.²⁹

Dressler’s recollections, written in 1924, are interesting because the current historiography suggests that by the 1890s, when bicycling took off and Lil-

lian's weight continued to climb, there already was a new female ideal coming into mode, one flaunting fewer curves and causing women with more to take action against them. Dressler recalls the era fondly as one when no one cared, and Russell was viewed as taking unneeded measures. She also refers to Russell not *as* fat but afraid of *becoming* so, which is noteworthy because by the standards of the 1920s, the Lillian Russell of the 1890s would have been considered fat. In the act of bicycling together in public, did the two large women take part in new, fashionable freedoms for women in the public sphere, or were they signifying that they realized their bodies had passed the limits of acceptable, and were they just making visible their attempts at regulating their margins? That this question cannot be answered definitively underscores the degree to which the ideal for the female body was in flux in these years.

By the turn of the century, print culture was filled with advertisements that focused on photographic images of female models, and drawings of the tall, brunette, athletic, Gibson girl were found in magazines from the 1890s until World War I.³⁰ The voluptuous model of feminine beauty had been attacked from not one but two fronts: the sleek, slimmer, modern, urbane, glamorous ideal of stage and advertising, and the healthy, athletic, "natural" outdoorsy image of feminine beauty. Both new looks served to make the voluptuous woman look positively out of fashion by the 1910s, when the even thinner flapper look began to take hold. Indeed, by 1912, when a young budding writer named Miriam Young visited her mother backstage at the theater where she was performing, she saw a large portrait of a woman hanging on the wall and asked her, "Who is that fat lady?" to which her mother replied in shock, "Why baby, that's Lillian Russell."³¹

During this same time, a now middle-aged Russell began to pen a popular beauty advice column for the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. From 1911 to 1914, "Lillian Russell's Beauty Secrets" was a regular column in which Russell dispensed advice to readers and held forth on various topics related to health, fashion, and the body. Long gone was the 1890s Lillian, the willing contestant of outrageous eating contests: here she urged readers to eat but two meals a day and roll around on the floor to quickly shed pounds. In a column from 1907, she exults over her recent seventeen-pound weight loss: "I have discovered a new way of preserving my figure. . . . It is just over from Egypt, and is the quickest method of discarding unnecessary flesh I have ever tried, and I have tried everything that's going." She then describes her morning routine of donning a sweater and vigorously rolling around on the floor, before dispensing these final words: "To all fat women who want to be thin I say: Roll, roll, roll!"³²

Russell's columns called for women to work to attain a healthy, natural body through abstaining from sweets and greasy food, and taking lots of exercise. She generally served as a purveyor of normative, slender feminine body ideals, but occasionally rebelled against these norms as well. While speaking of her own struggles with weight loss, she also disdained trendy new fashions that she thought did not flatter her shape. In one column, she resisted the popular empire-cut dress, declaring, "I am too small chested, my hips are too large, I would look like a barrel, a tub; I shall not wear the empire effects!" In the same article she also admitted that while she did not want to look like a tub, she realistically knew, thanks to genetics, that she could not look like "a beanpole" even if she wanted to.³³ In this column, Russell protests the unrealistic new fashions that flatter only tall, willowy bodies, and not shorter, pear-shaped bodies such as hers. In contrast, by 1914 in one of her later columns, Russell advises women to change their bodies to fit the latest fashions. While discussing a new bouffant dress, she points out that this new style "necessitates thinner figures. Some stout women imagine that because the flounces are accentuated their large hips will be disguised by wearing the bouffant effects. But it is not true; fluffy hip effects are only pretty when hanging from slim waists and with an indication beneath of slim limbs." She ends her column with an admonishment: "Remember: You must keep down the flesh to keep up with the times."³⁴

These examples demonstrate that the twentieth-century Lillian Russell struggled along with many other women to change her body to meet the new thinner ideal. Her column was immensely popular because it allowed female readers to communicate directly with a female celebrity known both for her beauty as well as for her own fight against fat; her fans' struggles were also hers. While Russell's plumpness was admired in the 1890s when she was at the height of her popularity, by the early twentieth century, the changing ideals and her own middle age were both factors that led to her decreased popularity as a performer. As a beauty columnist, she could expound on all she had learned during her years in the spotlight and maintain another type of popularity, all the while not being judged for her image, as she hid behind the pen. As the Jazz Age and the androgynous but sexualized flapper were poised to enter center stage, she took on the position of beauty authority, dispensing advice on how the next generation could distance themselves from the very voluptuous image that was once emblematic of Lillian Russell.

