Stoutwear and the Discourses of Disorder
Constructing the Fat, Female Body in American Fashion in the Age of Standardization, 1915-1930

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Abstract
This dissertation examines how fashion media discourses created the conditions through which the fat, female body was both known and constructed within the context of the early large-size garment industry in the United States, or what between the years 1915 and 1930 was known as “stoutwear.”

Drawing on a wide array of media sources, including women’s and fashion magazines, trade journals, catalogs and style guides, and employing Michel Foucault’s archaeological method, the dissertation examines the productive nature of fashion discourse in the construction and constitution of the fleshy body, or how the discourses of stoutwear brought order to the disorderly, fat, female body. While previous studies of the relationship between dress and the body have theorized how the body is fashioned, this dissertation builds upon these works through its focus on how discourse manifests fashion practices and thereby gives shape to the cultural body.

The first chapter provides an overview of this premise, reviews the small body of extant literature on plus-size fashion and defines key terms used in the dissertation. As an extension of the introduction, the second chapter outlines key methodological and theoretical concerns, including the practice of studying a history of fashion “without fashion,” discourse analysis, visual analysis, technologies of the body, fashion media discourse and dress as a situated bodily practice. The ensuing analytical chapters are organized so that they proceed from “macro” practices (i.e. the construction and constitution of the industry, stoutwear design and advertising strategies) to the “micro” (i.e. embodied dress practices) so as to evidence how the discourses of stoutwear touched every level of fashion practice. Chapter three provides a broad historical foundation for the study by examining the origins of the stoutwear industry and identifying the key actors and firms who were instrumental in consecrating the idea of a stoutwear industry separate from, but adjacent to, the burgeoning ready-to-wear industry. Thereafter, chapter four explores the design discourses of stoutwear and how these intersected with the aesthetics of modernism and the nascent technology of standardized sizing. Chapter five examines the practice of selling stoutwear, and specifically how stoutwear was advertised within the women’s and fashion press and how it was sold within department stores. Key issues in this chapter include the representational conventions of depicting fat women in the fashion media and the segregation of stoutwear into separate departments. Chapter six considers what it meant to look stout and how the stigma of stoutness was constructed within mainstream fashion media and ancillary to the slender ideal. Finally, chapter seven looks closely at style guides as a site of self-fashioning discourses.

The dissertation concludes that stoutwear discourses were underpinned by a “slenderness imperative,” or a disciplinary regime that manifested a “stout ideal,” or a stout body that visibly aspired toward slenderness. In its entirety, this interdisciplinary dissertation illuminates a history that has been almost entirely neglected within conventional histories of fashion at large, and within American fashion specifically, while also contributing to the theoretical literature on the relationship between fashion, dress and the body.

Keywords: American history, consumer culture, cultural history, design, discourse, dress history, fashion, fashion history, fashion magazines, fat, identity, Michel Foucault, modernism, modernity, plus-size, self-fashioning, technology, the body, women.

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Lauren Downing Peters
To my brother, Lance
(1972–2002)
Editor's Introduction


The Centre, from the very start a research institute at the Humanities Faculty of Stockholm University, has a Ph.D. programme and an international MA programme. The MA programme was launched in 2006, and the first Ph.D. students were admitted in 2008. The sheer demand for undergraduate courses in fashion studies prompted the Centre to offer an introductory course in 2006 and 2007, which in 2008 was expanded into a one-year introductory programme with a BA dissertation module. Each year some 160 students are admitted to the undergraduate level as well as the BA and MA programmes, following a highly competitive process.

The Centre for Fashion Studies has established fashion studies as an interdisciplinary field in Scandinavia, recruiting faculty members, teaching staff, and visiting researchers from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, including economic history, film studies, literature, art history and business and economics. The Centre has equally sought to develop a distinct intellectual profile by combining theoretical perspectives with object based studies pursuing a close interest in critical textual analysis, fabrics and visual representations of garments. In this regard, the Centre is almost unique in being university based with a broad range of academic expertise.

Since its inception, the Centre for Fashion Studies has been home to many different fields of research and teaching in both the humanities and the social sciences, attracting scholars and students from across the world. Its community outreach is also exemplary, while besides its agreements with universities and fashion schools abroad, the Centre has participated in several collaborative projects with museums both in Sweden and abroad.

Professor Klas Nyberg
The Centre for Fashion Studies, Stockholm University
Acknowledgments

Over the course of my PhD work, more than one colleague told me that writing a dissertation is akin to running a marathon. I’m not a runner (thanks for the crappy knees, dad!), so I can’t speak to the truth of that analogy, but I can confirm that over the course of five years, I have experienced the proverbial “writer’s high” on occasion, but also moments of confusion, desperation, literal pain, exhaustion and heartbreak, and I suppose that this is what running 26.2 miles must feel like, too. When I was feeling my most inspired, I was propelled by my own inertia, but when I was at my worst, I was grateful to have the support of cherished friends, family and colleagues, without whom I could have never crossed the finish line. In fact, I might maybe argue that writing a dissertation is harder than running a marathon, but I digress…

First and foremost, I want to thank my exceptional team of supervisors for guiding me through this process. My main supervisor, Klas Nyberg, was a paragon of kindness and patience who never hesitated to go to bat for me when the going got tough. (He also filled out innumerable forms, year after year, that permitted me to stay in the country legally, which was cool!) I am also thankful for the wisdom and support of my international team of co-supervisors, Caroline Evans, Hazel Clark and Andrea Kollnitz. My meetings with Caroline were always inspiring and endlessly helpful. Even if I wasn’t entirely sure of what I was doing or where I was going, I could always rely on Caroline for a fascinating text to read or to help me “just get on with it,” as she would say. I think that I am a more self-assured scholar because of her. I am also immensely thankful to Hazel for coming along with me to Stockholm after dutifully serving as my main supervisor during my MA at Parsons. She was always there to offer context and perspective beyond the narrow historical remit of my current research, and provided me innumerable opportunities to grow as a person and as a scholar. I greatly look forward to the next phase of our relationship. And finally, I am immensely thankful to Andrea. As the only local co-supervisor, Andrea was there for me in a capacity that the others simply couldn’t be. Occupying an office only two doors down from my own, I always knew that I could go and rattle on Andrea’s door—tearful or not—and she would be there to console and counsel. It has been wonderful getting to know you, Andrea, and I am so grateful for your advice as well as for your friendship in a country that, at times, felt quite lonely and cold. Last but not least, I have to give my thanks to my very first supervision team: Louise Wallenberg and Paula von Wachenfeldt. Without their gentle guidance in those early days, I might never have discovered stoutwear.

In addition to my supervisors, I am thankful to a wonderful roster of seminar opponents who over the years have challenged me and pushed my research forward. Thank you to Lisa Ehlin, Philip Warkander, Marco Pecorari and Patrik Steorn for slogging through chapters, partial chapters and less-than partial chapters and for seeing the potential in my work when it was still in a nascent form. Beyond the Centre, I owe a thank you to Beverly Skeggs who gave me helpful feedback at a research seminar at Helsinki University, Joanne Entwistle who reviewed a chapter draft via Skype at a graduate conference in Kolding, Denmark and Ellen Sampson, Alexis Romano and Nathaniel Dafydd Beard of the Fashion Research Network who hosted a reading group around my research. I am also immensely grateful to my final seminar opponent, Christopher Breward, for his kindness, support and for thinking beyond the dissertation, and to my final seminar committee, Anja Hirdman and Kristina Widestedt for their constructive, no-nonsense feedback, which was tough to stomach, but which made my writing so much stronger. I also owe my thanks to a small handful of institutions for opening up their doors to me for what little archival research I could manage, not least of which being the Museum of the City of New York and the Robert and Penny Fox Historic Costume Collection at Drexel University.

Without their gentle guidance in those early days, I might never have discovered stoutwear.

Within the Centre for Fashion Studies, I want to thank my all of my PhD colleagues and the support staff who over the years provided me a welcome respite from my writing (and, at times, from myself). Specifically, I want to thank Hanne Eide for all of the “ett öls,” laughs, seminars and for always supporting my research. Some of my most cherished moments at the
Centre involved sitting in the lunch room with Hanne and our friend and colleague Johann Deurell as we interpreted the symbolism of the magnificent Quetzal bird. I am also grateful for the support and friendship of Nina Wennberg who moved on to bigger and better things far too soon. Finally, although Marco Pecorari was only present for the first couple of years of my PhD, in him I found one of my best friends as well as one of my most cherished scholarly collaborators. We’re both stubborn as mules, but without Marco’s compassion and unwavering belief in me and in the value of my research, this dissertation might never have happened. Thank you, Marco, for your friendship and for always pushing me to think boldly.

Since I did such a terrible job assimilating into Swedish society, I am forever grateful for my expat community of one and best friend: Predrag “Pookie” Stefanovic. I will always remember our trashiest moments, such as the party cruise on which we were the oldest, coolest and most notorious passengers, as well as our classiest moments, such as when we spent a month’s rent at Fäviken and had the “privilege” of seeing freshly-severed moose heads. However, our friendship and climbing obsession could have never blossomed without the urging of my friend and teammate, Andi Strauss, who re-introduced us. Before that, Predrag was just some guy at a Second Avenue bar who I didn’t recall ever meeting. Still sorry about that!

Given that I kept one foot firmly planted in New York over the past five years, it is not an exaggeration to say that I could have never made it to the end without the support of my extended network of friends and colleagues. First, I want to thank my digital girl gang, The Pink Ladies, for keeping me up at all hours of the night with your beauty tips, feminist wisdom, negotiating skills and messages of support. I’m looking forward to rekindling our IRL friendship. (And Brooke, I still need my keychain!) I also owe a very special thank you to both Kate Block and Juliana Sullam for making the journey to come and visit me here in Sweden. I am so lucky to have women in my life who will cross an ocean to come and hang. I also want to thank all of my FSJ buds for being wonderful people, brilliant thinkers and tireless editors. I owe special thanks to Laura Snelgrove for making my life so enjoyable, and to Rachel Kinnard for enduring my mild magpie tendencies. I also want to thank my new friends at The Fashion Studies Alliance for bringing me into the fold and for creating a scholarly community to come home to. Among them, I owe special thanks to Laura Snelgrove for being such an inspiring friend, person, scholar and collaborator over the years (and, more recently, a truly top-notch proofreader!) and to Rachel Kinnard for making my dissertation cover sparkle. I also want to give a very sincere shout out to my new friends at The Fashion Studies Alliance for bringing me into the fold and for creating a scholarly community to come home to. Among them, I owe special thanks to Laura Snelgrove for being such an inspiring friend, person, scholar and collaborator over the years (and, more recently, a truly top-notch proofreader!) and to Rachel Kinnard for making my dissertation cover sparkle. I also want to thank my new academic home, the fashion studies department at Columbia College Chicago, for believing in my capacities as a teacher and as a scholar. I truly, truly feel like I won the lottery. See you in August!
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Chapter One — Introduction

In the days when the “old fat woman” held her inglorious place, garments for her were a mere afterthought, and as a result she was seldom well dressed. They were made by grading up from the smaller sizes based on the standard 36. Any storekeeper might find something that would with a little letting out here and there fit her—well, not exactly fit, but that wouldn’t look so badly. But no garment was made for her, as a class, unless we include maternity gowns. Hence, she was the black swan in Dame Fashion’s brood and naturally at enmity with “the perfect 36.”

That was the old days. Now, the woman above the average no longer drifts around the muddy edge of fashion. She has a standard of her own.

(Charles May, Printers’ Ink, September 16, 1920) 1

In the summer of 1915, Women’s Wear2 predicted across a number of issues that so-called “stoutwear” would emerge as one of the most important and lucrative categories of ready-made clothing in the United States.3 Speaking with Printers’ Ink five years later in September 1920, Charles May—the sales manager of a successful manufacturing cooperative known as the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers—validated the trade journal’s predictions by reflecting on the history, success and future trajectories of this niche industry. Before the emergence of a specialized garment sector for women whose bodies exceeded the spectrum of standard sizes, May describes how the “old fat woman” struggled to find garments that both fit and were in keeping with prevailing styles. In just five short years, however, an industry that had historically neglected the woman of larger proportions had brought her in from fashion’s “muddy edges”—an effort that, by-and-large, was led by manufacturers. By 1920, the term “stoutwear” had embedded itself within fashion’s discourses in the United States and larger women of even modest means, suddenly more visible within the spaces and places of fashion, could walk into most department stores around the country and buy any number of garments—from skirts, to shirtwaists, to suiting—off-the-rack. Comprising a reported thirty-seven percent of the female population of the United States, a new category of “stout” women—whom May hyperbolically described in the Printers’ Ink interview as a “new race,” born from economic prosperity, “with a large mentality reflecting [their] physical appearance”—were believed to be a powerful and theretofore underserved consumer group.4 In other words, stoutwear was simply good business.

2 The publication would change its name to Women’s Wear Daily in 1927, beginning with its January 3, 1927 edition.
3 See, for example, “How Many Fat Women in Your Town?” Women’s Wear (June 11, 1915), 3; “Ready for the Big Ones: A New Angle on the Fat Woman’s Wants,” Women’s Wear (July 2, 1915), 3; “Winning the Trade of Stout Women,” Women’s Wear (September 10, 1915), 5, 8.
4 For further discussion about the proportion of the female, fashion-consuming public that was estimated to be stout, see section 3.2.1. For further discussion, see Kerry Seagrave, Obesity in America, 1850-1939: A History of Social Attitudes and Treatment (Jefferson: McFarland, 2008), 163.
Flash forward a century, and the discourse around the large-size women's dress business remains much the same. As of late-2017, for instance, the *Wall Street Journal* valued the “plus-size” garment sector—the contemporary incarnation of stoutwear—as being worth approximately $21 billion annually in the United States alone. Although the enormous market potential for plus-size fashion has not entirely been realized due to the fact that fat stigma pervades the industry; this optimism is due in no small measure to the newest demographic statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that estimate that nearly thirty-eight percent of adult Americans classify as “obese” and that “obesity” disproportionately affects women. When the percentage of merely “overweight” individuals is accounted for, the percentage of Americans whose weight is deemed above average balloons to nearly seventy-one percent. Lending further credence to these statistics, a recent study emerging from the University of Washington found that the average woman in the United States today wears a US size sixteen, placing her solidly past the threshold between standard- and plus-sizes. In light of these statistics, *Women's Wear*—the same publication that heralded the emergence of the large-size garment sector in 1915—declared in 2016 that, with an eager and underserved population lying in wait, plus-size could actually be the solution to the apparel industry's well-documented stagnation over the past decade. However, if market analysts, critics and retailers today are still speaking about the potential of the large-size women's dress sector over a century after its emergence, it must be asked, what happened during the intervening years and, perhaps more importantly, what happened to stoutwear?

An answer to this question may be found in a close reading of Charles May’s interview with *Printers' Ink*, which reveals how, even from its earliest days, the large-size garment industry was besieged by prejudice. While at once singing the praises of the stout woman’s patronage, May also describes how he and other stoutwear manufacturers had to deal with reticent advertisers, haughty sales associates and speculative retailers who “appealed to the stout woman

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9 In the United States, the threshold between standard- and plus-sizes is a size fourteen, which is equivalent to a UK eighteen, an Italian fifty and a French forty-six. For further discussion, see Deborah Christel and Susan C. Dunn, “Average American Women’s Clothing Size: Comparing National Health and Nutritional Examination Surveys (1988-2010) to ASTM International Misses & Women’s Plus Size Clothing,” *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education* 10, no. 1 (2017): 129-136.

in a negative sense” and who generally regarded her as more trouble than she was worth.\textsuperscript{11}

Indeed, May and other stoutwear manufacturers, while overseeing a profitable line of business, were actually in the minority in the fashion industry in their attempts to court the favor of the stout woman. A far more common opinion of the stout woman was summarized by the French couturier Paul Poiret who, in a 1923 edition of the Philadelphia Inquirer was reported as having said that fashion designers “do not pay much attention to fat women [because] they are the infirm among the fashionable.... Their case is not for the dress designer—it is for the physician” (Fig. 1). Elsewhere in the article, Poiret-appointed by the Inquirer as “the high priest of feminine fashion in France”—said that stoutwear manufacturers had deluded women into believing that “a line here and a color there” could effect a slender and stylish appearance when in reality, “the fat woman can look neat and pleasing, but stylish and beautiful? Never!”\textsuperscript{12}

The stigma against fat women that Poiret channels through his comments was not, however, unique to the fashion industry.\textsuperscript{11} Rather, in a nation that, to borrow Amy Erdman

\textsuperscript{11} McKenna, “Makers of ‘Stouts’ Band Together,” 161.

\textsuperscript{12} “Fat Women Hopeless, Says Poiret—Is He Right?,” Philadelphia Inquirer (January 14, 1923), 90. This article was concurrently published in the Ogden Standard-Examiner (January 14, 1923), 2.

\textsuperscript{11} The term “fat” is not used here in a pejorative sense. Rather, my use is in keeping with the conventions put forth by scholars within the field of fat studies—a point which will be discussed at greater length in section 1.4 in this chapter.
Farrell’s phrasing, as historically and “extraordinarily ‘fat aware’”14 as the United States, fat stigma is something of a cherished, if taken-for-granted, tradition. Indeed, while much has been written about “epidemic obesity” and the vast toll it takes on the health of individual Americans as well as on the nation’s collective economy, comparatively less attention has been paid the discourses surrounding fatness as a cultural and historical phenomenon, or to the media and mechanisms through which fat stigma has been constructed.

In spite of this lack of attention, however, many scholars have identified (if obliquely) the fashion industry—through its elevation of unrealistic and damaging beauty ideals—as an implicit contributor to the bias against fat people.15 Less well understood, however, is how the fashion industry has been an explicit contributor to fat stigma through its continued and willful neglect of the sartorial needs and wants of women of non-standard weights and bodily proportions. Indeed, even as it has come to be accepted within the popular imaginary that fashion has a problem with fat bodies, there has yet to be a sustained, historical, scholarly examination of how the fashion industry foments fat stigma, nor to how it materially and discursively fashions the flesh by making the fat, female body, to borrow the words of Joanne Entwistle, “recognizable and meaningful to a culture.”16

1.1 Aims and Research Questions

With the above discussion serving as a fruitful point of entry for the manner in which it casts light on how the fashion industry has both been shaped by and has contributed to fat stigma over the past one hundred years, in the ensuing chapters, my principal aim will be to expose how fashion media discourses created the conditions through which the fat, female body was both known and constructed within the context of the early large-size garment industry in the United States. Focusing intensely on the fifteen-year period between 1915 and 1930, and specifically on what was then known as the “stoutwear” industry, my study is chronologically bookended on one end by Women’s Wear’s aforementioned proclamation in 1915 that stoutwear would go on to be one of the most economically robust sectors of the burgeoning ready-to-wear industry in the United States, and, on the other, by its resignation in 1930 that, due to new fads in dieting, exercise and fashion, “there are no more stout women”—an observation that unceremoniously


signaled the tapering off of one of the most optimistic, prosperous and innovative periods in the history of the American large-size women's garment industry. In spite of the richness of this history, and perhaps due to the fact that its peak of production was so brief, however, stoutwear has largely been forgotten in the annals of fashion history—an absence which, by turn, has led to the omission of the fat, female body from these histories, too. At the same time, however, it should be noted that this brief, fifteen-year timeframe is somewhat (and necessarily) artificial. Certainly, before Women's Wear's discussion of the future of the stoutwear industry in 1915 and even after the trade journal declared its demise in 1930, there were garments being produced for women of larger sizes on a mass scale. This dissertation, however, is explicitly preoccupied with stoutwear and the unique historical conditions under which it emerged in the longer history of the large-size women's garment trade in the United States, as well as those which spelled its demise.

In addition to tracing the history of the stoutwear industry, however, this dissertation also seeks to reconstruct a cultural history of the stout body through the particular lens of fashion. As Peter Burke has acknowledged, histories of the body represent a new branch of cultural history, one that has been in ascendance since the 1980s, and which has its roots in histories of medicine. According to Roy Porter, some of the best histories of the body have “engaged in discourse analysis and textual deconstruction, teasing out shifting ‘representations’ of the embodied self.” Thus, in considering the history of the stout body, this dissertation examines how the stout body was at once affected by and created within the fashion industry's webs of discourse about stoutwear. By considering the interrelations between the emergence of stoutwear in concert with the construction and constitution of the stout body, this dissertation also builds upon and redresses Ellen Leopold's field-specific insight that studies of fashion have too often fallen on either side of a dichotomy that, on the one hand, privileges straightforward histories of fashion and, on the other, focuses on the psychology of dress and on patterns of consumption. In reality, however, Leopold argues that fashion is a “hybrid subject” that incorporates the duality of fashion as a “cultural phenomenon, and as an aspect of manufacturing.” Aiming to bridge this methodological and ontological divide, this dissertation is highly cognizant of the “hybridity” of fashion as idea, as manufactured object and as a system that always implicates bodies, and thereby seeks to redraw the interconnections between production, mediation and consumption.

Drawing upon Michel Foucault's definition of discourses—or what he described in his 1969 text, The Archaeology of Knowledge, as “practices that systematically form the objects of which
they speak”—both “stoutwear” and “stout” are here situated as discourses, and specifically, “discursive formations,” that not only provided a way to speak about large-size dress and the fat, female body, respectively, in a particular place (the United States) at a particular point in time (the early twentieth century), but were actually constitutive or constructive of the so-called “stout” body. Although this will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter, here it is worth providing Foucault’s definition of discursive formations, which he describes as “regularities” that exist across and between a number of dispersed texts and statements, and which provide the “rules of formation” of an object of discourse. In adopting a Foucauldian approach, I therefore align myself with other scholars who reject the biological determinism of fatness and instead frame it as a product of culture, always situated within a historical milieu. As such, throughout this dissertation, “stoutness” is therefore explicitly framed as an early twentieth century construct.

With my study emerging from the analysis of extant fashion magazines, professional trade journals, the fashion section of national and regional newspapers and style guides, or what may broadly be defined as fashion media, my interests lie in how discourse is productive, and more specifically, how the body is constructed in and through “fashion media discourses”—a term coined by the sociologist and fashion scholar Agnès Rocamora. This dissertation therefore considers how the stout body was discussed and visualized within the historical fashion media and, by turn, how these discourses were formed and informed by overlapping discourses and fields of scientific and cultural production. However, it also examines how these discourses manifested within and shaped historical fashion practices. From the design and production of stoutwear, to the manner in which the stout body was mediated within fashion advertising, photography and magazine editorials, to how salespeople interacted with stout women on sales floors, this dissertation illustrates how the discourses of stoutwear touched (and thereby shaped) every level and every facet of the industry, from production to mediation to consumption. It is through this process, I argue, that the stout body was effectively disciplined and thereby created.

While scholars and historians across the humanities have explored how fat bodies have been shaped throughout history by shifting sociocultural mores, by locating my analysis specifically within the realm of fashion studies, I aim to advance the notion that dress (as object) and fashion (as idea) are the principal means through which bodies are “made” within culture. Indeed, as Entwistle has observed, “dress is a basic fact of social life” and those bodies that “do

23 Ibid., 38.
24 Among them, Elena Levy-Navarro criticizes the perspective that fatness is a “transhistorical, natural category,” and argues that fat “has a history and thus is in need of more cultural and historical analysis.” See Elena Levy-Navarro, “Introduction: Changing Conceptions of the Fat Body in Western History” in *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture*, ed. Elena Levy-Navarro (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), 2-3.
26 A key example of this is Peter Stearns’ *Fat History* in which the cultural historian traces the shifting representations, definitions and receptions of fatness between France and the United States between the 1890s and 1990s. For a summary of his approach, see Stearns, *Fat History*, xvii-xxiv.
not conform, bodies which flout the conventions of their culture…are subversive of the most basic social codes and risk exclusion, scorn or ridicule.” 27 Dress is therefore both a perfunctory but highly limiting medium for the construction and constitution of the body. As Entwistle writes, dress is “the outcome of practice” (emphasis in original) which are shaped by “particular norms, expectations about the body and about what constitutes a ‘dressed’ body.” 28 Within this context, I argue, stoutwear becomes a prism through which we may come to know the stout body, as well as a disciplinary mechanism that evidences the ways that power is imprinted on the body.

Driving my analysis is one central research question: How was the stout body discursively constructed by and within the fashion media between the years 1915 and 1930? This primary research question was supported by two separate but interrelated sub-research questions: How did these discourses manifest in specific fashion practices to construct or “fashion” the fleshy stout body? And how were these discourses themselves formed and informed by a historical context that witnessed rapid and dramatic technological and cultural upheavals?

In addition to answering these central research questions, this dissertation also seeks to make a methodological and theoretical contribution to the field of fashion studies. By employing Foucault's archaeological method—one which I argue has been underutilized within the field of fashion studies and which will be delimited in the following chapter—and his theories of power, discourse and the body, this dissertation provides a template for how marginalized and forgotten histories of the body and of fashion may be both located and written in lieu of a material record of surviving dress. Drawing further and specifically upon Rocamora’s notion of fashion media discourse and Entwistle’s tripartite theoretical framework of dress as a situated bodily practice—both of which are indebted to the thinking of Foucault—my work underscores specific modes by which discourse is productive, while also activating the concepts of fashioning and self-fashioning as useful theoretical tools for understanding how bodies are constructed through dress and through discourse.

While this is just a brief overview of my theoretical and methodological approach—which is discussed at greater length and in much greater detail in the following chapter—broadly speaking, this dissertation aligns itself with and aims to contribute to a body of research that examines the relationships between dress and the body, and specifically to those works that have examined how dress makes bodies, to borrow Entwistle’s phrasing again, “recognizable and meaningful to a culture.” 29 More specifically, however, this dissertation aims to fill a notable gap within the fashion studies literature by elevating large-size dress and the fat, female body as topics that are worthy of serious scholarly inquiry. Indeed, as Levy-Navarro has rightly observed, fat and the fat body are highly productive sites for examining everything from power, to politics, to modernity itself. 30 In spite of the great potential of this area of study, however, it remains one that is woefully under-researched, with notable exceptions. In the following subsection, I will

27 Entwistle, Fashioned Body, 6-7.
28 Ibid., 11.
29 Ibid., 8.
therefore provide an overview of the small body of previous research that has examined the relationship between dress and the fat, female body and thereafter situate this dissertation amongst these works and within a spatiotemporal context. Thereafter, I will define some key terms that will be instrumental for the rest of the dissertation. In the final section of this introduction, I will explain the research design and the outline chapters to follow. The following chapter, “Chapter Two—A Fashion History Without Fashion: Theory, Method & Materials,” is a continuation of this introduction, which outlines my theoretical and methodological frameworks and presents my empirical research materials.

1.2. The Other F-Word: Previous Research

As mentioned previously, the history of large-size dress has gone largely overlooked within conventional histories of fashion, but also within the field of fashion studies at large—or a body of scholarship encompassing sociological, practice-based and ethnographic works, among others. This lack is the consequence of at least two separate but related biases. First and foremost, given that stoutwear (and later, plus-size fashion) was a sub-sector or sub-field of ready-to-wear, it does not fit within the old frameworks for telling the history of fashion through a neat lineage of noteworthy designers,31 or as a succession of fashionable silhouettes and styles.32 Indeed, stoutwear aside, histories of non-Western and everyday dress—or categories of dress that lie outside the remit of haute couture or designer-led high fashion—continue to be notable blind spots within the discipline of dress history and the field of fashion studies.33

Second, this neglect is symptomatic of the fact that fat and fatness remain under-examined topics of study within academia at large, which is itself the product of a number of complex and somewhat evasive factors. Indeed, as Levy-Navarro has speculated,

Some might consider fat a marginal identity category that is reclaimed by only a few on the radical fringe. Having no interest group worthy of note, fat is not a category worthy of critique, such academics might assume. Others might mistakenly consider fat a natural category that is merely descriptive and thus not to be considered with a critical eye.

33 See Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark, Fashion and Everyday Life: London and New York (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 19. It should be noted, however, that this historical lack is more than compensated for by the rich body of fashion studies literature emerging from the disciplines sociology, ethnography and anthropology that has examined everyday dress practices. These studies, however, are mostly embedded in contemporary contexts and therefore histories of everyday dress are still lacking. Some notable exceptions (many of which focus on the British context) include Diana de Marley, Working Dress: A History of Occupational Costume (London: Batsford, 1986); Madeline Ginsburg, Victorian Dress in Photographs (London: Batsford, 1982); Vivienne Richmond, Clothing the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); John Styles, The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007); Christobel Williams-Mitchell, Dressed for the Job: The Story of Occupational Costume (Poole: Blandford, 1982).
Others are perhaps simply too invested in the norm of thinness and the contemporary views of health to be able to interrogate the operations of power therein. 34

Phrased differently, the absence of studies of fat and fatness within the academic literature may at least in part be attributed to private stigmas and prejudices held by scholars who struggle to understand fatness as anything but an incontrovertible public health hazard. Thus, even as fashion scholars have sought to foreground and re-activate overlooked and marginalized histories, 35 a history of large-size dress and studies of the dress practices of fat women may have therefore seemed off-limits for academic inquiry. Although the field of fashion studies encourages incisive, curious and critical approaches to the study of fashion, it is not entirely unaffected by the fashion industry’s hierarchies and value systems. Indeed, within academia, but specifically within fashion studies, fat is perhaps the other “F-Word.” 36

That being said, there is a small but growing body of scholarship that has examined the relationships between large-size dress, the fashion system and the fat body from both historical and contemporary vantage points, and which, quite notably, has mainly been the purview of women academics. The purpose of this literature review is to spotlight some of this important interdisciplinary research, and in doing so, to present some key methods, approaches and critical themes pertaining to fashion and the fat, female body that bolster this dissertation, while also situating this dissertation amongst these works. In doing so, however, I also aim to identify the gaps within the scholarship that this dissertation fills. As such, the focus here is predominantly and necessarily on works emerging from the field of fashion studies. In the following chapter, I address the theoretical and methodological literature, as well as where this dissertation fits among works that have more generally explored the relationships between fashion, everyday dress, consumption, identity and the body.

Generally speaking, the scholarship on fashion and the fat, female body is quite young, only really emerging at the turn of the twenty-first century, and notably coinciding with the rise of fat activism and the modern body positivity movement online—a movement that nudged the critical discourse around fatness into the popular consciousness, and which, by turn, resulted in a new wealth of scholarly work that sought to dissect and problematize prevailing assumptions about fatness. 37 Indeed, writing just after the turn of the millennium, Lorraine Gamman was one of the first scholars to broach the topic of fashion and the fat, female body in her chapter, “Visual Seduction and Perverse Compliance: Reviewing Food Fantasies, Large Appetites and ‘Grotesque Bodies,’” which appeared in Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson’s Fashion

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37 See, for example, Catherine Connell, “Fashionable Resistance: Queer ‘Fa(t)shion’ Blogging as Counterdiscourse,” IFSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly 41, nos. 1-2 (2013), 216.
In the years that followed, and in the wake of the important work coming from the field of fat studies, which treated the fat body as an object worthy of serious scholarly inquiry, a number of scholars working on the relationship between dress and the fat, female body fruitfully employed sociological, ethnographic and auto-ethnographic approaches to the study of fat women and their dress practices. Among them, Rachel Colls explored the notion of “bodily bigness” through empirical work (e.g. sartorial biography, group interviews, participant observation, etc) on the shopping habits and experiences of self-identifying plus-size women. More recently, Amanda Czerniawski engaged in immersive research in which she, much like the ethnographer Ashley Mears, went “undercover” as a plus-size fashion model in New York City in order to research the aesthetic and corporeal labor of models working on the outskirts of the industry. Through this work, Czerniawski sought to challenge claims that plus-size models are...
simply “failed” straight-size models who do not engage in practices of bodily self-surveillance comparable to those undertaken by their more slender counterparts. Taken together, both Colls’ and Czerniawski’s works opened up pathways for considering the Butlerian performativity of fatness and for understanding how, through dress, individuals negotiate a spoiled identity in a fat-phobic society. Their respective approaches proved highly influential for my own research into the dress practices of self-identifying plus-size women in New York City, but also for Rosie Findlay who, in her recent book on fashion blogging, *Personal Style Blogs: Appearances that Fascinate* (2017), considers in one chapter the “fatshion” blogosphere as an alternative space for identity construction and radical self-love.

Scholars working in the oftentimes overlooked—that is, within critical discussions about the state of the field of fashion studies—practice-based disciplines of fashion merchandising and marketing and human ecology have, in their own way, made important contributions to this field of study, too. For instance, over the last decade, Susan Ashdown of the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University has been using 3-D body scanning technologies to resolve many of the problems in fit that fat women report as being their main frustration when shopping for plus-size clothing. Similarly, Deborah Christel of the Department of Apparel Merchandising, Design and Textiles at Washington State University has studied fit and sizing in plus-size swim and active wear and, more recently, has devised a “fat fashion pedagogy” for apparel design. These works are worth noting within a review of more canonical fashion studies literature for the manner in which they integrate interviews, participant observation and polling—or methods native to the disciplines of sociology and ethnography—with practice-based work to create actionable industry solutions to the well-reported sartorial grievances of fat women.

Yet, even as the terrain of contemporary plus-size fashion has been fairly well fleshed out via practice-based, sociological, ethnographic and auto-ethnographic studies, the history of

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large-size dress remains largely unexplored, with some important exceptions. In his article, “Fashionably Voluptuous: Repackaging the Fuller-Sized Figure,” for instance, Kevin Almond investigates the history and enduring allure of the “voluptuous” silhouette in Western fashion throughout the twentieth century. Rather than a straightforward history, however, Almond’s work, which adopts a material culture approach, is mainly concerned with making a proposal for how to “repackage” plus-size fashion to make it more palatable to consumers and to fashion students. In my own article on the short-lived American Vogue advertorial “Fashion Plus,” which was published from 1986–1988 and stands as one of Vogue’s only forays into plus-size fashion, I attempted to, in part, map the terrain of plus-size fashion in the United States in the mid-1980s. In perhaps the very earliest work to discuss the history of large-size dress, if only briefly, in their book Suiting Everyone: The Democratization of Clothing in America (1974), Claudia Kidwell and Margaret Christman discuss stoutwear within the context of sizing technologies and the democratization of ready-to-wear in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Notably, this is the only text I have encountered that discusses large-size men’s dress, too. However, the most significant work to explore the history of large-size women’s dress is Carmen Keist’s 2012 PhD dissertation. Keist’s research, which has since produced several articles, is perhaps the first to take a deep dive into the history of stoutwear (although Keist anachronistically refers to it as plus-size fashion throughout the dissertation). Drawing on a variety of sources, Keist’s dissertation, which is firmly embedded within the disciplines of dress history and family and consumer sciences, adopts a linear trajectory and mainly focuses on the appearance of stoutwear and discusses a number of patents that were taken out for specially-designed large size dress in the early twentieth century.

Keist’s work, much like my own, is temporally located in the early twentieth century—a period that has been explored with great intensity by other cultural historians writing about the history of fat and fatness in the modern West. To borrow the words of Burke these works, not unlike my own, aim to provide a “portrait” of fatness within a particular historical moment and context. Perhaps the most significant book-length histories of fatness and “obesity” include Peter Stearns’ Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West (1997), Georges Vigarello’s The Metamorphoses of Fat: A History of Obesity (2013), Hillel Schwartz’s Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat (1986), Kerry Seagrave’s Obesity in America, 1930-1939: A History of Social Attitudes and Treatment (2008) and Elena Levy-Navarro’s edited volume Historicizing Fat in Anglo-

48 Kevin Almond, “Fashionably Voluptuous: Repackaging the Fuller-Sized Figure,” Fashion Theory 17, no. 2 (2013): 197-222.
51 Keist, “The New Costumes of Odd Sizes.”
53 Burke, What is Cultural History, 7.
American Culture (2010). These volumes’ focus on the modern period, and specifically on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is due in no small measure to what Peter Stearns has described as shifting beauty standards defined by youth and slenderness, changing notions of success, urbanization, new definitions of illness and different ways of assessing self-worth that emerged in the late nineteenth century. More specifically, Hillel Schwartz situates fatness as a product of modernity itself—or something that emerged at the “confluence of movements in the sciences and in dance, in home economics and political economy, in medical technology and food marketing, in evangelical religion and in life insurance.” Going back even earlier, Georges Vigarello locates the stigma of fatness in early-modern Europe, but argues that, through time, “what counts as big” grew ever narrower with “a barely imperceptible but steady privileging of lightness.” However, Vigarello also argues that the general disdain of the fat person would give way in the early twentieth century to a new focus on fatness as a psychosocial ailment—one that led to “ever stricter rules and precise guidelines for physical appearance and the expression of the self.” Indeed, as Levy-Navarro further suggests, this was a “pivotal moment in which the category of fat [functioned] as a master term,” one which dialogued with new ways of defining race, gender and class status. It is in this moment of great cultural and technological turmoil—one which saw the genesis of what may formally be identified as the “stoutwear industry”—that I locate my own work.

For these scholars, but also for myself, what is so notable about the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the long history of fat in the modern West is that it was during this period that, as Armstrong points out, a variety of techniques to “categorize, discipline and regulate bodies, both at the level of populations and individual bodies” emerged—among them eugenics, sexology, birth control and Taylorism and Fordism. However, it was also in this moment that a number of cures and compensations for fatness—from medications, to faddish diets, to exercise regimens, to new conventions in dress—first emerged as well. Indeed, during this period, rather than as a natural byproduct of the ageing process, fatness came to be regarded as something that could and, more importantly, should be kept at bay. Along with new bodily ideals, or what Schwartz has deemed a “kinetic,” dynamic conception of the body, the early twentieth century also witnessed the conception and concretization of the modern tenor of fat stigma.

It goes without saying that the modern fashion system played a crucial role in establishing and cementing these standards of beauty and behaviors, and more specifically, the

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54 Stearns, Fat History, xviii.
56 Vigarello, Metamorphoses of Fat, x.
57 Ibid., xi.
stigma of fatness; however, each of the above scholars only affords fashion a very cursory discussion in the grander scope of their research—framing it as but one piece of a larger puzzle in the constitution of modern attitudes toward fat, and a somewhat frivolous one at that. Perhaps most explicitly, in his book *Never Satisfied*, Hillel Schwartz argues that “fashion is a small part” of the cultural construct that is fatness:

[Fashion] has to do with shape and texture, posture and quality of skin, not with weight. Our century’s unique confusion of dimension, proportion, mass and weight has been compounded by fashion and fashion writing, but styles in clothing and cosmetics do not of themselves have causal priority. They cannot be enlisted to explain the trust of scientific research or the popularity of bathroom scales.\(^6^1\)

Rather than fashion, Schwartz therefore argues that “the body should stand at the center” of any cultural study of fatness.\(^6^2\) While I do agree with this latter point, I firmly disagree with Schwartz’s contentions that fashion has nothing to do with weight and that it does not have “causal priority.”

Although it largely falls outside the remit of fashion studies, and thus outside the aim of this literature review, it is nevertheless important to mention fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco’s brief foray into fashion here. In her 2004 essay, “Revolution on a Rack: Fatness, Fashion and Commodification,” she maps the trajectory of what she perceives as the commodification of the plus-size body in fashion and questions the efficacy and ethics of the emerging discourse of “fatshion” as a route to size parity:

But why is feminine fashion, deemed so frivolous by patriarchal society and by ‘serious’ second-wave feminists alike, supposed to be the signal that fat women have arrived? Fashion designers have claimed that “all women have three ‘fashion rights’: the right to look good, the right to wear attractive styles, and the right to be creative in fashion.” The language of rights used here detracts from more important rights, especially because these rights are couched within the impulses of capitalism. Yes, fat women have the right to spend just as much money as anyone else to look trendy. But how does this change their lives?\(^6^3\)

Much as within cultural histories of fatness, what LeBesco neglects in her negative appraisal of fashion is the fact that bodies, of any size, are “inherently dressed bodies” (emphasis in original).\(^6^4\) Indeed, LeBesco’s question about whether or not fashion can “change the life” of a fat woman is particularly nearsighted given that dress is an essential facet of social life—the flimsy but formidable barrier between the body and culture and that which makes fat bodies culturally meaningful and acceptable.

In critiquing the prevailing approach to studying the relationship between embodied fatness and fashion, a central precept of this dissertation is that fashion, dress and beauty culture

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\(^6^2\) Ibid.

\(^6^3\) LeBesco, “Revolution on a Rack,” 68.

are in fact the ideal epistemological spaces in which to “explain the thrust of scientific research or the popularity of bathroom scales,” to borrow Schwartz’s phrasing (both of which I do indeed “explain” through the particular lens of fashion in chapters five and three, respectively). To this end, I argue that a fashion studies approach affords great insight into just how vital fashion and dress are in constructing the social body, but more urgently, in giving shape to what, in each generation, is deemed problematically fat. Indeed, fashion is not merely the post-feminist dream state couched “within the impulses of capitalism” LeBesco refers to above, but is rather, and quite literally, the fabric of the fat experience, and as such, should not be overlooked or disregarded.

With fashion and dress effectively deemed ancillary to the cultural history of fatness and within critical fat studies scholarship at large, it is this gap that my dissertation—with its explicit focus on fashion and the culture of beauty—partially seeks to fill. It should be noted, however, that while this thesis in many ways runs parallel to the interests of critical fat studies, I do not consider this a piece of fat studies scholarship. Whereas fat studies scholars always regard fatness as a construct, and thereby largely overlook the material, embodied dimension of fatness, I am receptive to the idea that bodies have indeed grown bigger throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—a point which many fat studies scholars somewhat problematically reject outright. In a departure from these existing cultural histories of fatness, and different from Keist whose work spans roughly the same time period, this dissertation is not a straightforward history. Rather, while it is historical in scope—tracing the origins, growth and demise of the stoutwear industry alongside the established cultural histories of fat (especially in the earlier analytical chapters)—its central aim is to examine how the stout body was implicated in and created by the shifting values, standards of behavior and discursive regimes of the early twentieth century through the particular lens of fashion.

1.3 Stoutwear: American Clothing for American Bodies

In addition to locating my research within the temporal context of the early twentieth century, it is vital to constrain it geographically as well. Specifically, this dissertation is grounded in the assertion that stoutwear was an American industry. As such, I frame stoutwear as an industry singularly born from the technological infrastructure and democratic ethos of American ready-

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65 Deborah McPhail notes that for fat studies scholars, the “truth” of whether or not people are actually growing fatter, along with discussions about whether or not fat is unhealthy, are ultimately immaterial. See Deborah McPhail, Contours of the Nation: Making Obesity and Imagining Canada, 1945-1970 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 138-139.

66 In the 1920s, there were reports in Women’s Wear of stoutwear being successfully incorporated into British department stores. This was not a native industry, however. Rather, Sveltline models were imported from the United States. See “Send U.S. Line of Stoutwear to Selfridges,” Women’s Wear (August 21, 1922), 1. A competing report, however, suggested that this trade was limited. See “No Large Amount of Stoutwear Business From England Expected,” Women’s Wear (August 22, 1922), 5. For further discussion about the origins of the American clothing industry see Rebecca Arnold, The American Look: Fashion, Sportswear and the Image of Women in 1930s and 1940s New York (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 13-22.
to-wear, or the belief that women of all socioeconomic means (and sizes) should be able to dress well. Indeed, although manufacturers in the early twentieth century evidenced a desire to model stoutwear after standard-size garments, which were themselves largely derived from the edicts trickling down from Paris, there occurred a process of translation as manufacturers altered and redesigned Parisian fashions to better fit the lives (and bodies) of American women—a point that is discussed in greater depth in chapter five.

At the same time, however, stoutwear was also a product of the unique cultural climate of early twentieth century America, and specifically of Americans’ radically shifting attitudes toward and approaches to dealing with fatness. Although modern fat stigma emerged concurrently in the United States and Europe, which throughout the century increasingly came to share similar Western diet impulses, the situation in the United States and the paradoxes and contradictions that underlie Americans’ relationship to fat stand alone. Indeed, although fat was equally reviled in both cultural contexts in the early twentieth century and for similar reasons, Americans saw their waistlines gradually expand throughout the twentieth century whereas Europeans grew ever thinner.67 It is this paradox that makes the American context unique, and which, by turn, I argue, enabled the existence of the stoutwear industry.

Sitting somewhat uncomfortably at the confluence of the democratic ethos of mass manufacturing on the one hand, and the unique tenor of American fat stigma on the other, was the industrial complex of American ready-to-wear and, underneath that, the subsector of stoutwear. The American apparel industry—which has its origins in the mid-nineteenth century and was enabled by the influx of immigrant labor and by the strength and innovation of American manufacturing—not only ensured that the majority of citizens could obtain well-made, well-fitting and easy to care for clothing, but that they would become “the best dressed average people in the world.”68 What was remarkable about American mass manufactured clothing was the manner in which it blurred social distinctions and obfuscated class hierarchies so that, as Kidwell and Christman have written, “every man could look like a movie star and every woman like the wife of a President of the United States.”69 Adding to this was the fact that, not only was ready-to-wear available to a large swath of the American populace, it was fashionable to buy garments off-the-rack.

If one looks past the democratic rhetoric of ready-to-wear, however, it becomes clear that not all bodies were equally served by this industry. This was due in no small measure to the persistent problems surrounding standardization and garment fit (a point that will be discussed at greater length in chapter three), which were only compounded by larger women’s “difficult” bodily proportions. Indeed, through the creation of systems for measuring and sizing bodies, new standards were created, as were new categories of “good” and “bad” bodies. It wouldn’t be until the turn of the century—nearly fifty years after the apparel industry began to industrialize on a large scale—that manufacturers would see the market potential of expanding their wares to people of non-standard proportions and that niche markets would materialize. Among them,

67 Stearns, Fat History, xxi.
68 Kidwell and Christman, Suiting Everyone, 15.
69 Ibid., 16.
stoutwear emerged to serve the needs of women of size who had not been swept up by the democratizing ethos of ready-to-wear. Thus, up until approximately 1915—the stated genesis of the stoutwear industry—women whose bodies exceeded the nascent system of standard sizing largely relied upon antiquated modes of garment production. These included having garments custom made by tailors and dressmakers and, for women of lesser means, their own faculties as home sewers. To this end, stoutwear was revolutionary in that it permitted larger women to, for the first time, engage in modern practices of consumption and self-fashioning. Whereas Poiret had unceremoniously dismissed fat women as “hopeless,” and thereby legitimated high fashion’s neglect of fat women, American manufacturers of ready-to-wear (at least after 1915), were eager to bring fat women into fashion’s folds.

At the same time, however, stoutwear also exposed the tensions that existed between the democratic ethos of ready-to-wear and America’s emerging fat stigma: Even as stoutwear manufacturers introduced stout women to new modes of consuming clothing, they also proposed new ways to be stout. When viewed through this lens, it becomes possible to see that while stoutwear at once leveled the proverbial playing field for stout women in the American retail landscape, it also functioned as a disciplinary mechanism. Phrased somewhat differently, even as stoutwear manufacturers strived to fulfill the sartorial needs of the stout woman by achieving an alchemy of fit and fashionability in stoutwear, they were still operating within an ideological framework that mandated slenderness—a point to which I will return in the conclusion. Stoutwear therefore existed in a gray area of sorts by at once—and somewhat contradictorily—tapping into the democratizing ethos of American ready-to-wear, while also imposing bodily norms on fat, female consumers. Undergirded by this particular matrix of values and inherent contradictions, I argue that stoutwear could not have emerged or functioned as it did anywhere but in the United States—a prosperous, industrialized nation that, as Schwartz has written, is deeply “perplexed [and] intimidated by its abundance,” and which is simultaneously “confused by its own desires and therefore never satisfied.”

In situating stoutwear as a uniquely and explicitly American industry, however, this dissertation does not claim that the discourses of stoutwear and stoutwear itself (i.e. garments) were accessible to and affected all fat women in the same way. Indeed, the stout body as it was discursively constructed in the fashion media and specifically within the discourses of stoutwear was, first and foremost, an American body; however, it was also a white, middle class, heterosexual body, and was a body that was deeply embedded within and shaped by conventions and expectations of normative, white femininity—a fact which underscores the fact that fashion, ultimately, is a white discourse, or one which constructs and upholds a white, Anglo-Saxon ideal.

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71 Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 5.
of feminine beauty. Indeed, throughout the course of my research, I looked for but did not find non-white bodies within the discourses of stoutwear. In fact, I found no black bodies of size within the women's and fashion press, nor did I encounter conversations surrounding the black woman's sartorial needs in general, until the 1945 when *Ebony* was first published and later, in *Jet*, which was founded in 1951. This dissertation therefore does not claim to account for the constitution of non-white bodies, nor of male bodies. To this end, my research partially reifies fashion studies' privileging of women's experiences of fashionable dress, even as I attempt to write a marginalized figure back into the histories of fashion.

1.4 A Note on Terminology

Given that this dissertation is so preoccupied with discourse, the language employed throughout has been chosen with great care, namely with attention to avoiding anachronistic slippages in, for instance, applying contemporary terms and phrasings to historical objects, bodies, ideas and phenomena. This, however, was not without its difficulties. Although this dissertation is embedded within the historical context of the early twentieth century, in many ways, the circumstances, debates and discourses discussed throughout feel if not highly contemporary then little changed. Indeed, writing about the past from the perspective of the present—and particularly in the practice of writing about historical discourse—exposes a tension that historian Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. has described as “the problems of language talking about language.”

This is due in no small measure to the fact that, as Caroline Evans has observed, all history is ultimately “written in light of current concerns.” Continuing, Evans further explains,

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73 Christopher Breward has argued that “fashion and femininity” are “profoundly linked” within the fashion literature due to the fact that manufacturers, advertisers and retailers have lavished more attention on female consumers. Breward, however, has sought to upend that notion, arguing that men, although largely written out of the history of fashion, were not “excluded from the experience of fashion.” See Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life, 1860-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 2.