Lillian Russell's career provides us with the opportunity to consider the relationship between changing ideals for women's bodies and broad cultural changes. Notably, the fashion for women's lither bodies emerged at precisely the time women were increasing their power in the public sphere. In this

light, we can see the shifts in ideal women's bodies to be related to larger events in women's changing rights in America. Fashion historian Jill Fields connects the rise of the flapper's boyish look to the tempering of women's social and cultural power.³⁵ If smaller women tend to be considered the ideal in eras when women are gaining more power in the public sphere, what does this say about attitudes toward the larger female body in these same eras? Relegated to the maternal role, now seen as old-fashioned in relationship to the young, single, and thin fashionable body that dominates in the public sphere, the fat female body is also deemed by the dominant culture to be too excessive to be desirable. Perhaps, the fat female body becomes the source of anxiety in such periods because in its excessiveness it comes to embody the refusal to be contained and controlled. In her size, the fat woman suggests the idea of a woman who takes up more space than men, thereby threatening to emasculate them.

The large women who performed before and after the turn of the twentieth century had to come to terms with the fact that their own bodies were coded first as acceptable in their excess and then later as unacceptable in that very same excess, and all of this in their own lifetimes. Such changes make it difficult to know how to respond to a figure like Lillian Russell. Today's proud fat girl could hold her 1890 "American Beauty" self up as an icon because she weighed nearly 200 pounds and made a show of her outsized body and appetite. Yet this appears to conflict with the Russell who tried to lose weight, and the Russell who later in life even wrote a column doling out diet and exercise tips. Russell is a solid example of how the meanings of the female body are never static, nor are women's relationship to their own bodies.

Lillian Russell and Anna Nicole Smith were both voluptuous blondes whose bodies changed over time, as do those of most women during their lifetimes. Each woman straddled the turn of a different century, but Russell was admired widely, whereas Smith was a spectacle audiences enjoyed ogling and judging. For all their differences, I hold them both up as examples of how American culture's relationship to "over the top" femininity has changed during the past century. Of course, the question of what defines their "excess" lies at the heart of the matter—who sets the standard for how big is too big, whether it is hips, hair, attitude, appetite, or vocal decibels? In the 1890s American prosperity was still in bloom, so the country claimed Russell's bounty proudly. In our era, when one can never be too rich or too thin, Anna Nicole Smith's excessive appetites were viewed negatively. A woman who eats too much, desires too much, consumes too much in a way that makes that consumption visible on her body must learn to curb her cravings to be a respectable lady. She can consume, to be sure, but her consumption

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must always be used to discipline herself, as when Anna Nicole spent money on the vitamin B shots for weight loss that were, in part, the cause of her death.

The example of Lillian Russell offers us a historical reminder of where we have been, and in this it offers a powerful contrast with where we have arrived. I have discussed at length the persona of Lillian Russell to demonstrate that the current feminine standard has not always been in vogue. In centuries past, larger women were the “American beauties” of their day, and this knowledge, in turn, helps us realize that our own ideals will someday, too, be out of mode. Because there is no going back to an age of less technology, of less convenience, fat might never be friend again – and always foe to many. Lillian Russell sets forth an example of the complicated relationship between a woman and her body during the last American era when fat was not viewed in a completely negative light. Through learning about the past and how cultural values and ideologies change, it is my hope that we can begin to destabilize the “naturalness” of the current moment.

NOTES

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15. Morell, *Lillian Russell*, 101.
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26. “Lillian Russell Utters Words of Great Wisdom,” *New York Review*, June 4, 1911.
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33. “Lillian Russell Won't Be a Tub and She Couldn't Be a Beanpole,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 20, 1907, p. F6.
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