All history is written about from the perspective of the present, in the sense that the present throws up the themes to be studied historically. Since the present is always in a state of transformation the past must constantly be re-evaluated; and the past takes on new meanings in light of new events in the present.76

This becomes especially evident when writing about fashion, which is essentially defined by its “eternal returns,” or what Evans herself describes as its “labyrinthine” relays between past and present.77 Throughout my own research, it was perhaps all too easy to see the plus-size woman mirrored in the stout woman, given the way that each has existed in her own time as fashion’s “forgotten woman.”78 Likewise, early discussions about how to refer to the stout woman within consumer advertising almost begged to be compared with similar conversations that are being had today about whether or not to abolish the term plus-size.79 Indeed, the urgency of and inspiration for this research partly stemmed from the pervasiveness of the debates surrounding the future of plus-size fashion in contemporary fashion discourse. I would even argue that there is much that can be learned about how we arrived at our present situation through a firm historical footing (and as is perhaps demonstrated in this chapter’s opening paragraphs). At the same time, however, plus-size fashion and stoutwear were born from completely different socio-historical circumstances and, as a result, studies of stoutwear and plus-size fashion should each be afforded their own space. It is not only ahistorical but incorrect to conflate the two phenomena as one, even as we might acknowledge the correspondences between the two.80

However, the fact that there seem to be so many relays between the two periods affirms Foucault’s contention that there are certain topics of scholarly inquiry that are seemingly “without history—in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts.”81 To this list we might also add fatness as it is so deeply engrained in the popular imaginary as a pre-cultural, biological mode of embodiment; however, as Foucault suggests no object or idea is immune to history, and to study one of these subjects is therefore to try to “isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles.”82 Isolating these different “scenes,” as Foucault goes on to explain, requires “patience and a knowledge of details.”83 In this case, this process entails approaching the research with an awareness of the cultural debates and stigmas of fatness as they exist in the

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76 Ibid., 12.
78 The Forgotten Woman was a New York-based plus-size boutique in the 1980s.
79 For further discussion, see Peters, “Fashion Plus,” 176.
80 In her own work on this period, Keist anachronistically refers stoutwear as “plus size fashions.” See Keist, “The New Costumes of Odd Sizes”; Keist and Mareketti, “The New Costumes of Odd Sizes.”
81 Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 139-140. Others, however, would disagree with Foucault, namely scholars working in the history of sensibilities and gestures. For further discussion and an overview, see Daniel Wickberg, “What is the History of Sensibilities? On Cultural Histories, Old and New,” *American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (June 2007): 661-684.
82 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 140.
83 This is the crux of Foucault’s genealogical method, or a method for studying how these seemingly ahistorical concepts change over time. Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 140.
present (as well as an awareness that these discourses are themselves not ahistorical), while at the same time casting aside many of these assumptions when conducting the discourse analysis—a process which ultimately boils down to (and perhaps quite obviously) possessing a critical sensitivity to the minutiae of language. Indeed, if discourses, actively “form the objects of which they speak”84—a sentiment that applies to the practice of writing history, too—the utmost care must be taken so as to not conflate past and present through a careless use of language in the practice of history writing. Throughout the course of my own research and writing, the terms “fat,” “obese,” “stout” and “plus-size” proved particularly vulnerable to slippages and thus merit further discussion and definition before proceeding.

In popular discourse, the terms “overweight” and “obese” have become the preferred terms with which to describe and qualify bodies that exceed established norms. Buoyed and legitimated by their seeming scientific objectivity—which is bolstered by the Body Mass Index (BMI)—these terms are widely regarded as seemingly more objective than the more evidently offensive or derogatory “fat.” According to the BMI, which collapses height and weight into a single number, an individual with a BMI greater than twenty-five is considered “overweight,” while a BMI over thirty designates one as “obese.” Invented in the mid-nineteenth century by the Belgian mathematician Adolphe Jacques Quetélet as a heuristic formula originally meant to help actuaries quickly and easily evaluate the desirability of prospective life insurance policyholders,85 the BMI has since gone on to become a standard tool within the medical field for measuring a patient’s overall health. For scholars and activists working in the field of fat studies, however, the BMI and the attendant proliferation of the terms “overweight” and “obese” in public discourse—and especially in relation to the construct of the so-called “obesity epidemic”—have been implicit in the contemporary stigmatization of the fat body for the manner in which they “medicalize human diversity” and “fuel discrimination” under the guise of scientific objectivity.86 Adding to this, the BMI has come to be regarded by some scientists, nutritionists and doctors as an ineffective and unreliable way to measure and diagnose weight-related illnesses, leading to what Czerniawski has referred to as the BMI’s “death knell.”87 In order to resolve these debates, scholars and activists—pointing to the outmodedness of the BMI and fact that these “O-words are neither neutral nor benign”—have made a concerted effort to reclaim fat, as a political identity and as the preferred neutral adjective within scholarly work.88 This convention has been widely adopted throughout the literature, and as such, throughout this dissertation I avoid invoking the “O-words,” or place them in scare quotes when using them at all.89 Fat, by turn, is used when referring to the fat, female body as an object of fashion discourse.

84 Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 49.
86 Wann, “Preface,” xiii.
87 For a summary of these studies, see Amanda Czerniawski, “A 200-Year Weight Debate,” *Contexts* 16.3 (2017), 68.
89 Wann calls for scholars to place the terms within scare quotes when using at all. See Wann, “Preface,” xii.
Even as the term fat has been embraced within academia, however, in public discourse, as Don Kulick and Anne Meneley point out, “The tone with which the word fat is still uttered is often concerned, ashamed, alarmist or condemnatory” (emphasis in original). As such, a bevy of euphemisms—many of which have their origins in fashion discourse—have been conceived throughout the twentieth century to soften the proverbial blow when referring to fat bodies. The terms “plus-size,” “curvy,” “full-figured,” “voluptuous,” “chubby” and “stout,” among others, have all been employed by fashion manufacturers, advertisers and retailers in various historical moments to effectively “repackage” fat stigma and sell an ideal back to consumers whose bodies have elsewhere in the culture been rendered deviant. Indeed, Adam points out that the proliferation of terms used to refer to fat, female bodies actually functions to underscore the ambiguity of the fat, female body. At the same time, however, these terms have shown a tendency to breach fashion discourse, entering the mainstream in their respective time periods as a means to give shape to or make the fat, female body culturally meaningful within a society that is so deeply uncomfortable with fat. Much like the “O-words,” however, these terms, while decidedly more euphemistic, are themselves neither neutral nor benign.

In order to resolve these debates, throughout this dissertation I situate stout, as much as the terms that came before and after to refer to the fat, female body, as discursive formations. Given that this study is historical and explicitly about the discursive construction of the stout body, however, I have chosen not to heed Wann’s and other fat studies scholars’ call to omit or place stout within scare quotes, even though it is a euphemism that “falsely put[s] a positive spin on a negative view of fatness.” This is partly due to convenience, but, more importantly, to the fact that stout, while not entirely uncontroversial (a point that is discussed in depth in chapter four), was itself the preferred term for referring to the fat, female body in early twentieth century America. Thus, whereas fat will be used throughout when referring to the body as an object of fashion discourse (i.e. within my analysis), stout will be used when referring to the body as the subject of historical fashion discourse, as well as to refer to the historical category of large-size dress (i.e. stoutwear) and to a niche industry (i.e. the stoutwear industry).

1.5 Research Design & Dissertation Outline

In examining the various ways that the stout body was constructed through fashion media discourses—and specifically within American fashion media spanning the years 1915-1930—this dissertation is principally concerned with how the discourses of stoutwear and of the stout body were productive and manifested in different fashion practices. The following chapter, “Chapter

91 Almond, “Fashionably Voluptuous,” 211.
93 Wann argues that just as much as “obese” or “overweight,” euphemisms like “plump” and “husky” should be placed within scare quotes or omitted for the manner in which they “falsely put a positive spin on a negative view of fatness.” See Wann, “Preface,” xii.
Two—A Fashion History Without Fashion: Theory, Method & Materials,” which is itself a
continuation of this introduction, expounds on the relationship between discourse and practice
which underpins this dissertation by delimiting the methodological and theoretical frameworks
employed throughout the analytical chapters. It also situates my work amongst fashion
scholarship dealing with the relationships between fashion, dress and the body and discusses the
practical challenges of researching a marginalized and forgotten history.

After chapter two, the proceeding five chapters comprise the analytical portion of the
dissertation—each of which examines a different component of fashion practice and thereby
how ways of speaking about, writing about and visualizing stoutwear and the stout body
informed and shaped the discursive co-production of stoutwear (as garments) and the stout
body. While the relationship between discourse and practice will be more clearly outlined in the
following chapter, here it is important to note that the research design (i.e. the organization of
the chapters) draws upon Paolo Volonte’s theorizing of fashion practices, or the idea that
discourses are not abstract ideas, but are actually crucial “ingredients” that materially shape or
influence the production, promotion, dissemination and consumption of fashion as image,
object and idea. Drawing upon this insight, the analytical chapters are therefore organized so
that they proceed from “macro” practices (i.e. the construction and constitution of the industry,
stoutwear design and advertising strategies) to the “micro” (i.e. embodied dress practices) so as
to evidence how the discourse of stoutwear touched and shaped every level of fashion practice
—from the “fashioning” of an industry (in chapter three), to the “self-fashioning” of the stout
body (in chapter seven).

“Chapter Three—The Stoutwear Industry: Creating Consumers” forms the historical
and conceptual foundation of the dissertation in its examination of the genesis of the stoutwear
industry in 1915. The central aim here is to delimit the key figures and institutions that
consecrated the stoutwear industry and who, through the practice of discussing the potentialities
of stoutwear, also gave shape to the classification of consumers known as “stout women.” The
second half of this chapter continues this investigation by highlighting several conceptual red
threads that are woven throughout the research by identifying three key discursive formations for
speaking about both the stout woman and the stoutwear industry. It thereby opens up a
framework for thinking about how the stout body was produced within fashion media
discourses, but was also the product of overlapping, interwoven discourses, such as those
pertaining to technology, modernity and health, to name but a few.

Following this foundational discussion, “Chapter Four—Stoutwear Design Discourse”
turns its attention to the design of stoutwear garments. Whereas the previous chapter touches
upon the concerns surrounding the problem of garment fit to mass manufacturing—one that
was foundational to the industry—this chapter is preoccupied with the surface ornamentation of

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stoutwear and how it dialogued with and challenged prevailing dress styles. In lieu of analyzing surviving stoutwear garments—of which there is a noted lack in the material record (a point that is discussed at length in the following chapter)—this chapter examines the “design discourses” of stoutwear, or how the “problem” of designing for the stout woman was discussed and reconciled within the professional fashion media. Split into two sections so as to call attention to the dramatic shift in women’s dress styles that occurred during this period, the first section examines stoutwear design discourse in the period spanning 1915-1922, and the latter, the period spanning 1922-1930.

Progressing from the manufacture and design of stoutwear, “Chapter Five—Selling Stoutwear” examines how the discursive formations identified in chapter three manifested within the practice of selling stoutwear, broadly defined. This chapter begins with a discussion of how, within the professional fashion media, advertising executives, retailers and manufacturers constructed the stout consumer as emotionally maladjusted, lacking in impulse control and as exceedingly corporeally-aware. It then examines how these ideas manifested within consumer advertising and on sales floors, or in the ways that salespeople were trained to interact with stout consumers through a close analysis of extant advertisements and advice published within the professional media. Throughout this chapter, the notion of selling stoutwear is kept purposefully broad and therefore touches on everything from stoutwear “style shows” to discussions surrounding the matter of whether or not to “segregate” stoutwear departments.

The final two analytical chapters turn their attention away from the industry side of things to explore how these discourses were constructed and proliferated within the women’s and fashion press—presenting a space in which we might be able to consider how stout women themselves would have encountered and thereby embodied these discourses in the practice of reading the fashion media and in their daily dress practices. “Chapter Six—Constructing a Stigma: Looking Stout in a Slender World” examines how the stigma of stoutness was constructed within women’s and fashion media. This chapter seeks to fill a gap in the literature by examining how the construct of slenderness—a fairly well examined topic—dialogued with its corollary or “other,” stoutness, in the construction and constitution of fat stigma within the fashion media. In doing so, it frames the women’s and fashion’s press as an important disciplinary mechanism and medium that reinforced the cultural gaze, instituted practices of self-surveillance and cemented the notion of what it meant to “look stout,” even in spite of a near-total absence of stout bodies within these spaces. The final analytical chapter, “Ordering Disorder: Self-Fashioning the Stout Body,” focuses on the advice that was proffered to stout women within the fashion media, but specifically within fashion and style guides—a genre that is almost entirely overlooked within the field of fashion studies and dress history—which are here situated as spaces in which it becomes possible to glimpse how the discourses of stoutwear manifested in self-fashioning practices. This dissertation closes with “Chapter Eight—Conclusion: Fashioning the Flesh,” which synthesizes the findings of the analytical chapters, proposes pathways for future research and considers the contributions to fashion knowledge that this dissertation makes.
Chapter Two — A Fashion History Without Fashion: Theory, Method & Materials

Human bodies are dressed bodies.

(Joanne Entwistle, The Fashioned Body, 2000)

As discussed in the introductory chapter, this dissertation, in addition to tracing the historical trajectories of the stoutwear industry, also aims to contribute to a body of fashion studies literature that explores the theoretical intersections between fashion, dress and the body—a field of study first, and perhaps most famously, mapped by the sociologist Joanne Entwistle in her canonical text, The Fashioned Body (2000). Entwistle’s observation that “human bodies are dressed bodies” (emphasis in original) acknowledges dress as a necessary and highly symbolic barrier between the flesh and culture. While Entwistle’s text did much to address the lack of scholarship examining the relationship between dress and the body in its time, the body nevertheless continues to be an enduringly neglected object of study within the field of fashion studies, with some notable exceptions. My work partially seeks to fill this gap by showing how a specific body—the stout body—was fashioned in its time, while also initiating a methodological conversation about how it might be possible to reconstruct the historical dressed body through discourse.

Within the broader dissertation, the purpose of this chapter is to situate my work within the field of fashion studies, to establish the methods and theories that undergird this dissertation’s analytical chapters and to present my primary sources. In addition to these core aims, however, this chapter begins with a methodological discussion that addresses some of the barriers and pitfalls I encountered during my research journey—and namely, a dearth of surviving stoutwear garments to study. Given that, even forty years on, fashion studies is still

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1 Entwistle, Fashioned Body, 6.
2 While fashion studies scholars increasingly acknowledge that the body is an important armature for dress, few have interrogated the process through which dress materially gives shape to the body. Works discussing foundation garments are an exception. See, for example, Valerie Steele, Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Denis Bruna (ed.), Fashioning the Body: An Intimate History of the Silhouette (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). Another exception are works that have discussed masculinity in its various guises. See, for example, Christopher Breward, The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life 1860-1914 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Peter McNeil, Pretty Gentlemen: Macaroni Men and the Eighteenth-Century Fashion World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). Works about fashion modeling have also placed the body front-and-center. See, for example, Caroline Evans, The Mechanical Smile: Modernism and the First Fashion Shows in France and America, 1900-1929 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Elizabeth Wissinger, This Year’s Model: Fashion Media and the Making of Glamour (New York: New York University Press, 2015).
regarded by some as an academic field that is in-becoming, such self-reflexive discussions are not only commonplace within fashion studies writing and scholarship but, I argue, are necessary for drawing the boundaries around the practice and process of fashion research. Here, I therefore aim to contribute to this ongoing and evolving dialogue by opening up a discussion about how to reconstruct a fashion history without fashion.

2.1 Methodological Considerations: On Reconstructing a Forgotten History

“What does it mean to study a history of fashion without fashion?” This was a question Professor Caroline Evans asked at a research seminar at the Centre for Fashion Studies at Stockholm University. Although Evans asked the question rhetorically, it was nevertheless a question to which I returned time and again throughout my research for two reasons. First, as a subcategory of ready-to-wear that foregrounded “fit” over “fashion” (or a materialization of the axiom “form follows function”), it would be more appropriate to assign to stoutwear the designations of “clothing” or “dress” rather than that of “fashion.” To study stoutwear therefore requires a different set of terms and ways of thinking about fashion change than those


4 In posing this question, Evans was referencing and rephrasing a comment made by the film scholar Eirik Frisvold Hanssen who during the seminar asked the question, “What is a film history without film?” However, this idea has also been pursued by the film scholar Guo-Juin Hong who described Taiwanese cinema as a “film history without film” (emphasis in original). See Guo-Juin Hong, “Historiography of Absence: Taiwan Cinema Before New Cinema 1982,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 4, no. 1 (2010), 8. Smoodin has also explored “the possibility for film scholarship without films.” See Eric Smoodin, *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2. The sentiment, however, emerges more generally from the field of “new cinema history,” which focuses on film as a locus of other social and cultural phenomena. For an in depth discussion of this terrain, see Richard McPhee, Daniel Biltereys and Philippe Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

5 Kawamura argues that “clothing and dress are the raw material from which fashion is formed. Fashion as a belief is manifested through clothing.” See Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashion-ology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 1.
typically used to discuss what is variously deemed “the fashion system” or the “field” of high fashion. Said differently, stoutwear is not fashionable in the most literal sense of the term.

Second, and as others who have studied plus-size fashion from a historical vantage point can attest, the material record of large-size women’s dress is scanty at best, and non-existent at worst. Indeed, a survey of historical fashion and costume collections yields little insight into the dress practices of larger women since these objects simply have not been collected or conserved, or, conversely, have been misinterpreted. This lack is due to a number of institutional, political and practical reasons, which underscore the fact that the archive is a space of power and a microcosm of social and cultural values. By turn, this material absence has led, quite problematically, to a deeply entrenched survival bias within fashion and costume collections, which has only recently begun to be redressed via a number of notable exhibitions.

In this case, the survival bias of small and standard-size garments in museum collections would imply that because there is no material record of large-size women’s dress, there were no large-size women in the past. This notion has been especially romanticized within popular culture, but also by some scholars who have uncritically furthered the notion that “obesity” is a malady of the present. Yet, we increasingly know this simply to not be the case. Of course, “obesity” as a medical disorder measured by the Body Mass Index (BMI) is a fairly new construct, which has its origins in the early twentieth century; however, even long before the creation of the BMI, there were other ways to identify those bodies that strayed in excess from prevailing norms and ideals. Each era has assigned different labels to these people—from the derogatory “stout,” to the always-pejorative “fat,” to the more euphemistic “curvy” preferred today, for example—but the fact remains that these individuals are always rendered in their time.

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6 So-called “trickle-down” theories of fashion change have been popular within fashion studies, beginning with those put forth by Georg Simmel and Thorstein Veblen, and discussed by Kawamura, who uses trickle-down theories as a basis for her sociological precept of “fashion-ology.” See Kawamura, Fashion-ology, 19-37. Rather than discussing fashion as a closed system, however, Agnès Rocamora has application of Pierre Bourdieu’s “field theory” for understanding the dissemination of power within the fashion industry. See Agnès Rocamora, “Fields of Fashion: Critical Insights into Bourdieu’s Sociology of Culture,” Journal of Consumer Culture 2, no. 3 (2002): 341-362.

7 Kevin Almond, “Fashionably Voluptuous: Repackaging the Fuller-Sized Figure,” Fashion Theory 17, no. 2 (2013), 203; Keist, “The New Costumes of Odd Sizes,” 4-5.


11 In recent fashion studies scholarship, see, for example, Volonte, “The Thin Ideal”; Almond, “Fashionably Voluptuous,” 198-199.
as corporeal outliers, even if they might comprise the majority. Even a cursory survey of vernacular photo archives confirms this point, revealing, throughout history, women of all types and sizes, but as is pertinent to this study, a great number of images of stout women in all manners of dress (Fig. 2). In short, it may be said that every era has its fat woman. The difference from generation to generation, however, lies in how fatness—a highly mutable and historically relative construct—is defined.

As slippery and at times lacking as this terrain is, however, with the growing scholarly interest in and popular controversies around plus-size fashion, a fashion-historical footing is perhaps more urgent now than ever. Indeed, a history of stoutwear could aid in righting some of the myths and misperceptions that surround the fat, female body, and especially to erode the romantic, but contradictory, ideas that there were so few fat people in the past, or that previous

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12 A 2017 study out of Washington State University has found that the average woman in the United States is now a size sixteen, which places her past the threshold for plus-sizes, which begin at a size fourteen. See Deborah Christel and Susan C. Dunn, “Average American Women’s Clothing Size: Comparing National Health and Nutritional Examination Surveys (1968-2010) to ASTM International Misses & Women’s Plus Size Clothing,” International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education 10, no. 1 (2017): 129-136.
generations upheld the fat, female body as an ideal. Yet, embarking upon such a research path required me to return to the methodological question first posed by Evans, albeit slightly rephrased: How does one study a history of plus-size fashion without plus-size fashion?

* * *

Since its unofficial beginnings in the mid-1980s as an interdisciplinary field of study indebted to the more entrenched sister disciplines of costume studies and dress history, the field of fashion studies has witnessed scholars adopt a number of innovative methods and approaches, stemming from fields as disparate as economic history and ethnology. At the same time, studies that adopt a fully multi-methodological approach, and which straddle two or more disciplines, have been elevated as an ideal (albeit perhaps an illusory one) for their ability to address how fashion exists as image, object, text and idea. Indeed, the dress historian Lou Taylor has praised multi-methodological approaches to the study of fashion as having the ability to “expose the essential relation between garment, manufacture and consumption.” Likewise, Christopher Breward has argued that because fashion studies deals with “problems of identity, the body, gender and appearance,” it is almost a given that fashion scholars adopt multi-methodological approaches to their research. Even as this methodological opening-up of the field has resulted in evermore diverse and inclusive research, however, Taylor has nevertheless expressed concern that the prevailing popularity of cultural, ethnographic, economic and theoretical approaches to dress and fashion history risk resurfacing some of the “old anti-artifact prejudices” that prevailed before fashion was embraced by the academy as a legitimate topic of study. By-and-large, however, Taylor’s fears have not materialized. Indeed, one of the great strengths of fashion studies is its breadth, and the field’s embrace of multi-methodological and interdisciplinary approaches has merely served to expand the remit of dress history to include non-Western, marginalized and forgotten histories. Yet, even amid this diversity of approaches, the object—and more specifically, the garment—continues to hold a place of special importance in the minds and research of fashion studies scholars.

Take, for example, Francesca Granata’s work on the Bakhtinian grotesque in late twentieth century fashion: Although largely theoretical in scope and emerging from the analysis of a rich trove of extant visual, filmic and literary sources, Granata nevertheless stresses the importance of the time she spent in the archives at the Costume Institute “reading” surviving

14 Christopher Breward, The Culture of Fashion (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 2. For further discussion, see also Francesca Granata, “Fashion Studies In-Between: A Methodological Inquiry into the State of Fashion Studies,” Fashion Theory 16, no. 1 (2012): 67-82. The present preoccupation with and elevation of multi-methodological research as an ideal within the field of fashion studies in many ways mirrors the move toward and embrace of so-called “multimodal” approaches within the field of media studies since the 1990s. For an overview of multimodal analysis within media studies, see Carey Jewitt and Jeff Bezemer, Introducing Multimodality (London: Routledge, 2016).
dress in order to ground her theoretical observations. Likewise, Marco Pecorari argues that his largely theoretical study of the epistemic potential of fashion ephemera was bolstered by his close encounters with the objects in the archives, or what he deemed “epistemic engagements.” In spite of the claims they make to interdisciplinarity, these two examples nevertheless revert back to Taylor’s insistence that the object “grounds” or lends credence to more potentially subjective literary or visual accounts of fashion and dress. Likewise, Valerie Steele has similarly advocated for object-based beginnings in fashion studies, arguing that such approaches help the scholar to “lead out” from the object into theory. Indeed, the object remains as the principal launch pad from which many scholars still begin their fashion-historical research. With the object still holding a place of great importance within the field of fashion studies—and even within those works that brand themselves as interdisciplinary—where then does that leave the scholar who wants to study a history of dress but does not have access to surviving garments?

I, of course, was not alone in my desire to study a history that is not bolstered or supported by surviving garments. This is not to say, however, that there was no history to be told. In his exploration into the history of men’s consumption in England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for instance, Christopher Breward encountered a similar paucity of objects in museum collections. He argues that this lack has been “naturalized” as an “entirely appropriate reflection of the minimal time and attention assumed to have been lavished on sartorial matters by men,” but also by the fact that men’s fashion change occurs more slowly, and thus most men’s fashion items have ended their lives in secondhand shops or rag bins rather than in museums. More recently, Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark encountered similar methodological obstacles in their comparative study of everyday dress in twentieth century New York and London, noting that many museums continue to tell histories of fashion through a neat succession of contributions by designers of note, wherein the everyday has come to “lack significance.” In the case of stoutwear—which shares much in common with men’s fashion, but also with the much more expansive category of everyday dress—the institutional neglect may be similarly attributed to the fact that stoutwear, as a subcategory of ready-to-wear, is inherently less valuable than designer-branded objects and thus of less interest to curators. More practically speaking, however, these cheap and oftentimes poorly-constructed garments were, much like men’s wear, also more likely to end their lives as rags. In my own discussions and correspondence with curators and collections managers about the material record of stoutwear, they described problems regarding the availability of resources and funding to both store and display non-standard size garments. Indeed, mannequins and dress forms are expensive acquisitions for cash-strapped institutions, and few

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17 Francesca Granata, “The Bakhtinian Grotesque in Fashion at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century” (PhD diss., Central Saint Martins School of Art and Design, 2010), 46.
19 Taylor, Study of Dress History, 95.
21 Breward, Hidden Consumer, 10-11.
22 Buckley and Clark, “In Search of the Everyday.”
have plus-size versions already on hand. Moreover, the practice of building or padding out dress forms and mannequins to fit into large- and odd-sized garments is a highly specialized one, and given the oftentimes unspectacular, non-canonical or conservative appearance of large-size garments, the means simply do not meet the ends.  

Perhaps more interestingly, however, a part of the reason why stoutwear is so difficult to locate in museum collections may be attributed to the fact that these garments are so ripe for misinterpretation and mislabeling—a seemingly small but highly consequential barrier to being able to locate garments that, in their time, would have qualified as stoutwear. According to extant size grading tables created by early stoutwear manufactures, stout garments could have waist measurements as small as thirty inches—a size that roughly corresponds to a contemporary size ten (and thus solidly within the range of standard sizes) in the United States, and which speaks to the volatility and mutability of what, in each generation, is designated as fat. This disparity in historical and contemporary sizing conventions—a problem compounded by the proliferation of so-called vanity sizing in the late twentieth century, but also of the early twentieth century practice of sizing garments by their bust circumference—could easily lead collections managers who operate on the assumption that a size fourteen (or roughly equivalent to a thirty-four-inch waist) is the threshold between standard- and plus-sizes to designate in catalog records what is actually a stout or plus-size garment as standard-size (that is, when and if institutions designate size in their records at all).  

Quite early in my research, I encountered this paucity of objects firsthand as, time and again, collections managers and curators regretted to inform me that they did not have any stout, plus-size or large-size garments recorded in their digital collections management programs. This did not mean, however, that they did not have any large-size garments in their collections; it just meant they had not been cataloged as such. Aside from being permitted to go into the collections and measure items one-by-one against historical size grading tables, there was almost no way for me to know whether or not museums had conserved examples of large-size dress. I did, however, have the great fortune of spending some time at the Robert and Penny Fox Historic Costume Collection at Drexel University measuring garments that had been pre-designated as plus-size. This research was eye opening due to the fact that so many of the objects—some dating to as recently as the 1990s—fell within the contemporary range of standard sizes, thereby attesting to the rampancy of so-called “vanity sizing” in the late twentieth century.

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25 I worked as both an intern and assistant in the costume collection at the Museum of the City of New York and can attest that it is rare for costume collections to include sizes within collections records.  
26 Among them, Cornell University, the University of Minnesota, Kent State University, The Robert and Penny Fox Historical Costume Collection at Drexel University, The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, The Museum of the City of New York and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
century. Through this research, we even discovered that a garment that had been classified as plus-size was likely actually a maternity dress. Valerie Steele adopted a very similar approach when she went into historical costume archives and physically measured individual corsets in order to debunk the persistent myth of the eighteen-inch waist. A similar research program could be implemented to locate stout and plus-size garments across museum collections—and indeed it would be a fascinating and important project—but, aside from the time I spent at Drexel, the financial and time constraints for finding just perhaps a few extant garments were too great for the present study.

Much as with Breward’s and Buckley and Clark’s work, the institutional neglect of stoutwear has meant that an entire history has been written out of mainstream fashion histories. This is not to say, however, that such marginal or forgotten histories operated outside of fashion as an experience or product of modernity. Rather, these works, as I hope mine does, actually upend this notion. In Breward’s case, he set out to provide a framework for thinking about “fashionable” masculine consumption as occurring parallel to, albeit differently from, women’s consumption. Within the context of studies such as Breward’s—or what, generally speaking, could be defined as cultural histories of fashion—physical garments, in the end, actually reveal very little about the culture and practice of fashion outside the isolated practice of wearing, evidenced by the sweat stain or altered hemline, for example. Media, broadly defined, are therefore in many ways much better suited to the study of fashion practices—whether that be the practices of production, consumption or the very practice of mediation itself. Fashion magazines are therefore an ideal place to begin looking in order to reconstruct such histories; however, as is the case with individuals who in their time were marginal to fashion—such as men or stout women—oftentimes the media record is as lacking as that of surviving dress (a point that I will discuss at greater length in the following section).

Annabella Pollen and Charlotte Nicklas have remarked upon the fact that, as fashion scholars move increasingly to write about forgotten or marginalized histories, they are often required to adopt “ad hoc” approaches and exercise a degree of methodological nimbleness as they turn evermore “to unusual or unresearched historical sources…[reflecting] the convulsions

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29 Breward, Hidden Consumer, 2.
30 To this point, Giorgio Riello has argued that fashion studies as a field lends itself much better to studies of the consumption and the everyday due to the fact that these objects and practices that are rarely preserved in museum collections “appear much more important in this type of analysis than in dress history research.” See Giorgio Riello, “The Object of Fashion: Methodological Approaches to the History of Fashion,” Journal of Aesthetics & Culture 3, no. 1 (2011), 5.
that history, as a discipline has undergone in recent decades.”

Evans has echoed this point with her metaphor for fashion historians as “ragpickers” who must combine different methods, resources and ways of thinking in order to capture the inherently dynamic, “semiotically unstable” nature of fashion. In a demonstration of his own methodological dexterity, Breward observed that with an ephemeral media record, it was necessary to collapse the hierarchies that exist between sources as disparate as “popular novels, shop catalogs, trade directories, carte de visite and street photographs, diaries and vaudeville reminiscences” in order to tell the history of masculine consumption through “traces.”

In constructing my own “ad hoc” approach after realizing that I would have to reconstruct the history of stoutwear and of the stout body through mere “traces,” I was therefore led to search for a method that would grant me a certain degree of flexibility—one that would help me to identify a problem but also guide me as I waded through a vast and often unaffiliated array of largely textual but also visually evocative primary source materials. Through this search, I was inevitably led to Foucault’s archaeology—a practice that I will describe at length in the following section.

2.2 Foucault’s Archaeology: Discovering the Stout Body and Delimiting a Research Problem

In the introduction to her book, The Flesh Made Word (1987), the English literature scholar Helena Michie asked the question, “If women are simultaneously language and body, what does it mean to represent their bodies in language?” Inspired by her methods, I found myself asking a similar question of my own research: Absent a material record of surviving dress, what does it mean to represent the stout woman’s body in language? Indeed, Michie, much like myself, found herself facing a dearth of primary source materials in her attempt to reconstruct female sexuality in Victorian novels. Rather than reading these sources as sites of “repression, silence and prudery,” however, she sought to reconstruct female sexuality by looking in the very places that have “been assumed to be the place of its erasure.” For the stout woman, the fashion media has, in many ways, existed, to borrow Michie’s words, as the site of her “erasure.”

32 Nicklas and Pollen, “Introduction,” 2. Recent doctoral dissertations in fashion studies are a testament to these creative methodological approaches. For example, in her examination of fashion photography within the broader cultural and artistic landscape of postwar Britain, Felice McDowell devised a tripartite research method culled from the practices of discourse analysis, visual analysis and traditional archival research. See Felice McDowell, Photographed at...Locating Fashion Imagery in the Cultural Landscape of Post-War Britain 1945-1962 (PhD diss., London College of Fashion, 2015), 33-35. Similarly, Ane Lynge-Jörlden devised an “integrated” methodology that included participant observation and textual analysis. See Ane Lynge-Jörlden, Between Edge and Elite: Niche Fashion Magazines, Producers and Readers (PhD diss., University of the Arts London, 2009), 45.

33 Evans, Fashion at the Edge, 11-12.

34 Breward adopted this idea from the historian Charles Bernheimer. See Breward, Hidden Consumer, 17-18.


36 Ibid., 4.
scholars have argued that the fat woman has been marginalized by the fashion industry and within fashion media. 37 This is not to say, however, that she is entirely absent within these sources or that her absence is without meaning; rather, those sources in which she appears in traces capture the tensions that exist between the absent and present body, and thereby tell a story of their own. In order to reconstruct a body that had been written out of novels, but also out of history, Michie therefore devised a method of writing “across and in between traditions to begin to depict female sexuality.” 38 She does not purport to reconstruct a “literal” body, but rather seeks to “liberate” the female body “in (but not from) discourse.” 39

Although Michie is critical of Foucault’s perspectives on the body and female sexuality, 40 her method is nevertheless deeply indebted to him, and specifically to the problem-oriented nature of his “archaeological” approach to discourse analysis. First outlined in *The Order of Things* (1966) but more fully fleshed out in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault’s archaeology identifies ways of speaking and thinking in a chosen historical moment without adhering to a “formalizing” method for analyzing language, such as semiotics or Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). 41 Foucault was notoriously evasive in offering a concrete definition of archaeology; however, Kendall and Wickham helpfully define archaeology as “the process of investigating the archives of discourse.” 42 For this dissertation, Foucault’s archaeological method was chosen because it permits a historical excavation into one discursive site, in one discrete period, and thereby casts light on how a subject or object was understood and discussed within a particular historical moment.

Oftentimes, archaeology and Foucault’s later method of genealogy, which is more focused on ruptures and discontinuities in discourse over time, are discussed side-by-side. It is therefore worth establishing that, although this dissertation somewhat straddles the two, the aim is nevertheless to examine the rules of formation intensely during a specified timeframe.

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38 Michie notes that Foucault neglected female sexuality in *The History of Sexuality Volume I* in which “women only make cameo appearances. They are neither agents nor subjects.” See Michie, *Flesh Made Word*, 6.

39 Michie calls this an “integrative feminist approach.” See Michie, *Flesh Made Word*, 8-10. Michie’s method recalls Elizabeth Grosz’s contention that in order to resuscitate the body in Western thinking, the body must be liberated from “the biological and pseudo-naturalist appropriations from which it has historically suffered” and instead “must be understood through a range of disparate discourses and not simply restricted to naturalistic and scientific modes of explanation.” Such an approach, Grosz argues, permits the scholar to develop “alternative accounts of the body” and to “create upheavals in the structure of existing knowledges.” See Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 20.

40 Grosz notes that Foucault only speaks about the male body, and that his work (with the exception of his later volumes) leaves little room for considering “self-production.” Ibid., 146-147, 154-158.

41 Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 135.

(1915-1930) rather than looking at different forms the fat, female body might have taken at
different historical moments.43

According to Felice McDowell, “By charting the visible statements of a discourse rather
than seeking to uncover that which has never been articulated, an archaeological analysis
examines the rules, functions and formations of discourse,” as well as the conditions under
which a discourse is formed.44 For these reasons, Foucault’s method is not beholden to “‘the
book’ and the ‘oeuvre,’” nor to discrete units of text more generally, which the philosopher does
not trust “as being as immediate and as self-evident as they [appear].”45 Indeed, discourses,
according to Foucault, are not formally organized or constructed, but rather converge under
certain “rules of formation.”46 He therefore proposes a method of locating “discursive
formations” or “regularities” across and between texts, which are themselves broadly defined.47
Although Foucault himself provided only an oblique definition of discursive formations, Stuart
Hall helpfully defines a discursive formation as “a group of statements which provide a language
for talking about...a particular topic at a particular historical moment,”48 or that which presents
“different ‘pictures’ of reality” in different historical moments.49 In his own words, Foucault
explains how discourse ultimately “defines the possibilities of what can and cannot be said about
a subject.”50 According to Foucault, discursive formations may be located under the following
conditions:

Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of
dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices,
one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings,
transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a
discursive formation. (emphasis in original)51

43 Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977 (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 85. James D. Faubion offers a lucid definition of the two approaches, explaining that archaeology
is “nothing more than the synchronic phase of genealogy itself; its review of the state of subjects, of
objects, and of the relations between them not through time but, instead, at any particular moment [in]
time. From 1971 forward, Foucault favored genealogy not simply for its prioritization of events over
systems but also its programmatization [sic] of a history no longer constrained to be a history of the past
but capable of being ‘a history of the present.’” See James D. Faubion, “Introduction,” in Essential Works

44 McDowell, “Photographed At...” 45.

45 Echoing this point, earlier in the volume, Foucault writes, “We must question those ready-made
syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is
recognized from the outset.” Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, 22, 135.

46 Ibid., 41-42.

47 Foucault, for instance, referred to the archive in general terms, suggesting somewhat obtusely that
statements—and thereby anything that has been said within a particular socio-historical moment are the
archive. See Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, 148; The Order of Things, 130-132.

48 Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation” in Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices,
ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), 44.


50 Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, 103.

51 Ibid., 38.
Within these definitions, it is worth singling out the phrase “statement,” which Foucault defines as a phrase, utterance or the “elementary unit of discourse” that is caught up “in a logical, grammatical, locutory nexus.” Statements, according to Foucault, “cut across” sources and reveal “possible unities.” A discursive formation is discontinuous, but it nevertheless “finds a way of limiting its domain,” of defining what it is talking about, of giving it the status of an object—and therefore of making it manifest, nameable and describable. At the same time, however, discursive formations do not refer “to a single object, formed once and for all” on a “single horizon of objectivity.” The plus-size body has its antecedent in the stout body, for instance. These, however, are not the same body; although they are both manifestations of the fat, female body, each is a product of its time, formed and informed by historically-determined ways of speaking about and thinking about those bodies that breach the firm margins of the parallel construct of the “ideal” body.

According to these definitions, it could therefore be said that there existed a vast spectrum of “statements” that were invoked to speak about both the stout body and about stoutwear and which in turn manifest the material reality to which they refer (i.e., the matrix of manufacturers, retailers and media spaces that constitute the stoutwear industry and the fleshy, embodied experience of stoutness exemplified by the “stout body”). One of the most prominent statements appearing within the discourse of stoutwear was the idea of “scientific” stoutwear, or a statement that refers to the principles underlying the logic of how to cut patterns for large-size garments—a form of industry shorthand that was, in turn, foundational to the practice of stout garment manufacturing and design, at times even to its detriment (a point that will be discussed in greater depth in chapter four). Other statements that referred to and which, in turn, were constitutive of the stout body included “She’s 33% of your trade”; the “Perfect 36”; and the notion that fat flesh could “flow” or possessed “liquid” qualities (all of which will be discussed in chapter three). Statements such as these appear frequently within these early discourses about the stoutwear industry, referring to the same object in different ways, but which cumulatively give meaning to and physically construct the stout body. To borrow Foucault’s phrasing, they are a group of statements “that have one and the same object.”

Foucault also argues, however, that a single statement, on its own, cannot independently perform this task of constructing an object “once and for all…preserving it indefinitely as its horizon of inexhaustible ideality.” Rather, statements belonging to a discursive formation are historical as well as relational, for it is “the interplay of the rules that make possible the

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52 Ibid., 80, 86.
53 Ibid., 87. In my case, statements appearing in the media referring to the “thirty-three percent” of the population that was estimated to be stout, the “perfect 36” pattern from which all ready-to-wear garments were graded or the “flowing” qualities of fat, female flesh, whether implicitly or explicitly referring to the stout woman, nevertheless helped to bring her into clearer focus. The significance of these statements and why I singled them out will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter.
54 Ibid., 41.
55 Ibid., 32.
56 Ibid., 32.
57 Ibid.
appearance of objects during a given period of time.”58 As is the case with stoutwear, the above statements define the stout body always in relation to the slender, normative body; it is a body constructed of lacks and shortcomings—a body that is deviant, difficult to fit and thus in need of discipline. When the stout body is defined as such within fashion discourse, a fleshy body begins to take form, if only obliquely. At the same time, however, it should be acknowledged that these statements are not at all unique to the discourses of and about stoutwear. Rather, statements, by their very nature, cut across fields and appear within other discursive formations. Rocamora underscores the idea that discourses are “made of statements that extend beyond the confines of the field…[overflowing] the limits of the field [they unfold] in.”59 More specifically, she notes how fashion discourses, while possessing their own characteristics unique to the production and consumption of clothing, nevertheless routinely borrow values and concepts from the field of art.60 They are “interwoven,” as she says, with the logic and practices of other fields of creative production.61

This is certainly true of stoutwear, too, as it existed as a sub-category of ready-to-wear and thus relied upon not only the material infrastructure of Seventh Avenue to produce large-size garments, but also the media spaces and industry jargon of ready-to-wear. Even so, the stoutwear industry possessed its own unique traits, values and characteristics that set it apart from the mainstream—namely, the tendency to invoke the discourses of statistics, architecture and engineering when speaking about both the production of stoutwear, but also of the stout body. Beyond the remit of design discourse, however, stoutwear was also very much a clear manifestation of shifting cultural mores, ways of thinking about the body and a mounting fear of fatness in American society. In other words, stoutwear was very much a product of its time. Indeed, although the ideology of stoutwear in many ways breached the “porous” boundaries of the field of fashion, strictly speaking, it is this “combination” or “meeting” of discourses that is specific to the sub-category of stoutwear within the wider realm of fashion discourse.62

However, just as statements are not unique to the discursive field in which they circulate, they also are not the “majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject.”63 For instance, the widely-circulated statistic that one-third or thirty-three percent of American women in 1916 qualified as stout (and which will be discussed at length in chapter three) was not the sole invention or finding of one group, one manufacturer or one advertiser; rather, the statistic responded to and emerged from a manifest tendency in American culture at the turn of the century to weigh, measure and to generally quantify the body. Indeed, statements

58 Ibid.
60 Rocamora makes this point based on her reading of Bourdieu, and specifically his essay “Haute Couture, Haute Culture.” However, Nancy Troy also makes similar remarks in Couture Culture: A Case Study in Modern Art and Fashion (London: MIT Press, 2003).
62 While Rocamora acknowledges the idea that fields have porous boundaries and are formed by external forces, she nevertheless argues that a “fashion discourse” is particular; it is a “coming together of specific discourses…a meeting of statements pertaining to various discursive formations and shaped by various fields, but whose combination is specific to the field of fashion. Ibid., 58.
63 Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, 55.
such as this flowed through different individuals and cut across texts at the same time they permeated different fields and transcended disciplines.

As Foucault has written, it is therefore on the shoulders of the researcher to characterize and individualize...the coexistence of these dispersed and heterogeneous statements; the system that governs their division, the degree to which they depend on one another, the way in which they interlock or exclude one another...and the play of their location, arrangement and replacement.64

Drawing upon this notion, as Gavin Kendall and Gary Wickham have written, to approach the study of history in a Foucauldian manner “is to select a problem rather than a historical period for investigation” (emphasis in original).65 Invoking similar language, Fran Tonkiss argues that while discourse analysis as a method of research is notable for its “resistance to formulaic rules of method,” one of its hallmarks is this identification of a discrete research question or problem.66 In his own words, Foucault describes (somewhat circuitously) the act of establishing or identifying a problem as locating the “rules of formation” of an object of discourse, or the “practices” that “define [a discursive formation] in its specificity.”67 When conducting an archaeological discourse analysis, the researcher must therefore ultimately know what she is looking for, or what she is ultimately asking at, prior to beginning the research.

For this dissertation, the methodological problem, at its most basic, ultimately boiled down to the question, “Where is the fat, female body in early twentieth century American fashion media?” Given that she was absent within these spaces, I engaged in a good deal of searching and reading “between the lines” of conventional fashion reportage (e.g. editorials, fashion spreads, columns, etc.) to catch glimpses of her in the marginal spaces of fashion media discourse. Through this process, I soon realized that she was not absent entirely within these spaces; rather, she had merely been relegated to their margins. To invoke the thinking of the fat studies scholars Jana Evans Braziel and LeBesco, while the slender body “manifests the quintessential commodity in American culture—the pinup beauty marketed in glossy shots, calendar photographs, centerfolds, and advertisements for virtually all products,” the fat, female body is a body around which almost exclusively dieting and weight loss products proliferate.68 Unless you are expressly looking for her, you will not find her in the sumptuously-produced pages of mainstream magazines, for her domain (when she does appear in these sources) has historically been the classifieds section of magazines, newspapers and journals where she is depicted alongside advertisements for decidedly unfashionable products like depilatories and deodorants. Beyond the fashion media, the stout woman's place was within diet and exercise

64 Ibid., 34.
67 Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, 46.
manuals, style guides and fashion design textbooks—all of which have generally evaded the attention of fashion scholars. Indeed, as Gillian Rose has written, discourse analysis within the field of cultural studies depends largely upon expertise and familiarity with your primary sources; the “most interesting” discourse analyses, she argues, are oftentimes those that emerge from such serendipitous findings.69 This notion also parallels Burke’s insistence that within cultural histories, sources should not be treated as mirrors of their times and should instead be read in concert with sources and texts that illuminate the greater context in which they were created and circulated.70 In researching the history of stoutwear across such a widely-dispersed and heterogeneous range of primary sources, I therefore had to engage in a good deal of not only reading between the lines of extant sources but of also reading in parallel with conventional histories of fashion in order to fill in the gaps that existed in a scanty material and media record.

Although Foucault’s archaeological approach to discourse analysis permits a great degree of methodological freedom, it has nevertheless been critiqued as lacking in rigor within the fields of CDA and cultural studies. Indeed, as Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer have written, while Foucault is the de facto “godfather” of CDA, it is nevertheless difficult to translate his theoretical claims into concrete methods.71 Rather, they argue, each researcher must undergo a process of delimiting and defining her specific archaeological methods, as I do later in this chapter.72 Methods aside, Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasiński have also pointed out that although cultural studies has produced a large body of textual analysis and made claims regarding the social construction of gender, ethnicity, class and age, “cultural studies has been unable to show how precisely the discursive construction of cultural forms is achieved in everyday life.”73 This is due in no small measure to the fact that Foucault’s theories of power, discourse and governmentality largely neglect the agency of speaking subjects. Even so, the underlying, most basic principles of Foucauldian discourse analysis have nevertheless had a great impact on these fields, which draw heavily upon the basic precept that discourse “defines and produces objects of knowledge, thereby governing the way topics are talked about and practices conducted.”74

Somewhat different from media and cultural studies, however, Foucault’s approach has been adopted less critically within the field of fashion studies in recent years where his theories of discourse and power have become, in themselves, fashionable, even as his methods continue to go underutilized.75 Indeed, as Tyran has written the popularity of Foucault has also led to a growing propensity amongst fashion studies scholars to namecheck Foucault without engaging in

70 Burke, What is Cultural History, 20.
72 Ibid.
74 Ibid., 12.
75 An exception to this is Felice McDowell’s application of Foucault’s archaeological method in her doctoral dissertation. See McDowell, “Photographed At,” 41-51.
sustained analyses that draw upon his theories. Tynan’s sentiment echoes Riello’s (somewhat critical) opinion that the field of fashion studies is heavily “deductive,” meaning that scholars oftentimes come from “the frontlines of theory” only to apply their “abstract assertions” to the analysis of artifacts. This criticism aside, Foucault’s focus on governmentality and discourse has proven incredibly useful for scholars interested in analyzing and theorizing peripheral dress practices and forgotten histories of fashion, and especially within the fashion media. In particular, I argue that Foucault’s approach is especially useful for researching bodies that have been marginalized or are absent within extant histories of fashion, such as the stout body, which I frame here as discursive formation that was constructed within but also passed through the discourses of early twentieth century American fashion.

2.2.1 Method in Four Steps: Searching, Selecting, Sorting and Analyzing

While previous sections dealt with my methodology and the principles and rationale for my choice of Foucault’s strain of discourse analysis over others (such as CDA), here, I will delimit the specific method employed throughout the course of researching and writing this dissertation. In doing so, I will attempt to overcome the notion, discussed above, that Foucault’s archaeology is resistant to formulaic rules of method by describing, in detail, how I practiced discourse analysis. The “archaeological excavation” of historical fashion media occurred in four discrete phases: searching, selecting, sorting and analyzing, which were followed by the writing up phase. The initial search phase of the research required me to read widely as I searched for traces of the fat woman within extant fashion media. In doing so, I was led to both physical fashion magazines and trade journals (housed within the library stacks at Parsons School of Design, The New School and the Fashion Institute of Technology) and their digitized counterparts. During this initial research phase, the discovery of the discursive formation

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76 She notes that Entwistle’s The Fashioned Body is a notable exception, but we could also add Agnès Rocamora’s Fashioning the City to this list and, more recently, Rachel Lifter’s PhD dissertation, “Contemporary Indie and the Construction of Identity” (PhD diss., University of the Arts London, 2012); McDowell’s PhD dissertation, “Photographed At”; and Renate Stauss’ PhD dissertation, “Dress as Therapy: Working with Dress on the Self in Therapeutic Settings” (PhD diss., London College of Fashion, 2017). For further discussion about the impact Foucault has had on fashion studies, see Jane Tynan, “Michel Foucault: Fashioning the Body Politic” in Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists, eds. Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 184-199.

77 Riello, “The Object of Fashion,” 2.

78 See also Mitchell Dean, Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault’s Methods and Historical Sociology (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2, 14. Scheurich and McKenzie argue that there has not been a single text that has completely and thoroughly laid out the archaeological method. See James Joseph Scheurich and Kathryn Bell McKenzie, “Foucault's Methodologies: Archaeology and Genealogy” in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 319.

79 Across the literature, Foucault’s archaeology is described as a highly individual pursuit. For instance, Kendall and Wickham delimit a seven-step process, whereas Keller denotes only two steps. See Reiner Keller, “Analysing Discourse: An Approach from the Sociology of Knowledge,” FQS 6, no. 3 (2005): 1-18; Kendall and Wickham, Using Foucault’s Methods, 27-28.
“stout” enabled a new, more focused phase of the research and bounded the time frame for the dissertation. It also helped to define the research “problem,” which, as has already been discussed, is itself a necessary component of the problem-oriented nature of Foucauldian discourse analysis. As has already been discussed in this chapter, while the plus-size body is a genealogical outgrowth of the stout body, they are two very different bodies, constructed in two very different historical moments. During the initial search phase, mentions of the plus-size woman were collected with equal intensity as those pertaining to the stout woman. As a result, the research design was initially much more expansive, covering the long twentieth century. Given the sheer abundance of primary source materials I unearthed during my archaeological excavation, however, I necessarily had to limit my investigation to a much narrower timeframe. Quite early on, I therefore drew time-contingent boundaries (1915-1930) around which sources I read and collected, even as I continued to read expansively. After narrowing down the focus of the research, the powerful capabilities of the keyword search feature on the ProQuest platform—the digital home of two of the dissertation’s most important primary sources: *Vogue* and *Women’s Wear*—enabled me to locate articles, advertisements and editorials that mentioned the word stout and its synonyms in their various permutations. Keyword searches unearthed thousands of hits, many of which were saved in digital folders on my computer and on the ProQuest servers.

At this point in the research it was necessary to engage in a process of selection to make the collected body of primary sources more manageable and digestible. Although I had previously assumed that the fat woman was a marginal figure within fashion media discourse, the sheer abundance of materials accumulated through the keyword searches was somewhat overwhelming. This presented another methodological problem, namely how and when to should limit sources, while still performing a thorough and thoughtful discourse analysis. To this point, Rose notes that one of the difficulties of discourse analysis lies in knowing where to stop the data collection process. She argues that you should stop when you have “the feeling that you have enough material to persuasively explore its intriguing aspects. That is, discourse analysis does not depend on the quantity of material analyzed, but its quality.” Thus, “in the face of the breadth of source material demanded by discourse analysis, it is useful to begin by thinking about what sources should be selected as starting points” (emphasis in original).

With this in mind, and upon closer examination, I found that much of the reportage, and especially in the professional media (a designation that will be discussed at greater length in the

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80 When conducting a discourse analysis, Foucault argues that preexisting categorical assumptions must be “held in suspense.” The researcher’s job is therefore to show that such categories (here, “stout” and plus-size”) “do not come about by themselves, but are always the result of a construction of the rules which must be known and the justification of which must be scrutinized.” See Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 28. In this instance, I had to suspend my conceptions of what constituted a fat body in the early twentieth century, due to the fact that my own lens for thinking about this body was so tinged by my own cultural understanding of a plus-size body.

81 Both of these publications have been completely indexed by ProQuest. It is possible to search for text in long form articles as much as in advertisements.


83 Ibid., 149.
following section), was ancillary to my main research question. In the trade periodicals in particular, the coverage of stoutwear manufacturing often focused on store openings, quotas and the minutiae of new collections—information that reflected a thriving manufacturing sector (a finding in and of itself), but was nevertheless ancillary to the principal research question: How was the stout body discursively constructed by and within fashion media between the years 1915 and 1930? As “starting points,” to borrow Rose’s term, I therefore selected only those articles, advertisements and editorials that discussed, in one way or another, the stout consumer herself—whether that be her needs and wants as a consumer, her body or her socio-psychological wellbeing. Another criterion of selection was to choose sources that were visually strong, or which contained photographic and illustrated elements, given the privileging of the visual within fashion. After I had made my selections, the initial cache of thousands of unique articles, advertisements, style guides, textbooks and editorials had been whittled down to approximately five hundred ninety documents.\(^4^4\)

The third phase of the research, sorting, was kicked off by printing a selection of the most relevant primary sources, or about three hundred in total. Through the selection process, items can easily be lost or become redundant through digital filing systems. By printing them, however, it becomes possible to physically sort the sources into different piles that reflect the various themes and reveal patterns that crop up again and again during the search and selection phases. In his own words, what Foucault describes such patterns as discursive “regularities” or “rules of formation”—the proverbial keys to Foucauldian discourse analysis for they reveal how a subject was understood, spoken about and thereby constructed within a given historical moment. To quote Foucault again, “Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion...one can define a regularity...a discursive formation” (emphasis in original).\(^4^5\) Through the sorting process, which removes documents from their original context and places them into new thematic groupings, it becomes possible to identify such systems of dispersion and thereby delimit key discursive formations that drive the rest of the research.

Given that fashion media are highly visual, however, it would have been problematic to limit my analysis only to text. As Kendall and Wickham point out, the archaeological method takes into account what is visible as much as what is “sayable.”\(^4^6\) The term discourse throughout this dissertation is therefore broadly inclusive of both text and images—a usage that is shared across disciplines in the humanities. Indeed, the notion that language is not only verbal, but also textual, visual, material, gestural and increasingly digital, is a central precept of multimodal analysis—a research paradigm that has been in ascendance within the field of media studies.

\(^4^4\) It should be noted that this is merely an estimation, gleaned from the documents I had saved in a folder on my desktop over the past five years titled “Primary Sources.” It does not account for that fact that throughout the writing process, I returned often to the digital archives to incorporate previously overlooked or neglected sources or, conversely, cut them during the editing and revising process. Many of these articles did not make it into my folder of primary sources even if they appear in the dissertation.

\(^4^5\) Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 38.

\(^4^6\) Kendall and Wickham, *Using Foucault’s Methods*, 27, 35.
since the mid-1990s. This dissertation, however, falls short of a fully multimodal analysis since it does not take into account gestural and verbal language, but rather focuses on the exchanges between the written and the visual within fashion media. In doing so, the dissertation draws upon Norman Fairclough's observation that "very often, visuals and 'verbals' operate in mutually reinforcing ways which makes them very difficult to disentangle." For this reason, I follow Fairclough in assuming "broad and nonrestrictive notions of discourse and text" when conducting discourse analysis. This approach is common (if somewhat taken for granted) one in the field of fashion studies where scholars like Paul Jobling have, in a reversal of Roland Barthes' privileging of "written clothing," advocated for an "in tandem" reading of image and text within fashion media. Invoking similar language, fashion historian Eugenia Paulicelli has observed that, in fashion the visual and the discursive necessarily "coexist" and should therefore be given equal consideration by the researcher.

Through the practice of reading text and image side-by-side, I learned that text did much to illuminate or bring meaning to representations of stout women that, oftentimes, did not fulfill my personal expectations of what a stout body should look like. With my contemporary eyes inured to the visual discourses of the "obesity epidemic," many images that purported to be of the stout body appeared to me to be slender or perhaps only marginally fat—that is, bearing stereotypical visual hallmarks like double chins, full waistlines or ample busts. Thus, without text, or the discursive aid of the phrases "stout" or "stoutwear" to focus my analysis, I may have entirely overlooked these important visuals as objects of study. Ultimately, my own biases of what the fat, female body should look like were colored by what Porter has described as the natural inclination for historians to regard the body as unchanging. In laying out an agenda for rectifying this misperception, Porter therefore encourages historians of the body to use images not merely as illustrations but as evidence. More specifically, he writes that historians should "ponder deeply" about not only the aesthetics but also the significance of photographs and illustrations of the body within and in relation to written sources. Throughout this research,

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88 Ibid., 28. See also Rose, Visual Methodologies, 194.
89 Jobling finds Barthes’ distinction between “written clothing” and “image clothing” problematic, and instead postulates “a dialectic between words and images that seeks not to prioritize the one over the other, but to propound instead their complementarity.” Paul Jobling, Fashion Spreads: Word and Image in Fashion Photography Since 1980 (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 66, 91.
91 This finding in many ways brought to mind Roland Barthes’ sentiment that in fashion photography, text can oftentimes be “parasitic” to the image. See Roland Barthes, “The Photographic Message” in A Barthes Reader, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 204.
92 The norms of representing the “obese” body are perhaps best articulated by Charlotte Cooper who has coined the term “headless fatty phenomenon” as a way to describe the tendency for fat people to be photographed or filmed unaware or without their consent, usually from the neck down, with the resulting images being used widely within the media as illustrations of the “obesity epidemic.” See Charlotte Cooper, “Headless Fatties,” CharlotteCooper.net, January 1, 2007, http://charlottecooper.net/fat/fat-writing/headless-fatties-01-07/.
representations of stout women in the professional and mainstream fashion media vacillated between two poles: that, on the one hand, of the stout body as slimmed down and idealized to the point it did not look recognizably fat or stout, and on the other, of the stout body as a gross caricature of deviant femininity. There was, however, much to be learned from these polarizing modes—or these visual discourses—of imaging the fat, female body and the value systems they created and upheld just as there was much to be un-learned about my own ways of seeing.

Just as I had to unlearn how I saw the stout body, however, I also had to unlearn the natural biases I held against using advertisements (as opposed to glossy editorial content) as legitimate objects of study within my analysis. As I discuss at greater length in chapter seven, given the particularly effusive nature of advertisements from the second decade of the twentieth century onward, the boundaries between editorial content and advertisements grew increasingly blurred. By consciously elevating advertising and editorial content to the same level, and thereby reading and analyzing advertisements with as much intensity and consideration as editorial content while also remaining sensitive to the matters of authorship and audience, I sought to replicate the manner in which women themselves would have consumed these discourses in their time. In her work on the history of *The Ladies' Home Journal*, Jennifer Scanlon advocated a similar method, arguing that “the line between the magazine’s internal departments, the editorial material…and the advertising…was often less than clearly drawn,” and thus it was important for the researcher to give them equal consideration.

Through this ad hoc method, which interwove visual analysis and discourse analysis, I aimed to create what Anne Balsamo, drawing upon Foucault, has described as a “thick perception” of the body. This method, as Balsamo argues, is a means to “understanding the ways in which the body is conceptualized and articulated within different cultural discourses.” By reading the body across myriad sources, she argues that it becomes possible to understand the specifically cultural practices and modes of making the body. Within this context, reading as a method unto itself became a central mechanism of discursive production. In constructing a thick perception of the stout body, my aim was therefore not to merely describe how the stout

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97 In discussing “thick perception,” Balsamo draws upon Michael Feher who describes histories of the body as “body building.” In order to arrive at a “thick perception” of the body in any given era, he explains, one must regard the body as an “effect of techniques promoting specific gestures and postures, sensations and feelings.” Balsamo argues that “thick perception” is one method for analyzing the relationship between bodies and technology. See Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 3-4. See also Michel Feher, “Of Bodies and Technologies” in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: DIA Art Foundation, 1987): 159-165.

body was represented through image and text, but to articulate the very mechanisms and practices that led to her making.

In creating this thick perception of the stout body, however, I also drew upon Michie’s method of reading “across and in between traditions” in order to capture how the stout body was constructed within and across different fields of discursive production.99 A key example of this reading “across and in between” sources and traditions is evident in chapter three, in which I attempt to situate the intense focus on statistics within professional media amongst new practices of measuring and quantifying bodies in early twentieth century America. This kind of reading was not without its constraints, however. Indeed, as productive as this four-step process was, it also revealed the limitations of my sources in answering my central research question while forcing me to think through matters of authorship and audience. In the following section, I will therefore delimit and describe those sources that, for the purposes of this dissertation, proved to be the most productive (and, at times, surprising) starting points for my archaeological discourse analysis.

2.3 Presentation of Primary Sources

The main sources I relied upon for my discourse analysis included a vast array women’s magazines, fashion magazines, American newspapers, industry trade journals and fashion and style guides—a complete accounting of which is provided in the bibliography at the end of this dissertation. Given the wide scope of the materials consulted, it would not be an overstatement to suggest that this dissertation could not have happened without the existence of online and digitized archives. Of course, online archives have their critics—namely those who argue that digital materials should be used only as supplements to in-person and hands-on object-based and archival research instead of as the primary research material itself100—but, with the passage of time, this criticism seems to have been eclipsed by cautious optimism. Indeed, scholars across the humanities have embraced the vast epistemological terrain that opens up with the digitization of forgotten and overlooked materials while at the same time calling for “more explicit,

99 Michie notes that not only was the female body repressed within Victorian novels, she also argues that Foucault neglected female sexuality in his *The History of Sexuality Volume I* in which “women only make cameo appearances. They are neither agents nor subjects.” See Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*, 6.

100 In fashion studies, these debates most often swirl around the accessibility of digitized costume collections and the impossibility of conducting a proper object analysis at a digital remove. Most notably, Jules David Prown has argued that the digital object can be a starting point for research, so long as it is supplemented by the examination of actual objects. See Jules David Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). Riello has echoed this point, noting that “the digital age allows for an easy…comparison of similar objects in different collections.” He argues that this ease of access compounds the fact that the “average researcher does not have the specialist skills to understand such a range of artefacts. The easiness of access to museum artefacts does not match the complexity of knowledge necessary to produce good scholarly interpretations.” See Riello, “The Object of Fashion,” 7.
discipline-specific conversations that consider the role and influence of digital technologies in our research.”

In the vein of trying to open up a discipline-specific conversation about digital archives as Solberg suggests, it is worth pointing out that, within the field of fashion studies, the *Vogue* archive tends to be held up at the expense of other, less well-known and, at times, less accessible and less user-friendly archives, such as Cornell University’s Home Economics Archive: Research, Tradition and History (HEARTH), the Fashion Europeana archive and the new, but incomplete, *Harper’s Bazaar* archive, for example. This leads to a natural bias, especially amongst young researchers and students, to perhaps rely too much upon the easy accessibility and searchability of *Vogue* for primary source material. I, too, however, am guilty of this. Early in my research, the first place I went looking for the stout woman was in the glossy, albeit digitized, pages of *Vogue*. As mentioned previously, my interest was in where and how the fat, female body figured in the mainstream fashion press both contemporarily and historically; however, my initial keyword searches for the terms “plus-size” and “fat” (among others) yielded few hits. It was not until I began the slow process of “digitally flipping through” early twentieth century issues of *Vogue* that I discovered her, the stout woman, in various guises, appearing in advertisements for weight loss tonics, creams and reducing corsets. This insight was one that I would not have made without the easy and quick access to issues of *Vogue* that are oftentimes more difficult for researchers to access due to condition concerns, and one which led me on an entirely new research path. Armed with new insights about the so-called “stout woman,” my research aims crystallized and my frustrations about the lack of existing large-size garments in costume collections subsided as I thought through my newfound sources.

As Andrew Stauffer has observed, shrewd scholars are increasingly “exploiting the virtual to make the past operational.” In my own case, these initial findings not only presented a previously-overlooked discursive terrain to me, but also offered valuable clues about what I should be looking for (and where I should be looking) beyond the remit of women’s and fashion media. The easy access to digitized trade journals, local newspapers, fashion and style guides, family and consumer science manuals, economics textbooks, vernacular photo archives and weight loss advice literature bolstered my more canonical fashion media research. As Stauffer has

102 In my own experience as a Master’s student at Parsons School of Design, the librarians gave us only an introduction to the *Vogue* archive. It was not until I came to the Centre for Fashion Studies that I discovered, on my own, more diverse and less well known digitized collections.
103 It should be noted, however, that these initial searches helped me to discover the forgotten and short-lived advertorial, “Fashion Plus,” which ran in American *Vogue* from 1986-1988. This, I discovered, was one of the very few instances in the history of the fashion magazine that plus-size fashion was given equal footing—albeit in an advertorial format—as standard-size fashion. See Peters, “Fashion Plus,” 175-199.
104 At the beginning of my PhD, I was interested in exploring how dress had been mobilized as a tool with in fat activist movements from the 1960s to the present. It was only after I stumbled upon the discourses of stoutwear that I shifted gears.
written, source material dating back to the nineteenth century has been a rich target for
digitization “given the plentitude of material produced by the industrial press, its freedom from
copyright restrictions, its often visually rich texture, and its informational complexity as part of a
rapidly changing media landscape.” Indeed, and speaking specifically to the opportunities
afforded dress historians and fashion studies scholars by these online treasure troves, Jennifer
Clynk and Sharon Peoples have argued that “digitized visual, archival and newspaper sources
offer promising opportunities to address silences in dress collections.” Nevertheless, I would
be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy my rare encounters with “real” objects. Indeed, through the
process of digitization, everything becomes an image. Even if I didn’t learn anything new per se
from handling a decaying girdle, a frail photograph or a musty book, these material traces
nevertheless offered me an ocular respite from my screen, but also reminded me that this was a
real history that implicated real, fleshy bodies.

In the following subsections, I will describe the two genres into which my primary
sources fell—many of which I exclusively had digital access to—and list the titles of the
periodicals and volumes that I consulted. Taken together, these genres of sources helped me to
address the previously-discussed “silence,” to borrow Clynk and Peoples’ phrasing, that I
encountered in fashion and costume collections. In addition to listing my primary sources, I will
also describe and delimit the particular characteristics of the categories into which they fall. This
extra step is necessary given that many of my sources fall outside the remit of what is
canonicaly defined within fashion studies as the fashion media.

2.3.1 Fashion Media vs. Professional Media

The lion’s share of my findings emerged from what I have broadly come to delimit as “fashion
media” and “professional media.” Drawing upon Agnès Rocamora’s definition of fashion media
as “comprising both fashion magazines and the fashion pages of newspapers and periodicals,” the
former category includes any and all media related to the topic of fashion, but created for
public consumption. The latter is broadly comprised of professional trade journals, which I
discuss below. Regarding fashion media, however, like Rocamora, I distinguish between fashion
magazines, which are “dominantly devoted to the field of fashion and beauty,” and women’s
magazines, which in spite of dedicating a great deal of space to the discussion of fashion are
nevertheless topically broader in scope.

For this study, the fashion magazines I consulted included all issues of American *Vogue* and
*Harper’s Bazaar* published between the years 1915 and

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106 Ibid., 2.
107 Jennifer Clynk and Sharon Peoples, “All Out in the Wash: Convict Stain Removal in the Narryna
Heritage Museum’s Dress Collection” in *Dress History: New Directions in Theory and Practice* (London:
Bloomsbury, 2015), 51.
108 Rocamora, *Fashioning the City*, 60-61.
109 Ibid., 61.
Given that *Harper's Bazaar* was during this period more of a general interest magazine—covering topics ranging from interior design to politics—and would not become more avowedly fashion-focused until Carmel Snow’s tenure beginning in 1933, *Vogue* proved to be a much more robust and useful source.

Colloquially referred to as America’s “fashion bible,” *Vogue* has long acted as translator of fashionable styles down to everyday dress practices and as a mediator between producers and a broad socio-economic cross-section of aspirational, fashion-consuming and fashion-literate readers, rather than just as a record of elite tastes. This is especially true with regard to the period in question—a moment during which *Vogue* had come under the editorship of Edna Woolman Chase (1914-1951) who did much to shift the magazine’s mission to extend beyond the interests of the east coast’s well-heeled. Indeed, as Norma Rantisi quoting Chase has written, during her tenure, *Vogue* was “transformed from a ‘gazette’ of social activities to a shopping guide and the intention was to show the women in the rest of the [United States]…what the smart women of New York were buying.” Among the many changes she instituted in shifting Condé Nast’s Eurocentric approach, Chase expanded *Vogue*’s mission by courting the American fashion, design and beauty industries more explicitly, therein expanding the remit of the magazine’s advertising agenda to include shopping services and a new focus on interior design and children’s clothing—a change that brought mass market stoutwear and weight loss advertisers into the fold as well.

Given that the stout woman has been effectively written out of fashion history—both within primary and secondary sources—it would be in these advertising and classifieds sections I was able to access these titles via the ProQuest digital database. While the full runs of both titles were available to search and flip through (for *Vogue*, from 1892 to the current month and for *Harper’s Bazaar*, 1867 to the current month) the *Harper’s Bazaar* archive, during the period of my research had only recently become available and was still under construction. This hindered the searchability of the periodical, which for a time was only functional as late as the 1920s.

During Snow’s time at *Bazaar*, Alexy Brodovitch elevated the magazine’s fashion content. See Rebecca Arnold, *The American Look: Fashion, Sportswear and the Image of Women in 1930s and 1940s New York* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 32. Within Western popular culture, *Vogue* has long been held up as the “fashion bible.” Within fashion studies, however, the sentiment is equally applicable. See, for example, David Gilbert, “From Paris to Shanghai: The Changing Geographies of Fashion’s World Cities” in Christopher Breward and David Gilbert (eds) *Fashion’s World Cities* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 18.

This is a notion that persists within fashion studies scholarship in spite of evidence to the contrary. David explains how, while *Vogue* positioned itself early on as an elite women’s publication, when it was purchased by Condé Nast in 1909, the magazine renounced “the snobbery of the social networks of the Gilded Age…[and] began to embrace more populist understandings of ‘authentic’ American taste and style in dress. The new nationalism included a greater acceptance of mass-produced and branded goods, an attitude which typifies American fashion design and production in the twentieth century.” See Alison Mathews David, “*Vogue*’s New World: American Fashionability and the Politics of Style,” *Fashion Theory* 10, no. 1-2 (2006), 14.


that most of my research would occur, with a number of noteworthy exceptions. Advertisements for stoutwear, beauty products and dieting and exercise gadgets, routines and supplements would prove particularly helpful in revealing the fashion media’s discursive construction of the stout body. Given that many of these advertisements were published across the women’s and fashion press, I was further able to glimpse parallel discourses across my sources, regardless of genre. The main women’s magazines I consulted included all issues of The Ladies’ Home Journal, Good Housekeeping and The Red Book Magazine dating from between the years 1915 and 1930. It should be noted that although they are broader in scope and generally more attuned to the needs and wants of “average” women, women’s magazines were no more sympathetic to the plight of the stout woman.

One space in which the stout woman was decidedly not a marginal figure, however, was in what I have deemed the professional media. Within this dissertation, the professional media include those journals published by and for the clothing and advertising industries for the consumption of professionals, and which generally speak to the business of making and selling clothing. They include all issues of Women’s Wear, Dry Goods Economist, Dry Goods Merchants Trade Journal, American Cloak and Suit Review, Corset & Underwear Review, Advertising & Selling and Printers’ Ink dating from between the years 1915-1930. The professional media are notable both for the level of discourse pertaining to the minutiae of design, manufacturing, sizing, pattern cutting, quotas, advertising, marketing, retail strategy, fabrication and fit, among other things, and the prevalence of industry-specific jargon. Among them, Women’s Wear was inarguably the most important. Whereas the stout woman was all but absent within mainstream women’s and fashion periodicals, within the professional media, the stout woman was afforded special attention, particularly in the late-teens and early-twenties—a period that coincided with the industry’s “discovery” of stout women as a viable and voracious consumer class. Women’s Wear thus offered a rare and invaluable glimpse into the practices of designing and manufacturing clothing from a historical vantage point—an area that, with the general privileging of the practice of

\[\text{footnote}116\] It would be incorrect to claim outright that there was no editorial space given to the concerns of the stout woman; especially as stoutness was correlated with age during this period, a number of articles discussing the fashions of older women addressed the matter of stoutness. A thorough overview of these articles and editorials can be found in chapters six and seven.

\[\text{footnote}117\] All of these titles were accessed via Cornell University’s HEARTH archive.

\[\text{footnote}118\] With the exception of Women’s Wear, which is hosted on the ProQuest platform, all of these sources were accessed via the HathiTrust Digital Library. The HathiTrust database is the product of partnership between a number of major global research institutions, and thus each journal is furnished by a different institution. The Dry Goods Economist is hosted by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and University of Minnesota; Dry Goods Merchants Trade Journal is hosted by University of Iowa; the American Cloak and Suit Review and the Corset & Underwear Review are both hosted by the New York Public Library; Advertising & Selling is hosted by Ohio State University; and finally, Printers’ Ink is hosted by University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, University of California and University of Iowa.
consumption as a topic of study, has been enduringly neglected within the field of fashion studies. For these reasons, it was not only important but vital to distinguish between professional media and fashion media due to the sensitivity to the matters of authorship, context and audience required of the researcher by the methods discourse analysis. Even so, within fashion studies, it is rare for scholars to distinguish between the two genres. Indeed, in The Study of Dress History, although Taylor is extensive in her discussion of literary primary sources, she, quite notably, does not single out trade journals, but instead lumps them in with other “period press and journals.” I argue, however, that by distinguishing between the professional media and fashion media, it is possible to glimpse how fashion discourses operate differently behind the scenes and in front of the eyes of consumers. To read about the stout woman in the professional media is to learn about the insidious nature of fat stigma in the early twentieth century, which permeated all levels of the industry. In my experience, the professional media became a space that manufacturers, retailers and advertisers felt was ostensibly safe from the prying eyes of consumers, and one in which they could freely speak about the stout woman in terms that were at once derogatory and desultory. For me as the researcher, however, to see the stout woman spoken about in such an unvarnished manner was eye-opening for the manner in which it evidenced how stigma can both shape and bleed outward from an industry.

Standing between fashion media and professional media, digitized national newspapers proved to be an important supplement to fashion magazines and trade journals. Including sections on both the business of fashion and on fashion as a women’s issue, in a single broadsheet it was possible to glimpse behind-the-scenes discussions about design and production alongside consumer advertisements, advice columns and fashion spreads. Newspapers also proved to be one of the rare spaces in which it was possible to find the perspective of the consumer through the medium of the op-ed. Restricting my selection of newspapers to large cities in the northeast quadrant of the United States due to their proximity to New York—and specifically to New York’s garment district where the vast majority of stoutwear manufacturing occurred—titles consulted included: New York Times, New York Herald and Brooklyn Daily Eagle, and, to a much lesser extent, Philadelphia Inquirer, Pittsburgh Daily Post, and

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119 Taylor has remarked favorably upon the emphasis placed upon consumption in the field of fashion studies. See Taylor, The Study of Dress History, 69-72. Breward, on the other hand, argues that this approach is problematic because it tends to “downplay the practices of the designer in favor of a concentration on issues of consumption with potentially unbalancing effects.” See Christopher Breward, Fashion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14-15. In keeping with Breward, it is my intention to foreground the practices of design and manufacturing in this dissertation.

In addition to providing a platform for multiple voices and multiple perspectives at once, digitized newspapers were also an incredibly rich source for casting light on local conditions and circumstances in the stoutwear trade, but for also attuning me to a breadth of small and local manufacturers whose dealings were not always reported or accounted for in the national press.

2.3.2 Style Guides

Another vital source was fashion and style guides, a full listing of which can be found in the bibliography. Much like newspapers, style guides sat somewhere between the discourses of professional and fashion media. Unlike these sources, however, I found that style guides—many of which were written by self-identifying stout women, or women who had experienced weight stigma or ageism—were one of the few places I could glimpse “dress in action.” The notion of “dress in action” comes from the dress historian Anne Buck who has written about how literary sources can reveal how “dress is used to express character and illuminate social attitudes and relationships.” Although Buck’s focus was on period novels, I argue that similar information can be gleaned from the pages of style guides due to the invaluable and rare first-person perspectives furnished by their writers who reveal in great detail how “real” women negotiated the edicts of fashion and beauty, handed down by the glossy fashion press, in their everyday practices of self-fashioning.

The emergence of didactic, women-focused literary sources, like style guides, in the early twentieth century is intimately bound up with both the growth of the discipline of home economics, as well as with what Mike Featherstone has described as the emergent “culture of narcissism” in the 1920s, which placed “greater emphasis upon appearance, display and the management of impressions.” Volumes such as Emily Post’s *Blue Book of Social Usage* (1927) and, later, Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) were successful due to “their ability to articulate the terms of a changed logic of social life” while assisting their readership to “rearrange conceptually a changed order of social relations.” Within this literary genre, which has its origins in eighteenth century manners books and nineteenth century etiquette manuals, fashion and style guides were a new, narrowly focused and immensely popular subgenre of advice literature that expressly tackled the importance of surface display and self-presentation—or the ever-important “first impression.” Against a backdrop of rapidly shifting

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121 Mentions of various stoutwear events in *Women’s Wear* and other trade journals, such as fashion shows and lectures, ultimately led me to these sources, which reported on local events, in order to find additional information. Most of these sources were located via the highly-searchable archive, Newspapers.com. For the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, I consulted the Brooklyn Public Library.


gender norms and expectations, these volumes were crucial resources for women seeking guidance for how to navigate the newfound freedoms of public life during the interwar period. Especially after having earned the right to vote in 1920, the changes in the lives of American women were particularly manifest, and publishers became aware of a growing market for literature that would assist women in navigating their new social terrain.

The emerging discipline of home economics in particular bred a wealth of new advice literature, much of it penned by women and for women. Discussing everything from how to translate fashion trends to everyday dress practices, to the principles of color and harmony in design, to how to mend garments or make at-home alterations, style guides are an incredibly rich resource for the manner in which they open a window onto historical dress practices and reveal how women actually dealt with the problems of self-presentation. Also evident within these sources, however, is a discernible tension surrounding the practice of modern consumption as different from old ways of procuring custom-made and fitted clothing from tailors and dressmakers. For instance, as the home economist Helen Goodrich Buttrick explained in her book, The Principles of Clothing Selection (1927), she saw a real “need for a definite kind of education” for the modern woman as a “clothing consumer” in order to “overcome our national vice, extravagance,” amidst a sea of goods. For all they reveal about the practices of consumption and self-fashioning, however, they somewhat curiously have evaded the discerning eyes of fashion and dress historians who have tended to use insights from style guides anecdotally, if at all, even as they have been of great interest to scholars in other disciplines.


In 1917, the Smith-Hughes National Vocational Education Act increased funding for vocational education, including in the emerging discipline of home economics, which would lead to a three-hundred percent increase in the number of women entering and teaching in these programs. See Przbyszewski, The Lost Art of Dress, 2-5.

Entwistle has explored this notion in her research on power dressing in which she used style manuals to cast light on these discourses. See Joanne Entwistle, “Fashioning the Career Woman: Power Dressing as a Strategy of Consumption” in All the World and Her Husband: Women in the 20th Century Consumer Culture, eds. Maggie Andrews and Mary Talbot (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 224-239.


Norbert Elias and Erving Goffman used etiquette books to study the structures of power in societies at different historical moments. See Norbert Elias The Court Society (New York: Pantheon, 1983) and Erving Goffman, Behavior in Public Places (New York: The Free Press, 1963). Other works that have placed advice literature front-and-center include Arditi, “Etiquette Books”; Battistella, “The Yardstick of Manners”; Michael Curtain, “A Question of Manners: Status and Gender in Etiquette and Courtesy,” Journal of Modern History 57, no. 3 (1985): 395-423. Within the discipline of design history, Lees-Maffi notes that advice literature has “largely been used as an auxiliary source in studies informed by a blend of data more easily distinguished as primary material such as letters, diaries, probate inventories and so on, implying that advice needs corroboration by reference to other sources.” See Grace Lees-Maffi, “Introduction—Writing Design: Words, Myths, Practices,” Working Papers on Design 4 (2010), 3. In fashion studies where advice literature has tended not to figure centrally as a primary source, similar thinking about the validity of these sources is likely at play.
This is due in no small measure to the fact that style guides and advice literature present some very real methodological problems and limitations. The design historian Grace-Lees Maffei, who has endorsed the use of advice literature as a primary source, argues that they require the scholar to negotiate several issues, including “the positioning of advice at an appropriate point within or between the categories of production or consumption; the extent to which prescriptive material may be taken as indicative of practice,” among other things. In spite of these potential methodological pitfalls, however, Lees-Maffei places advice literature on a continuum of media forms that, while sometimes overlooked by design historians as objects of study per se, illuminate through design and advice discourse how designed objects function as “mediating devices: mediating identity [and] mediating between individuals,” as well as mediating the flow of information between producers and consumers. Even if they do not explicitly reveal actual consumption practices but only suggest practices, Lees-Maffei argues that these sources nevertheless “allow historians to [establish] the moment at which a particular point of etiquette was adopted by the readership because it is omitted from subsequent texts.” Indeed, advice literature has the capacity to capture a fleeting moment in which a particular design practice or manner of dressing was so widely practiced that it was deemed worthy of being framed as a standard.

In taking all of this into account, I argue that style guides can be a useful resource for understanding everyday, historical self-fashioning practices. While we cannot necessarily determine how and to what extent the dress practices discussed in advice literature were actually adopted by women, Entwistle makes a convincing case for why dress advice helps to elucidate, even if it cannot verify, actual embodied self-fashioning practices. Entwistle argues that advice discourses meaningfully recount behaviors that were taken up by a motivated readership that sought guidance in how to solve the problems of self-presentation. We should therefore regard advice literature as just that: as advice that may be adopted and thereafter amended by individuals rather than as a set of unwavering rules. It is within this discursive grey area, I argue, that it is possible to glimpse the practice of—or at the very least, the potential of—historical self-fashioning practices. In order to read such sources in this manner though, it is necessary for the scholar to make an ontological leap of faith in assuming, albeit with some degree of hesitation, that the advice offered by the writer was actually taken up by readers. However, by looking for themes and patterns across advice literature—rather than focusing on isolated or fringe recommendations, for example—the researcher should be able to make certain assumptions about the degree to which particular practices were actually adopted or at least accepted by a readership as a viable self-fashioning practice. Within this dissertation, style guides figure most

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134 See Entwistle, “Fashioning the Career Woman.”
prominently in chapter seven, which, fittingly, considers how the discourses of the stoutwear industry figured in advice targeted to stout women.

All of this being said, a more practical barrier to employing style guides as a medium for researching historical dress practices lies in the matter of availability, due to the fact that they are inherently ephemeral. Subject to the volatility of trends and cultural norms, advice literature is published in intermittent editions, with each successive version offering more up-to-date advice than the last. As such, they are oftentimes decommissioned by libraries when new editions come out, and generally evade the attention of collections managers. For this research, I therefore had to rely upon a handful of online archives, such as HathiTrust and the HEARTH digital repository, which are dedicated to preserving home economics texts; however, I also took it upon myself to purchase rare volumes from online auction websites such as eBay whenever possible.

2.4 Theory: Fashioning Bodies

Riello has argued that, within the field of fashion studies, there is a tendency for researchers to lead out from theory rather than from the object—a practice which he finds highly problematic. In my case, however, the practice of “thinking through” my primary sources is what ultimately led me to my theoretical framework, as well as to my principal research questions and to a general understanding of what type of knowledge this dissertation aims to further. Thus, throughout this dissertation, much like my chosen method, theory was consciously invoked as a “tool.” Indeed, as Rocamora and Smelik write, “Engaging with theory is essential in order to understand and analyze fashion.... To theorize fashion means to develop propositions and arguments that advance the understanding of its logic and manifestations.” As Wilson has written, however, “Reliance on one theoretical slant can easily lead to simplistic explanations that leave us still unsatisfied.” As Heike Jenß has suggested, fashion studies scholars indebted to the “migratory” practices of cultural studies and material culture studies have increasingly developed “do-it-yourself” theoretical toolkits so that they may better be able to address fashion in its multiple forms. In keeping with this idea, I end this chapter with a discussion of the multiple theoretical underpinnings of this dissertation. By design, this section follows the

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135 Riello, “The Object in Fashion,” 2. Efrat Tséelon has echoed this point, writing that in the fashion studies community, research follows two tracks: mere reportage of the voice of experience,” as in anthropological and ethnographic studies, or “the merely formalistic application of schema of analysis,” as in more theoretical works. Like Riello, she argues that material culture can provide a bridge between the two approaches, while also arguing that the method of discourse analysis well-suited to the study of fashion. See Efrat Tséelon, “Fashion Research and its Discontents” Fashion Theory 5, no. 4 (2001), 439-440.


137 Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 10.

138 These scholars include those whose works are reproduced in the edited volume. For further discussion, see Jenß, “Introduction,” 3.
presentation of my primary sources in order to evoke how my primary source materials led me to the most appropriate theories.

With my stated aim to examine the discursive construction of the body in and through fashion discourse, for this dissertation, my theoretical toolkit was assembled from Foucault's writings on knowledge, power and the body, and specifically his conceptualization of “panopticism” and “political technologies of the body.” Such a bringing together of Foucault's methods and his theoretical writing is somewhat unique to the field of fashion studies where scholars have tended to rely upon one or the other. In addition to Foucault's original writing, however, I also drew upon Rocamora’s construct of “fashion media discourse” and Entwistle's tripartite theoretical framework of “dress as a situated bodily practice,” both of which draw upon but also critique Foucault. Together, these approaches helped me to arrive at a better understanding not only of how fashion discourses are produced and circulated, but also of how they manifest in fashion practices and imprint on and construct the body. My toolkit was therefore comprised of both Foucault's own writings, but was also indebted to the work of scholars who have foregrounded the usefulness of his thinking for the study of fashion.

2.4.1 Knowledge, Power and the Body

While in his earlier works Foucault was preoccupied with the history of knowledge, in his later writings he turned his attention to examining how power functions both in the surveillance of populations and in the construction of the body at the level of the individual. Foucault's interest in how power functions at both “macro” and “micro” levels in the construction of the body is particularly pronounced in Discipline and Punish (1975). In this volume, Foucault famously invokes the panopticon, an architectural design for a prison originally conceived by the British reformer Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century that ensured that inmates felt that they were being surveilled at all times and which thereby eliminated the need for corporal forms of punishment, as a metaphor for modern society. Specifically, he uses this metaphor to examine how forms of non-physical punishment and surveillance facilitate the production of disciplined, docile bodies. According to Foucault, panopticism must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men…. It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization of disposition of centers and channels of power, of definition of the

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139 For instance, there have been no studies emerging from the field of fashion studies to examine how the body is produced through fashion discourse. Rocamora’s Fashioning the City perhaps comes the closest, but her investigation is still limited to an exploration of how Paris as a fashion capital is discursively constructed. Likewise, Entwistle’s use of Foucault's thinking in The Fashioned Body is not indebted to his methods.

140 While the former is commonly attributed to his “archaeological” phase, the latter comprise his “genealogical” bodies of scholarship.
instruments and modes of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools and prisons.  

Here, Foucault suggests that through the process of naming and creating categories and organizing bodies in space, the body is turned into a locus of social control and an object of culture. Bodies, according to Foucault, are embroiled in power relations through which they become “caught up in a system of restraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions.” Indeed, throughout Foucault’s later writing, power and knowledge are interdependent forces: “Power produces knowledge…[and] there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge.” At its most basic, panopticism therefore ensures that bodies conform to established norms and ideals—whether they be behavioral or corporeal. It is only through such discursive processes, Foucault argues, that the body becomes politically “useful” and that a “knowledge” of the body is created. Elaborating on this notion, Tim Armstrong has argued that Foucault’s writing provides a framework for considering how the body is entangled in webs of power, or how the body begins to exist at “the point at which a nexus of structures—political, cultural, medical, technological and linguistic—intersect.” In this vein, Foucault’s theorization of the relationship between knowledge, power and the body provides not only a lens through which it becomes possible to identify disciplinary regimes to which bodies are subject, but to also consider how individual bodies are managed and constructed.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault refers to such disciplinary regimes as political technologies of the body. According to Foucault, political technologies of the body embroil the body in a struggle to “hold upon it…invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies [and] to emit signs” through both material and ideological means. Political technologies of the body thereby underscore how the body is shaped and disciplined by both physical and non-physical instruments of power, or a broad spectrum of tools and strategies exercised at an institutional level, and which function as powerful normalizing mechanisms on subjected or docile bodies. Cumulatively, political technologies of the body create corpuses of knowledge through which bodily categories are both identified and experienced. The corollary to political technologies of the body is Foucault’s later notion of “technologies of the self,” which he defined as activities that “permit individuals to effect by their own means…a certain number of operations on their own bodies…so as to transform
themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” Technologies of the self therefore examine how individuals internalize, perform and even reject power on their own bodies, whereas political technologies of the body examine power at a macro or institutional level. Even as this suggests a top-down dissemination of power, however, Foucault stresses that political technologies of the body are networked and “diffuse” (rather than possessed by one group or individual) and are made up of “bits and pieces” that may not be “localized in a particular type of institution or localized state apparatus,” but rather, “go right down into the depths of society.” In this regard, Foucault’s definition of technologies of the body shares much in common with his definition of discourses as authorless, as relational and as not beholden to “‘the book’ and the ‘oeuvre.” Indeed, technologies of the body, Foucault writes elsewhere, are deeply embedded in a broader network of force relations that implement a “micro-physics of power whose field of validity is situated in a sense between these great functionings and the bodies themselves. 

Throughout this dissertation, Foucault’s notion of political technologies of the body was employed as a means to understand how knowledge and power are created and circulated in the field of fashion, and specifically within fashion media. His notion of technologies of the self, on the other hand, figures less centrally throughout the dissertation since my primary sources do not evidence the voices and lived experiences of stout women. The exception is chapter seven in which I consider style guides as a space in which historical self-fashioning practices—therein framed as technologies of the self—may be glimpsed. 

In his writing, Foucault elevates panopticism—or, broadly, the surveillance of populations—as an exemplary political technology of the body; however, political technologies of the body may assume more mundane forms. Indeed, as Susan Bordo has written, through “banal” technologies of the body, such as “table manners and toilet habits, [and through] seemingly trivial routines, rules and practices…bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood. As is pertinent to this dissertation, early twentieth century practices, such as weighing the body, placing the body into height and weight tables or even classifying the body according to standard sizing conventions may be theorized as political technologies of the body that ushered in new and more effective ways of quantifying and categorizing bodies (all of which are discussed at length in chapter three). Through these dispersed processes, which Foucault describes as “generative,” notions of normalcy and deviancy—and specifically categories of normal and deviant bodies—are constructed. 

Although Foucault himself did not write about fashion, it is a political institution in its own right—one with its own governing bodies, rules and conventions—that wields and

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149 Ibid.
150 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 26-27.
151 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 26.
152 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 26.
produces power in symbolic, material, visual and discursive ways. In this vein, the “power of fashion” can be glimpsed in innumerable forms—an idea that has been pursued by a handful of fashion studies scholars. Among them, and perhaps most obviously, the corset stands as archetypal manifestation of how fashion disciplines the body both physically and socially. Indeed, as Entwistle writes, the corset not only constrained and cinched the waist; as an obligatory item of dress, women who flouted their corsets in the nineteenth century were denigrated as morally and sexually “loose.” Similarly, Tynan has identified uniforms as another and quite literal manifestation of how dress encroaches upon and disciplines the body by obfuscating the visual hallmarks of individuality. Somewhat less visible but no less impactful, standard sizing—a technology in its own right that only came into wide use in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—stands as an exemplary and immensely powerful political technology of the body for the manner in which it “assigns a statistically generated number to every bodily form,” thereby functioning as a highly powerful normalizing tool that literally places bodies into a hierarchical system of classification. Within this hierarchy, bodies at the smaller end of the size continuum have historically and culturally better conformed to beauty norms, whereas the closer that bodies are to the far end of the spectrum, the more they have been regarded as deviant. Indeed, as will be discussed at much greater length in the following chapter, through the process of designating standard bodies, sizing, by consequence, also designated any bodies that fell outside of or beyond that spectrum as non-standard, problematic and unruly.

However, fashion and its various institutions also create “docile” bodies in other, less visible but perhaps more insidious, ways. Indeed, as Susan Bordo has pointed out, the Western fashion system elevates illusory, normativizing ideals of beauty in and through the media (i.e. through pervasive images of slender, white, heteronormative bodies) to which women must compulsorily strive to attain “through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup and dress.” As women proverbially cast off their corsets in the early twentieth century, new forms of discipline emerged that required greater vigilance over the body and an increase in what Mike Featherstone has described as “body maintenance” and what Valerie Steele has more specifically described as the “internalization of the corset.” While these concepts are more fully fleshed out in chapter six, as well as in the conclusion, here it is nevertheless worth establishing the notion that it is through these normativizing and regulatory frameworks that both the slender beauty ideal was consecrated, and through which the construct of the stout body was also manifested.

Indeed, Foucault’s writings on the body and power are an ideal lens through which to think about the political significance of fashion, and specifically to think about how discourses of dress discipline and give shape to the body. To this end, and as Tynan has written, Foucault’s...
focus on social structures helps to divert attention away from “the spectacle of fashion to consider how it is constructed, to discover who is involved, to reflect on how fashion is articulated [and to identify] who it benefits.” My already-discussed primary sources—from style guides to professional commentary—revealed such regimes of power and the mechanisms through which normative beauty ideals were reinforced, gender norms were affirmed, and new dieting and exercise regimens were fortified amongst American women. While Bordo has described women’s bodies as “inscribed” with these regulatory mechanisms and regimes of power, Entwistle has more explicitly pointed out that there is a direct and correlative relationship between power, knowledge and discourse in Foucault’s writings. Indeed, as Entwistle writes in *The Fashioned Body*, discourses are themselves “regimes of knowledge” that establish the conditions for thinking and speaking, but which also, and more directly, “have implications for the way in which people operate since discourses are not merely textual but [are] put into practice at the micro-level of the body.”

Entwistle defines these as “discourses of dress,” or the spectrum of ideas, norms, codes and conventions that establish what is fashionable and appropriate, and more generally, how bodies should look. In her discussion, however, Entwistle more or less conceives of dress discourses as floating ideas and thereby falls short of locating how and where dress discourses appear. In order to better both locate and situate these dress discourses, I therefore added Agnès Rocamora’s notion of fashion media discourse to my theoretical toolkit.

2.4.2 Fashion Media Discourse

Drawing upon Foucault’s earlier, archaeological thinking about the body and power—and namely that presented in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972)—I adopt his definition of discourse, which, in a departure from linguists and semioticians, liberates the term of its connotations with “words and things” in framing discourse as a practice. In freeing discourse from language and speech, Foucault foregrounded the idea that discourses do more than designate things; rather, they “systematically form the objects of which they speak” and encompass “relations of power not relations of meaning.” In other words, his imperative was not to study language *per se*, but rather the particular web of power relations that exist between discursive “texts” and, perhaps more importantly, how those relations are put into practice. In both his earlier archaeological works, such as *History of Madness in the Classical Age* (1961) and *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), but also in his later genealogical works, such as *The Use of Pleasure* (1984) and *The Care of the Self* (1984), Foucault examined the discursive construction of both bodies of knowledge and of

160 Tynan, “Michel Foucault,” 184.
161 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 168.
163 Ibid., 20-23.
164 Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 49.
literal bodies—from the idea of pleasure to the body of the prisoner—that can only exist meaningfully within the very webs of discourse in which they are created. According to Foucault, discourse does not originate in any one individual or author as a “majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject,” but rather manifests across texts and, as with his later works, through time as a “space of exteriority in which a network of distinct sites is deployed.” In short, discourse creates objects of knowledge, and by turn, “nothing meaningful exists outside of discourse.”

As has already been discussed, Foucault’s particular approach, and specifically his focus on “exteriority” is highly fruitful for the study of fashion due to the manner in which it decenters the supremacy of figures like star designers and editors in the creation and dissemination of value within the fashion industry to examine fashion writ large. In her book *Fashioning the City: Paris, Fashion and the Media* (2013), Rocamora puts these ideas into action in order to study the discursive construction of Paris as a fashion capital, not through the lens of the great French couturiers, but rather through the figure of *la Parisienne*, the Eiffel Tower and the discursive construction of Paris as a fashion capital, among other things. In doing so Rocamora’s focus is manifestly on discourse, but specifically on “fashion media discourses.” Indeed, Rocamora argues that “media discourses invest fashion—its products, practices and agents—with a variety of values whose ‘truth’ is as much part of the object of discourse as the material reality it refers to.” For Rocamora, fashion media discourse “sets out the parameters for an understanding of the way media texts work to create value and meanings within a given field—fashion—and a given culture.”

In discussing the fashion media’s discursive construction of Paris as a fashion capital, however, Rocamora takes issue with Foucault’s focus on the “wider societal context of discursive production,” which does not take into account the contexts and circumstances in which discourses “appear and circulate”—a lack that is evident Entwistle’s writing, too. By partnering Foucault’s theories of discursive production with Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory in the formulation of fashion media discourse, Rocamora thus seeks to delimit how discourse is created and disseminated within a particular field of cultural production, and to acknowledge the different institutions, sites and mediums through which particular forms of knowledge are created and dispersed. By employing the thinking of both scholars, Rocamora argues that we can arrive at a better understanding of how cultural fields of production are “themselves shaped by, and dependent on, wider social forces,” but also of how discourses are materialized in the

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166 Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 55.
167 This oft-cited phrase, helpful and illuminating as it is, is frequently misattributed to Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge*. This specific phrasing, however, does not appear anywhere within the text. Rather, it is Stuart Hall who said this. See Stuart Hall, “Discourse, Power and the Subject” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1997), 33.
168 Rocamora, *Fashioning the City*, 56.
169 Ibid., xvi.
170 Ibid., 57.
real world, or beyond the page, so to speak.\textsuperscript{172} At the same time, however, Rocamora also acknowledges that while the particular form that fashion discourse takes may be unique to the field of fashion itself, “it is a space of knowledge with porous boundaries, a wide constituency of layered nodes and ideas, themes and concepts that cut across disciplines and fields.”\textsuperscript{173} Fashion discourse is thus the cumulative product of so-called “interwoven discourses” in which concepts and ideas from adjacent fields—such as literature and the arts—give value and meaning to fashion. “What is particular to fashion discourse,” Rocamora argues, “is the particular coming together of specific discourses,” as well as the specific mediums or sites in which these discourses circulate.\textsuperscript{174}

With its emphasis on the particular sites and contexts of discursive production, fashion media discourse is therefore a useful epistemological tool for bounding Foucault’s far-reaching notions of discourse with a sensitivity to fields of cultural production. However, as Pecorari aptly points out in his review of *Fashioning the City*, Rocamora’s approach, while useful in its articulation of a specific methodological agenda, nevertheless has its limitations, particularly the manner in which Rocamora overlooks fashion practices ranging from fashion design to “specific practices of individual appropriation.”\textsuperscript{175} Adding to this, I would similarly argue that the body (somewhat necessarily) goes neglected in Rocamora’s work (with the exception of her discussion of *la Parisienne*), and thus fashion media discourse could only take me so far in thinking through the relationship between fashion, discourse and the body. Likewise, Rocamora’s conceptualization of the “field of fashion” via Bourdieu presents its own limitations in the particular case of stoutwear, which, as a subcategory of ready-to-wear, operated by a somewhat different set of rules than those set out by Bourdieu for thinking about the field of haute couture or high fashion. In order to more fully flesh out these relations, I therefore turned to Entwistle’s theoretical framework of dress as a situated bodily practice, which situates dress as a crucial and overlooked intermediary between discourse and the body, and which is the third and final component of my theoretical toolkit.

\textsuperscript{172} Rocamora, “Fashion Media Discourse,” 58.
\textsuperscript{173} Rocamora, *Fashioning the City*, 57.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{175} Marco Pecorari, “Review: *Fashioning the City*,” *Fashion Theory* 17.4 (2013), 532.
While Foucault’s notion of panopticism has been invoked widely, especially within studies that have explored the intersections of fashion and gender, identity and race,\textsuperscript{176} the potential for Foucault's work to be applied to the study of historical dressed bodies has been under-realized in the field of fashion studies even as the philosopher outwardly situates the body as “totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body.”\textsuperscript{177} A notable exception, however, is Entwistle’s The Fashioned Body in which the sociologist applies Foucault’s conceptual framework to a consideration of the dressed body throughout Western history. At the same time, however, Entwistle is also sensitive to the fact that Foucault alone is not enough to study the fashioned body for the manner it “presumes effects at the level of individual practice” (emphasis in original).\textsuperscript{178} In lodging this critique, Entwistle therefore aligns herself with feminist scholars like Lois McNay and Judith Butler who are critical of Foucault for similar reasons,\textsuperscript{179} as well as scholars like Tim Armstrong, Peter Gay and Michael Mason who have argued that Foucault's work is generally “inattentive to historical detail, to areas of contestation, and to the recorded experience of historical subjects.”\textsuperscript{180} Through her theoretical framework of “dress as a situated bodily practice,” Entwistle aims to bring awareness to the notion that “bodies are socially constituted, always situated in culture and the outcome of individual practices directed towards the body.”\textsuperscript{181} In doing so, she also calls upon Merleau-Ponty’s theories of embodiment, which situate the body as “in the world” and reinstate subjects as “temporal and spatial beings,” as well as Bourdieu’s theories of habitus which serve to remind us that the body is a product of culture, and specifically a product of its class status.\textsuperscript{182}

Throughout the book, Entwistle therefore spotlights different case studies that illuminate how the body has been “fashioned” in different social and historical contexts. In its broadness,
however, Entwistle’s volume falls short in being able to highlight the specific practices and processes through which these identities are discursively and materially constituted. As Tim Edwards wrote of the book, it is in many ways “more a critique and prescript for future research than an explication of how such connections work either theoretically or empirically.” Further, her work also fails to explicitly acknowledge the great potential of her own conceptual framework to underscore the crucial role dress, and specifically the practice of fashioning, might play in bringing the agentic, fleshy body back in to Foucault’s theories. Indeed, Entwistle reminds us that human bodies are always dressed. Thus, by examining the ways that discourses are embedded within fashion objects, we may arrive at a better understanding of how discourse manifests the social, fleshy body. In addition to making a contribution to fashion historical knowledge, this dissertation aims to realize the potential of dress as a situated bodily practice for not only demonstrating how a specific body, the stout body, was constructed or fashioned in and through fashion media discourse, but to effectively re-fashion Foucault’s theories of discourse and power to bring the fleshy, dressed body more front and center.

The goal here is therefore to bring together Foucault’s theories of knowledge, power and the body, Rocamora’s conceptualization of fashion media discourse and Entwistle’s theoretical framework of dress as a situated bodily practice in order to show how the stout body was constructed in and through fashion discourse. Central to my particular approach is foregrounding the productive nature of discourse in the fashioning of the body, and specifically how discourse manifests fashion practices such as design, sizing, garment manufacturing, advertising, retailing and (to a lesser extent) embodied dress practices. My impetus is therefore not to just locate discursive formations in fashion media and to describe the way the stout body was represented; rather, I aim to reveal how discourse engages as well as creates other fashion practices. Indeed, as Volonte has suggested, fashion is not a single practice but is comprised of a number of practices. While he highlights the catwalk show and the act of getting dressed as two different forms of fashion practice, as mentioned previously, so too do garment design and fashion advertising, among other things, cumulatively undergird and facilitate the idea and institution of fashion. Fashion practices, Volonte argues, are characterized by the fact that they exist at the intersection of a number of “material structures, social structures, rules [and] meanings.” Moreover—and of particular importance to this dissertation with its focus on discourse—Volonte notes that the rules and conventions that drive practices within fashion are “produced by reciprocal expectations of behavior within the community of practice.”

While I agree with this critique, I take issue with Edwards’ claim that Entwistle’s theoretical framework is “underdeveloped” and that she ends up “muddying the waters rather than clearing them.” Rather, I think that the tripartite theoretical framework is not only well-reasoned in the book, but also a sound model for thinking about the relationship between fashion (as system and idea), dress and the body. See Tim Edwards, *Fashion in Focus—Concepts, Practices and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2009), 35.

The closest she comes is when she points out that “dress opens up the potential for women to use it for their own purposes.” However, my interest is decidedly less grounded in uncovering individual fashioning and self-fashioning practices, but rather to examine practice at an institutional level (i.e. through the production of clothing and of advertising, for instance). See Entwistle, *Fashioned Body*, 24.


Ibid., 5.
examining how discourse establishes fashion practices—rather than just merely framing discourse as providing a language for speaking about fashion practices—this dissertation reveals the generative nature of fashion discourse as well as the specificities of different fashion practices in the discursive construction of the body.

With this approach, this dissertation therefore responds to critiques of both Rocamora’s and Entwistle’s respective theoretical frameworks that have held that the scholars are not sensitive to the matter of practice. That being said, my approach is nevertheless deeply indebted to both sociologists. Indeed, by situating the discourses of stoutwear within the field-specific practices of fashion, it becomes possible to see the multiple ways discourse imprints upon and constructs the body. From the minds of industry leaders, to the advertising agency, to the sales floor and finally to the body of the consumer, this dissertation illuminates how the discourse of stoutness diffused throughout every facet, level and practice of the industry in the creation of the stout body.

In its entirety, my theoretical toolkit at once builds upon and departs from previous uses of discourse theory within fashion studies in its emphasis on practice. As much as Entwistle has shown how the body is fashioned, and Rocamora has discussed the discursive construction of Paris as a fashion capital, so too may we understand industry practices and garments themselves as formed and informed by the rules of discourse through the very practice of fashioning itself. As Sophie Woodward has written, “The process of fashioning in part produces what is fashionable, yet is also produced by the system of fashion.” Similarly, Jenß, reflecting on the etymology of the term, has written that to fashion is “to form, mold, shape (either a material or immaterial object),” and that this definition is a “significant component of understanding fashion as a social dynamic,” from high fashion to the everyday. These definitions of fashioning are particularly apt for the manner in which they acknowledge not only the productive nature of fashion, but also the dialectic between fashion as industry and fashion as a dispersed system of power relations. Indeed, by acknowledging fashion as a practice, it becomes possible to account for the web of relations between industry, media and the body that overlap in the discursive construction of the stout body, while having a particular sensitivity to how the industry is itself caught in these discursive relations.

This focus on practice is evident in the organization of my chapters, which examine the emergence of the discourse of the stout body within industry-specific conversations about the viability of a stoutwear industry (as in chapter three), to discussions that revolved around how to best sell to the “sensitive” stout woman (as in chapter five), to finally how these manifested in embodied practices of self-fashioning (as in chapter seven). However, it is also evident in my will to include the voices of those who were actually making (garments, advertisements, etc.) whenever possible—a task that was largely enabled by the use of professional media in which such meta-commentaries proliferated. Indeed, by re-activating these voices—many of whom

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have been forgotten or pale in influence to the elevated and well-accounted-for voices of star designers, for instance—it becomes possible to glimpse how discourse actually materialized within a given historical context, often in mundane or unspectacular ways.

Of particular importance to the theoretical framework I lay out here is the fact that, since the turn of the century, when the tenets of modernism collided with the technologies of mass manufacturing, the body has been particularly subject to the constitutive forces of discourse in creating evermore rational bodies. Aligning myself with scholars who posit fashion as a distinctly modern phenomenon, and those who argue for the democratizing effects of fin de siècle scientific and technological advancements on the fashion industry, I situate fashion—as industry, media and practice—within a discursive regime that creates categories of bodies and, perhaps more specifically, brings order the disorderly body in making it, as Entwistle has written, “into something meaningful and recognizable to a culture.”

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Throughout this chapter I have discussed fashion studies methodologies and outlined my method, described my primary source materials, established my theoretical framework and situated my research within the fields of fashion studies. However, a secondary aim of this chapter was to also open up a methodological discussion about the enduring significance of “the object” within fashion studies and the potential consequences and pitfalls of telling a history of fashion “without fashion,” while being largely reliant upon digitized sources. Furthermore, in presenting my theoretical toolkit—which brings together Foucault’s thinking on the relationship between knowledge, power and the body with the theoretical frameworks of Rocamora and Entwistle on fashion media discourse and dress as a situated bodily—I aimed to foreground the importance of studying fashion from multiple theoretical and methodological angles.

189 Although many fashion scholars have examined the relationship between fashion and modernity, in particular, the work of Elizabeth Wilson and, later, that of Caroline Evans has been instrumental in furthering the notion that fashion is a product of modernity. See Evans, The Mechanical Smile; Wilson, Adorned in Dreams.
189 Entwistle, Fashioned Body, 8. Grosz has argued that there is “nothing natural or ahistorical” about practices of bodily inscription and ornamentation, but that “they make the flesh into a particular type of body—pagan, primitive, medieval, capitalist, Italian, American, Australian.” Through practices like dieting, exercise and applying makeup, she writes, “the body is more or less marked, constituted as an appropriate, or, as the case may be, an inappropriate body, for its cultural requirements. See Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 142.
Chapter Three — The Stoutwear Industry: Creating Consumers

It is probable that the “stouts” will continue to rank as the most important of the special classes of “freaks” in the ready-to-wear trade. With all the consideration in the world for them and appreciation of their self-conscious distress, which is very real, women like these offer possibilities in the way of business.

(Women’s Wear, June 1915)

In the above quotation, Women’s Wear predicted in June 1915 that stoutwear would rank as the most lucrative sector of the rapidly expanding ready-to-wear industry in early twentieth century America. As “freaks,” so-called “stout” women were defined within professional media such as Women’s Wear as those whose bodily dimensions fell outside of the narrow spectrum of standard sizes, which itself had only really taken shape two decades prior. Yet, as the use of scare quotes around the word “stout” in the above quotation indicate, the category was somewhat tenuously defined. Having gone largely neglected by the makers of mass-manufactured garments since the birth of the ready-made garment industry in the mid-nineteenth century, the non-standard proportions of the stout woman were little understood, and even less was known about her habits, drives and needs as a consumer. In the eyes of manufacturers, she was, at first glance, a “freak” who bore little resemblance to her slender counterparts both in body and in temperament. Indeed, the “stout” woman was not only marginal to the garment industry; she was an increasingly reviled figure in American society—a figure who Women’s Wear observed lived in a semi-permanent state of “self-conscious distress,” which, if properly channeled, could mean big profits for manufacturers and retailers. A new consumer group had been discovered; yet, for stoutwear entrepreneurs, many questions still lingered. Among them: What defined a stout body, who exactly was the stout woman and how could the emergent stoutwear industry meet, and therefore profit from, her particular set of needs? Taken together, these questions, however, also raise a more pertinent question: Did these early figures so much discover the stout woman, or rather, did they create her?

In answering the latter question, this chapter begins by tracing the emergence of the stoutwear industry in the first two decades of the twentieth century during which time new manufacturers and trade groups emerged and new methods for the production, grading and marketing of garments for larger women were conceived. Far from emerging from a vacuum, however, this is a story that is intimately bound up with the process through which clothing became democratized during the period spanning the Civil War to the decade after World War I;

2 As Kidwell and Christman explain, in 1899, women could purchase garments off-the-rack with bust sizes that ranged between thirty-two and forty-four inches, and with waists that measured from twenty-three to thirty-inches in circumference. See Suiting Everyone, 109.

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the rapid and dramatic aesthetic shift in fashionable women’s dress that occurred in the early twentieth century; and, perhaps most importantly, the history of ready-to-wear and standardized sizing in the United States. Relying largely upon what I defined in the previous chapter as “professional media,” in the first half of this chapter, I aim to offer a backstage or behind-the-scenes perspective on the emergence of the stoutwear industry. In doing so, I draw upon sociologist Yunia Kawamura’s conceptualization of the fashion industry as a closed system of structuring frameworks in order to delimit the institutions, cultural intermediaries and discursive spaces that gave rise to and bolstered the stoutwear industry as a subfield of the market for mass manufactured fashion through both material and symbolic forms of production.

After laying this foundation, the second half of this chapter shifts its focus to the stout woman by presenting her as a figure produced through early twentieth century fashion discourse, but also through the technologies and conventions of mass manufacturing. In doing so, it identifies three statements that recurred within the fashion media and which together established the stout woman’s body as deviant or, more concretely, as exceeding prevailing definitions of the standard or normative body. While it is perhaps something of a given to argue that the stoutwear industry emerged as a response to a growing and identifiable population of women whose bodies exceeded the conventions of standard sizing, here I pursue the contrary notion that the discourses of stoutwear actually gave shape to or defined the stout body itself. Here, as throughout the entire dissertation, the stoutness is therefore framed as a Foucauldian “discursive formation,” or as an amalgam of statements that provided a language for talking about the stout body, but which also systematically formed the stout body itself. In its entirety, this chapter therefore performs two tasks: It provides a footing for the rest of the dissertation by delimiting the circumstances, key institutions and actors that gave rise to the stoutwear industry, while also theoretically situating stoutwear as a discursive space, but also as a nascent technology through which the stout body was itself constructed.

3 While the terms “frontstage” and “backstage” are often associated with the work of Erving Goffman—and specifically his chapter “Dramaturgical Model of Performance” in his The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York: Anchor, 1959)—I use the term here colloquially. Indeed, there is no better allusion for describing the different functions of industry media and the press with respect to their intended audiences.


5 Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, 49.
3.1 The Stoutwear Industry: The Basic Features

Kawamura has argued that every fashion system no matter its size—from *haute couture* to American ready-to-wear—seems to share certain basic features. Among them, Kawamura points to key figures (the designer or the editor), networks, institutions and governing bodies (such as the Council of Fashion Designers of America or the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture) and, perhaps most importantly, to platforms that permit these institutions and figures to communicate either directly or indirectly. Such platforms, she writes, facilitate the dissemination of fashion knowledge and create symbolic value. Yet Kawamura does not linger on this latter point, describing such platforms simply as “the mass media.” As has already been discussed in chapter two, however, fashion media discourses, or the language invoked by “fashion designers [and] the members of the field of fashion such as designers and fashion journalists,” ultimately lies at the heart of the symbolic production of value within the field of fashion. Both professional media and fashion media—two categories that I defined in depth in the previous chapter—evidence a narrative or historical progression as much as they reveal certain rhetorical and discursive tendencies and consecrate value by forming an ideological foundation for the industry. Indeed, Rocamora reminds us that “words that are used in fashion writing do not simply describe the value of objects they are related to, they make it.”

Combining Kawamura’s discussion about what constitutes a fashion system with Rocamora’s insights about the productive nature of fashion discourse, in the following three subsections, I will introduce the “basic features” of the stoutwear industry. In doing so, I frame the stoutwear industry as a system of institutions, cultural intermediaries and discursive spaces that gave rise to and bolstered the material and symbolic value of stoutwear—or its ideological foundation—as a subfield of the emerging ready-to-wear industry. I thereby also challenge the prevailing notion that the American garment industry evolved as a single mass market—or what scholars and laypeople alike variously and colloquially refer to as the “ready-to-wear” or “women’s wear” industry—a point to which I will return in the conclusion of this chapter. The first subsection will present the ideological foundation upon which the stoutwear industry was formed. The second will identify two key figures who facilitated its emergence and expansion from 1915 onward. The third and final subsection will discuss the media spaces in which stoutwear was both promoted and discussed amongst industry figures.

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7 Ibid., 49.
8 Rocamora, “Pierre Bourdieu,” 238. Here, Rocamora is paraphrasing Bourdieu and Delsaut’s essay ‘*Le discours de mode*’ (1975) in which they refer to the idea of ‘fashion discourse.’
9 Rocamora, “Pierre Bourdieu,” 239.
10 On the other end of the spectrum, standing in contraposition to ready-to-wear, stands “high fashion” or *haute couture*. This emerges from Kidwell and Christman’s insight that the clothing industry in the United States, from its very inception, has been an “industry of industries” that included women’s wear and men’s wear, but also the subsectors of workwear, “misses’ sizes” for adolescent girls and “odd sizes” for the woman whose bust was not in proportion with her respective waist and hip measurements, among others. See Kidwell and Christman, *Suitsing Everyone*, 93; Arnold, *The American Look*, 4. The history of market specialization in the garment trade is a notably under researched topic, however.
3.1.1 The Ideological Foundation: Fit and the Fat Woman

On June 11, 1915, *Women’s Wear* published an article titled “How Many Fat Women in Your Town?” which featured a byline that read, “You Don’t Know, But Enough to Pay Well for Special Attention.” In signaling an impending shift in the way large-size women’s garments would be designed, manufactured and retailed in the decades to come, the article recounts the experiences of a manager from Crawford’s, a Midwestern department store, who had successfully expanded his merchandise to include large-size women’s garments. Even to him, however, its success had come as something of a surprise:

Every once in a while…a stout customer used to ask me while I was waiting on her, or used to ask the salesgirls: “Don’t you ever buy anything for fat women?” Whatever the response we made was bound to be a lame one, because the simple truth in the matter was that I didn’t think there were enough fat women to make it pay. After a while though, I began to…keep my eyes peeled for the stout ones….

You haven’t any idea how many fat women there are in the world until you begin to sell something they want. The proportion of fat women is greater than the proportion of fat men, probably because many of them lead lives more sedentary than their husbands. Whatever the reason, the fact is undisputable—at least in this town and in every other town where I have ever been.

In a cartoon that accompanied the article (Fig. 3), an endless sea of stout women is depicted spilling out into an anonymous urban street, suggesting their ostensibly sudden arrival, both onto the American fashion scene but also within American society at large. The women are rendered in hyperbolic proportions, their heads grazing the sills of the buildings’ second floor windows, their massive bodies choking the narrow urban thoroughfare. As grotesque caricatures of stout women, their faces are drawn comically simple, with wide smiles and ponderous cheeks and jowls dwarfing beady, expectant eyes and piggish noses—their features exaggerated to accentuate their corporeal departure from normative beauty ideals. The effect is further heightened by the presence of a man a fraction of their size who stands in the foreground and over whom they loom. He stands before them as a proxy for the department store managers and fashion buyers who seek to profit from opening their doors to stout women, while they gaze at him eagerly as he ushers them into an anonymous storefront emblazoned with the words, “Your Store?” The growing stigma of overweight in the early twentieth century, and all of the negative associations that came with it—namely of the fat woman’s ignorance, sloth and lack of self-control—is personified by their enormous proportions and appearance, written on their bodies for all to see. So too, however, is their insatiable hunger to consume.

12 Andrea Kollnitz argues that fashion caricatures reveal interwoven discourses, as well as to exacerbate normative and non-normative ways of dressing. See Andrea Kollnitz, “The Devil of Fashion: Women, Fashion, and the Nation in Early twentieth-Century German and Swedish Cultural Magazines,” in *Fashion in Popular Culture: Literature, Media and Contemporary Studies*, eds. Joseph H. Hancock, Toni Johnson-Woods and Vicki Karaminas (Chicago: Intellect, 2013), 225-241. Previous studies have argued that fashion caricature fell out of vogue in the nineteenth century. This example from *Women’s Wear*, however, is a testament to the enduring and widespread use of caricature into the twentieth century.
How Many Fat Women in Your Town?

You Don't Know, But Enough to Pay Well for Special Attention

You have no idea how many fat women there are until you begin to call something they want.

[Image of a cartoon woman being chased by a man]

There is no need to be alarmed. The only thing that will happen is that she will be given a chance to stretch her legs a little and then be out of your sight. The important thing is not to be afraid of a little weight, but to be prepared for the consequences of not paying attention to the matter.

[Continued text not visible]
In the history of stoutwear, this article represents a crucial tipping point as it is among the first appearing in *Women's Wear* to explicitly propose the vast market potential of a specialized stoutwear industry. While first and foremost signaling the market segmentation of large-size women's dress, this article, however, and quite importantly, also announces the arrival of what was framed across professional fashion media as a new and voracious consumer class. In doing so, however, it also foregrounds the industry's longtime neglect of the stout woman and, moreover, its inability to cater to her needs. As the Crawford's manager told *Women's Wear*, while he was not unaccustomed to encountering the occasional fat, female customer, he simply had not realized that "there were enough fat women" to financially justify carrying extended sizes. After having become aware of their inability to "fit in," however, they suddenly became more visible even "on the streets and in the street cars" and more conscious of the fact that they looked "too big" in their clothes—"their inability to wear standard-size garments merely exacerbating the degree to which their proportions did not align with the architectures, rhythms and technologies of modern life, but also with the standards of prevailing garment sizing norms. Less than discovering a new consumer group per se, it may therefore be argued that this article more so identified a major gap or market opportunity in the women's wear trade, while also giving shape to this ostensibly new consumer class as one that was proverbially hungry for well-fitting clothing.

Another article titled "Ready for the Big Ones: A New Angle on the Fat Woman's Wants," which was published only a month later in *Women's Wear* on July 2, 1915, made similar predictions about the rosy and lucrative future of stoutwear (Fig. 4). Telling the story of another Midwestern department store buyer, the article explains how, once he had started carrying sizes larger than a forty-four-inch bust, he had trouble keeping the items in stock:

There are lots and lots of fat women. Where they come from or why they get fat I don't know. But there are lots of them; more and more all the time. I have lost business in the past because I wasn't able to supply the wants of these women. They resent their flesh to a greater or less degree and they never are more conscious of it when they are endeavoring to get into a ready-to-wear garment that is not roomy enough. And they don't come back for a long time. I happened to have a stout girl in the sales force, and when I came on she asked me as a special favor to send in some special orders for clothes that she could wear. I got into the way of discussing the big-woman's clothes question with her; she was sure it would pay to go into the extra sizes business in earnest. I undertook it with a good deal of misgivings, but it was a go from the outset.

In this passage, the vast and growing number of stout women is once again stressed; however, so too is the notion that the current stock of ready-made garments is insufficient and incapable of accommodating their particular set of needs—their embodied struggle illustrated by his observation that stout women are resentful of their flesh and are "never more conscious of it when they are endeavoring to get into a ready-to-wear garment that is not roomy enough." Later

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"Am I as big as she?"

This is the universal question of stout women.

No stout woman ever passed another without asking her own companion: "Am I as big as she?"

Always, in the question there is a little note of wistful hope mingled sometimes with a suspicion of envy—sometimes a hint of envy, when the other woman is not quite so fat, for all her bulk.

We find in the proper stories, there is a trifle about the stout woman that frequently justifies the envy of not only those who are equally fat but sometimes of her more slender sisters.

The difference is in the stout woman's clothes.

Cradle Fains—the famous American primness dome—has been quoted as saying she never will be entirely happy until she's fat. General Fain's prospects of getting out in style are in the knowledge that she can afford to be fussy nowadays.

If Fain were to herself, what it does to the number of women for whose needs no one prepares, it is like to any Miss Fain would ask with that same dread—"Am I as big as she?"
in the article, the buyer goes on to explain in more concrete terms how

it is a big field for the ready-to-wear retailer. And for the manufacturer, too. There is money in it. It has got to be taken seriously, though, got to be provided for on the same bases that the trade for regulars is provided for. No waist cut from a 44 pattern that is a little over-size is going to please a fat woman with a 52 circumference whatever size label is put in it. And not every model or every style is going to fill the bill..... The men’s wear [sic] trade has learned this, long ago, and fat men’s sizes are standardized just as well as the regulars. The women’s wear trade has got as good an opportunity as the men’s wear trade.15

In the above quotation, the anonymous buyer argues that, on the one hand, there’s a great deal of money to be made from this marginalized consumer class; on the other, however, he also suggests that these gains are immaterial unless manufacturers and retailers first abandon their prejudices against stout women, and second, shift their focus away from overhead costs and style and, instead, toward the matter of fit. Lingering on this latter idea, he argues that the science of fit is one that had been fine tuned in men’s wear long before, but which was still in its infancy in the women’s wear trade—a trade that had long privileged fashion over other concerns. Different from the mainstream of women’s ready-made clothing manufacturing, however, here, the buyer calls on the nascent stoutwear industry to shift its focus to fit, arguing that simply sticking a large-size tag into a dress that is improperly graded will do little to satisfy the stout woman.

The “stoutwear evolution,” as it were, was founded on the idea that the conventions of standard size, mass-produced garments were inadequate, imprecise in fit and exclusionary, and by consequence, rendered fat women fashion outsiders. As such, stoutwear entrepreneurs, such as those quoted in the above passages, proposed a wholesale renegotiation of prevailing sizing conventions but also of the industry’s approach to dealing with the “problem” of the stout woman by placing her needs at the very center of their attention. In doing so, the discourse of stoutwear homed in on the matter of fit, perhaps to the neglect of fashion—a notion that will be discussed later. This task, however, would not be without its own set of complications.

As Kidwell and Christman have written, the early American garment industry at large struggled with creating precise fits in off-the-rack garments—a fact which was brought into stark relief in the pages of early mail order catalogs dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that boasted about the availability of fashionable styles but largely neglected to address garment fit.16 While men’s wear retailers were more confident in their ability to achieve a precise fit in spite of the vast distances engendered by the mail order trade, women’s wear retailers, on the other hand, conceded that alterations were inevitable. Rather than choosing a size, a woman would send in her bust and waist measurements and a retailer—each of whom had their own sizing conventions—would then choose the size that most closely corresponded to her measurements, a practice that preceded the industry’s adoption of standard sizing by several

15 Ibid., 3, 11.
16 Kidwell and Christman, Suiting Everyone, 103.
decades.\textsuperscript{17} However, due to the fact that the length of skirts and dresses could not be customized, there was always an unspoken agreement between the customer and the retailer that the customer would, at the very least, have to bear the costs or labor of lengthening or shortening a garment.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, the goal in women’s wear, perhaps more so than in men’s wear, was to reduce the cost of alterations as much as possible, rather than to achieve a perfect fit—a task that was only made all the more difficult by the relentless demands of fashion and the near-constant evolution of the fashionable silhouette.\textsuperscript{19} It may be argued that the notion of “good fit” was something of a mutable concept as much as it was an enduring problem. Even so, by this time, the United States was leagues ahead of its European counterparts in the realm of fit, earning it the reputation as a world leader in ready-to-wear.\textsuperscript{20}

However, while manufacturers framed alterations as an inevitability, or as a natural consequence of buying ready-made garments, beyond the rarefied spaces of the professional fashion media, poor fit was increasingly coming to be regarded as a manufacturing error. As one New York Times headline read in 1917, “The nation’s bill for correcting manufacturers’ errors [is] $300,000,000 annually.”\textsuperscript{21} Women, it further claimed, bore the brunt of these expenditures since men’s sizing was technologically so far ahead of women’s:

Not more than 2 per cent of wearers can be fitted accurately without alterations…[and] not more than 10 to 15 per cent can be fitted even approximately without snipping something here or changing something there. Roughly, this means that 85 to 90 out of every hundred garments sold at retail in this country in the course of a year have to be altered, with the duplication of labor and expense that is entailed.\textsuperscript{22}

The enormous cost of secondary alterations, the article goes on to argue, was due to the fact that the women’s wear industry based its sizing standards on two false assumptions: “The first of these…is that a single basic standard measurement for these garments is enough to fit all needs. The second is the assumption that all women are tall.” Another article published in Women’s Wear the same year tackled similar problems, explaining how the standards that manufacturers relied upon in 1915 were based on outdated data: “No one knows where they came from or whether they are typical, or right or wrong; they are merely accepted without further thought, and this is the root of the evil.”\textsuperscript{23} Continuing, the trade journal argued that this problem could be

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 105-106.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 109.
\item \textsuperscript{19} As Kidwell and Christman further explain, “It was no accident that the first articles manufactured for women, the loose-fitting cloaks and mantillas, were garments in which ‘perfection of fit did not so rigidly apply’” rather than high fashion garments adapted from Parisian styles. See Kidwell and Christman, Suiting Everyone, 108.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Milbank, New York Fashion, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{21} “Altered Garments Cost a Huge Sum,” The New York Times (September 2, 1917), 20.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{24} “Who’s To Blame for Alterations? Ninety Per Cent of Garments Must be Altered,” Women’s Wear (August 29, 1917), 25.
\end{thebibliography}

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solved by “cutting ready-to-wear to conform with the average height of American women, [saving] hundreds of millions of dollars...by the apparel industry of the country.”

Another article titled “Altering Frock Often More Expensive Than New Suit” published by the *New York Times* in 1915 further dispelled many of the myths perpetuated by the industry that ready-made garments could be altered at a minimal expense and similarly points to the problems in fit that pervaded the women’s wear industry:

If...one looks upon altering clothes as an economy solely, as a means of escaping the buying of new ones, it is well to know that one is often deceived by such a belief. ... Today we live in an epoch of lightening change in fashions which everyone tries to keep up with whether or not they acknowledge it; an epoch when the vast machinery of departmental clothing supplies to even the rural free delivery the latest thing from Paris for $15. Then what is the use to strive ardently in the name of economy?...

As American fashion was evermore turning to the ready-made, rather than custom-made, the matter of waste—both of time and of money—became a problem of the first order for clothing manufacturers who struggled even into the second decade of the twentieth century to create well-fitting garments for an increasingly diverse and financially empowered population. Notably, in the above quotation the manufacturer remarks upon the “lightning change in fashions” that was pervading the industry, as well as the “vast machinery” that was being used in the mass production of garments. Within this context, the old ways of garment cutting and manufacturing were proving themselves obsolete; as a consequence, however, people were increasingly being forced to accept speed—or the ability to purchase “the latest thing from Paris” at a fraction of the cost—over fit. With all of the alterations that had to be undertaken after-the-fact, however, the jury was out on whether or not the technological strides being made in garment manufacturing were actually saving anyone time or money. After the turn of the century, speed had become the defining feature of American ready-to-wear. As with so many other things pertaining to the speeding up of modern life, however, the stout woman would ultimately find herself unable to keep up, and therefore left behind.

Indeed, perhaps no one was more affected by the inefficiencies of ready-to-wear than the stout woman. For instance, as early as 1902, Sears Roebuck & Co. offered a range of ready-to-wear garments for standard-size consumers; however, “very tall or very stout” women, along with those who were “particularly hard to fit for any reason,” had to rely upon the services of a mail-order custom tailoring department at an additional expense. Being able to easily order perfectly fitting garments through the mail, however, was a decidedly different practice from the very modern experience of being able to walk into a store and buy a garment off-the-rack. By-and-large, these early attempts to streamline the manufacturing of stoutwear were regarded as unsuccessful, and worse, as an affront to the stout consumer. As one *Times* article noted, the “made-to-order” business for stout apparel was plagued by “annoying delays, tedious fittings and...

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25 Ibid.
Thus, perhaps even more so than for the normatively-sized woman, aftermarket alterations were considered an unavoidable facet of large-size garment consumption, and were even embedded into their design. For instance, *Dry Goods Economist* reported in 1914 that garments for larger women should be designed from the outset with the inevitability of secondary alterations in mind:

Many retailers have built up a splendid trade on dresses for stout women and for those of large frame and generous proportions.

A decided aid in this direction is the ease with which such garments can be altered, as after many experiments manufacturers have succeeded in devising basic lines that make these gowns easy to fit.

...It is essential that the dress be so designed that the skirt can be shortened at the hem rather than the waistline. This is because shortening the skirt at the belt necessitates drawing it up slightly at the hips and this spoils the line of the skirt and makes it entirely too wide throughout its length.  

Alterations were such a mainstay of stoutwear design and manufacturing that it led one leading stoutwear maker to ask in a 1914 *Dry Goods Economist* advertisement, “Your Alteration Room! Is it Blocked With Work?” (Fig. 5). As has been previously discussed, however, even as alterations had become entrenched as an industry standard, the near-compulsory aftermarket alterations required stout garments had nevertheless become a point of consternation for manufacturers and consumers alike.

From approximately 1915 onwards, the stout woman had therefore increasingly found herself at the center of an embattled campaign to standardize the stoutwear industry—the principal goal of which was to be able to perfectly fit a ready-made garment to the body of a stout woman.

29 “Dresses for the Stout: New Styles Particularly Adapted to Fleshy or Large Women,” *Dry Goods Economist* (July 18, 1914), 61.
without the aid of additional alterations. Before embarking on this task, however, manufacturers and retailers engaged in a good deal of self-reflection and, perhaps more often, finger-pointing in order to determine when and how the industry had lost its way. In a 1917 New York Times article, for instance, a corset manufacturer explained how the stout woman had for a very long time been catered to in a desultory manner without regard to the requirements of the individual figure. To them the term “stout” implied a figure of a matronly appearance with a generous bust, back and hip curves that did not fit in at all with fashion’s demands as to what the stylish figure should be.30

Similar language was used in a November 1915 Women’s Wear piece titled “Revolution in Fitting Stylish Stout Women,” which held that there was a “great deal of misconception regarding ‘stouts’ [within the mainstream apparel industry, with] many figuring the garment must out of necessity be ugly or ill shaped.”31 A backward-glancing article that appeared in a 1921 issue of the Dry Goods Economist similarly remarked on the industry’s “dismal” start, noting that many manufacturers catered only to a single type of stout woman: “It was a figure of large hips, short waist, of flat chest.”32 In other words, it was an older body that bore little resemblance to the fashionable silhouette, and which was meant to be covered up (Fig. 6).

Indeed, most stout garments according to one seller were, regardless of prevailing fashion trends, “made on a liberally cut pattern with full wide sleeves and skirt” in a “lazy” attempt to accommodate the stout woman’s outsize proportions.33 In short, the stoutwear industry had to this point been built on the bedrocks of America’s emergent fat stigma. The problem of fat stigma was reported on in a 1923 article that explained how “retailers at first were very slow to grasp the profit possibilities inherent in the stout-wear [sic] trade. This is very true,

33 “Poor Patterns and Scant Cut Stoutwear Problem,” Women’s Wear (March 23, 1922), 27.
and what may be considered an early ‘prejudice’ was very difficult to eradicate.”

As the century wore on, however, the industry’s “prejudice” against the stout woman was paralleled by other, perhaps more pragmatic, difficulties—namely, the inability to fit her well in spite of the centrality of “good fit” within industry discourse.

Even so, it was not until the first discussions about the viability of an explicit, cooperative, specialized industry for stoutwear—as opposed to a dispersed and unaffiliated network of manufacturers—appeared within the professional fashion media that a discourse regarding how to create a scientifically-based sizing system derived from normative sizing conventions, but graded specifically for the “peculiar” bodies of larger women, emerged. Within this context, the discourse of “scientific fit” became both a defining feature of the stoutwear industry but also a rallying cry for its advocates. As one manufacturer argued, stoutwear manufacturers should “experiment” and work with specialists to determine standard sizes, which “could be provided to meet exactly [the] individual requirements of the stout woman.”

The so-called “individual requirements of the stout woman” pertained to the way that she put on weight, for as one Brooklyn Daily Eagle article from June 1918 explained, she is “not at all a slimmer figure enlarged to scale.” Indeed, it was increasingly accepted that “as flesh is taken on, the proportions of the figure change radically,” and thus, the conventions of sizing had to be reconceived from the ground up. Increasingly, manufacturers and merchants during this early period turned to “expert dress makers and authorities on dress [who] found that the whole architecture of a stout model was different from the regular sizes,” a revelation which itself had “explained the failure of alteration rooms to afford good service on stouts” for so long.

Different from mainstream ready-to-wear manufacturers, stoutwear makers such as I. Heller & Co. took “the radical stand that the trouble is with the dress, not the woman” (Fig. 7).
Amid these discussions, this new collective of stoutwear entrepreneurs increasingly found a discursive common ground and, perhaps more importantly, an ideological foundation upon which they could build a niche, specialized industry that would better serve the particular needs of stout women. This common ground was the principle of scientific fit—a notion that eclipsed and improved upon the prevailing discourses of standardized sizing. Indeed, through the deceptively simple act of talking about and defining the problems plaguing stoutwear—and even through the act of referring to a stoutwear industry—the industry itself was given shape and the material and symbolic value of stoutwear was made patent. Through this process, an important gap in the market for ready-to-wear was also identified and a new sub-category of the mass market was born. Per Kawamura’s notion that fashion systems are not only built upon ideological foundations but also upon the labor of intermediaries, however, it is also important to identify the key figures who gave shape to and bolstered this nascent industry. Among them, it is worth singling out the company Lane Bryant. As one of the most successful and most enduringly influential large-size garment manufacturers and retailers in the United States, the firm has been a standard bearer within the industry throughout much of the long twentieth century and into the twenty-first—one that has not only established standards and conventions for the sizing, design and manufacture of large-size clothing, but which has also played an outsized role in determining how these garments are marketed and sold.

3.1.2 The Key Figures: Lena Bryant and Albert Malsin

The story of the founding of Lane Bryant, America’s leading plus-size retailer and industry standard bearer, is the stuff of fashion folklore. As the story goes, in 1900, a down-and-out Lithuanian-born widow and mother named Lena Bryant (née Lena Himmelstein) fell back on her talents as a seamstress within the bustling garment trade of turn-of-the-century New York. With only a small inheritance to her name, she rented a small apartment on West 112th Street in Jewish Harlem with her sister-in-law and made a down payment on a sewing machine. While at first, she earned a modest living by creating custom lingerie and negligées and making alterations on mass manufactured shirtwaists and skirts, by 1904 she had opened her own storefront at 1489 Fifth Avenue and was beginning to gain a reputation for both the quality of her work and for the superb fits she was able to achieve. Shortly thereafter, she went on to make fashion history by creating the “first” maternity dress, known as the “famous No. 5 Maternity Gown, so called

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40 As in articles that reflect on the history and growth of the stoutwear industry. See, for example: “Hotel Chain of Stoutwear Shops Planned,” Women’s Wear (August 31, 1922), 1; “May Resigns as Sveltline Assn. Director,” Women’s Wear (January 20, 1923), 1; “Plan to Check Style Piracy in Stoutwear,” Women’s Wear (April 10, 1928), 1; “Stoutwear Still Grows,” Women’s Wear (November 2, 1922), 16.
42 Tom Mahoney, 50 Years of Lane Bryant (New York: Lane Bryant, 1950), 5-7.
because it was given this number when the business grew large enough for a price list.” As told by the New York Times,

Legend has it that a young matron asked Mrs. Bryant if she could make a functional and attractive dress for her to wear during her pregnancy—a radical idea, for in those days women did not go out or wear fashionable styles when they were pregnant.

Four years later, the maternity gown with an elasticized waist was successful enough to allow Mrs. Bryant to open a checking account. Along with her checkbook, Mrs. Bryant inadvertently got a new name: a bank clerk transposed Lena into Lane, and it stuck.

The story of Lane Bryant as the massively influential plus-size clearing house we know today, however, did not begin until 1909, when Bryant married the Lithuanian-born immigrant, Albert Malsin. A mechanical engineer by trade, Malsin was taken by his new wife’s innovative maternity designs, which swapped fitted belts with convertible elastic waistbands that permitted the wearer’s dress to grow and shrink with her throughout her pregnancy. Malsin soon abandoned his own engineering practice to work with his wife—he primarily focusing on the financial and planning side of the business, and she on design.

Around this time, Bryant had also outgrown her small Fifth Avenue storefront, so she moved her operations to a second-floor loft at 19 West 38th Street, in the heart of New York City’s Garment District. Here, the couple mechanized their trade, employing high speed sewing machines and industrial equipment that bore the capacity to cut dozens of garments at once, thereby driving down their production costs considerably while increasing their scale of production. Not so far away, in a small, one-room space located in Midtown Manhattan, just off of Fifth Avenue, the couple opened up their first dedicated retail store. Up to this point, the Lane Bryant brand was best known for its maternity wear; even so, openly discussing pregnancy was still a faux pas in the United States. Bryant had therefore found her large following principally through word-of-mouth, while the first mentions of Lane Bryant’s maternity business would not appear in the fashion press until more than a decade after its founding (Fig. 8). By 1911, however, there was growing evidence that Bryant and Malsin were training their sights on the stoutwear business, even if it would not be formalized for several

44 Mahoney, 50 Years of Lane Bryant, 8.
45 Angela Taylor, “A Store That’s a Haven if You’re Pregnant, Tall or Plumpish,” The New York Times (April 20, 1970), 65. This story has also been published in Joseph J. Fucini and Suzy Fucini, Entrepreneurs: The Men and Women behind Famous Brands and How They made It (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985), 119; and Tom Mahoney, The Great Merchants: America’s Foremost Retail Institutions and the People Who Made Them Great (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). In another account, however, it was written that Lena Bryant, “so unaccustomed to the grandeur of the surroundings and the awe of having so much money that she filled out the deposit slip not as Lena Bryant, but as Lane Bryant.” See Mahoney, 50 Years of Lane Bryant, 9-10.
46 Mahoney, 50 Years of Lane Bryant, 13.
47 “Selling ‘Stouts’: Studied Service to One Kind of Buyers Wins Success at Lane Bryant,” Printers’ Ink Monthly Vol. 1, No. 7-12 (June 1920), 36.
48 Previously, the first Lane Bryant maternity wear ads were celebrated as being published by the New York Herald in 1911 (see, for example, Mahoney, 50 Years of Lane Bryant, 14). In my own research, however, I found earlier instances of Lane Bryant maternity wear ads in Vogue (see Fig. 8).
more years. On May 2, 1911, Albert Malsin registered a patent for a garment with an expandable waistband, and in the text accompanying his diagrammatic illustration (Fig. 9), he explicitly referenced the stout woman:

My present invention relates to maternity dresses and other garments which are contrived and adapted to accommodate themselves to persons of different sizes and shapes. The object of the invention primarily is to construct the waist band or waist portion of the garment that it will adjust itself easily and naturally to persons of different sizes without the necessity of altering its length or shape....

In the accompanying drawings illustrating my invention, Figure 1 illustrates a view of my improved waist band device as adapted to be worn by a slender person. Figure 2 is the same view of the same device showing it applied for use by a stouter person.40

Malsin was granted the patent for his adjustable dress a few years later, in December 1914; however, he was not alone in his ambition to patent specially-designed garments for stout women. As Keist has written, between 1910 and 1928, at least forty-nine patents were granted to a number of different stoutwear entrepreneurs.50

The products focused on addressing the "perceived problems of clothing" for stout women by "supporting and improving the body [through] inventions like corsets, brassieres, mensural products, support devices and combinations of corset and brassiere."51 Malsin himself patented no fewer than fifteen fashion-related items during his lifetime, many of which were created specifically for the stoutwear industry, and which likely served a promotional purpose as much as they were functional.52

At the same time, Malsin had begun thinking more critically about the mechanics and opportunities of the stoutwear trade. In a promotional pamphlet published by the Lane Bryant

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51 Ibid.
52 As Cole has written, caution must be used when using corporate materials like patents as historical evidence. Ottomores materials like these are used merely for promotional purposes, rather than for their intended purpose. With the case of Lane Bryant, and Malsin's patented inventions, this may indeed be the case, although it is impossible to prove whether or not he actually used devices like his off-cite Measure Mold (US patent no. 1,123,822) for measuring clients. See Catherine Cole, "Cavets in the Use of Corporate Literature by Costume Historians," Material/History Review 34, no. 1 (1991), 1.
company in 1950 to celebrate the company’s fiftieth anniversary, business historian Tom Mahoney recounted a story of how, after realizing that while not all women will grow pregnant, most will struggle with stoutness at some point in their lives, Mabin began a systematic survey of “feminine curves with the same thoroughness with which he earlier had planned the curves of scenic railways in amusement parks all over the world.”55 On July 9, 1915, Women’s Wear published an article titled “Scientific Specialization in Stout” that documented Mabin’s process (Fig. 10). The full-page article, complete with tables and illustrations, explained how he supposedly conducted a “scientific survey” of over 4,000 Lane Bryant customers using his patented spring-loaded, flexible measuring tape called the “Measure Mold,” which he then cross-referenced with data provided by a large insurance company of 200,000 female policyholders.56 In doing so, his aim was to discern how bodies exceeding a forty-four-inch bust measurement deviated from standardized grading and sizing systems that were based on bodies of statistically average proportions.

He ultimately found that, after a certain weight threshold, stout women put on weight less predictably and less uniformly than their slender counterparts. As he told the trade journal Printers’ Ink Monthly in 1920, “stout bodies are not simply thin frames plus several extra layers of flesh.”57 He therefore cautioned readers of Women’s Wear that those seeking to enter the stoutwear trade “bear one thing in mind, above all...namely that it is impossible to make such garments by the ordinary process of grading.”58 Additionally, Mabin estimated that upwards of forty percent of American women aged fifteen and older were either stout all over or stout in

55 Mahoney, 50 Years of Lane Bryant, 18.
56 The exact number of women Mabin measured is unclear. In another article, Mabin claims that he measured 250,000 women (see “Who’s to Blame for Abominations”), while Tom Mahoney’s Lane Bryant pamphlet claims that Mabin measured 4,590 customers and examined the insurance policies of another 200,000 women. See Tom Mahoney, 50 Years of Lane Bryant (New York: Lane Bryant), 19.
57 “Selling ‘Stouts’: Studied Service to One Kind of Buyers Wins Success at Lane Bryant,” Printers’ Ink Monthly (June 1920), 34.
Scientific Specialization in Stouts

A. Malins Believes That It Is Impossible to Fit All Types of Stouts According to a Single Standard.

Often, when dealing with any detail, that there are many more among the possible combinations of the many factors involved, that what is true for one type of stout may not be true for another type. Moreover, what is true for one type of stout may not be true for another type, even if the same ingredients are used. Thus, the best way to approach the problem is to consider each type of stout separately.

Miss Malins, who is a leading authority on the subject, states that the best way to fit a stout to the customer is to consider the type of stout and the manner in which it is to be served. Each type of stout has its own characteristics, and these must be taken into account when determining the best way to fit it to the customer.

Table of Grading for Stouts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>The stout with a rich, malty flavor and a full-bodied texture.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>A stout with a slightly stronger flavor and a more pronounced hop character.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>A stout with a more pronounced hop character and a drier texture.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 10: Women's Wear (July 9, 1915), 4.
parts, and thus in need of specialized, scientifically designed apparel. He also established what *Printers' Ink* described as some “interesting secondary facts,” among which were the observations that “stout women are more commonly found in cities than in the country, and…women of foreign birth seem to be more inclined to stoutness than do the more pure-blooded Americans” —a racist comment that reflected a more prevalent conception within the cultural imaginary that immigrant bodies were unruly and uncivilized. Armed with these initial findings, however, Malsin posed the following questions:

What is [the] approximate proportion [of stout women] to the number of the regulation size customers? What are the laws of nature in shaping the stout figures? What are the proportions and correlations of the bust and waist measurement of stouts? [And] finally,—what is a stout? 

For Malsin, the sizing survey did not begin and end with aggregating data; rather, to him, stoutwear represented an interesting design problem that was in need of solving. Approaching stoutwear with the same verve with which he had approached his engineering work, it was his lofty ambition to completely overhaul the stoutwear industry by inventing a sizing and pattern cutting system that would eliminate waste, drive down production costs and provide a better fit, off-the-rack, for stout consumers. In sum, it was his goal to thrust stoutwear into the era of mass manufacturing, and that he did: By 1911, Lane Bryant had a brick-and-mortar store, a mail order division and a robust wholesale business that sold garments to major department stores such as Macy’s and Altman’s; in 1916 Lane Bryant incorporated and went on the New York Stock Exchange; and by 1917, the company’s sales had surpassed $1,000,000 for the first time. At the same time the Lane Bryant business soared, however, Malsin also had a more elusive and perhaps loftier goal in mind: to give shape to the stout body itself.

Malsin’s work was founded on the principle that the larger woman’s body is unruly, or fundamentally different from statistically “average” bodies. Indeed, as he remarked in one publication, “in all the thousands of stout women [I measured] no two were alike.” Even so, he conceded to *Women’s Wear* that

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57 “Selling ‘Stouts,’” 34.
58 Farrel notes that fatness was a common visual marker of the “less civilized” body in early twentieth century media and satire. Within this visual schema, the Hottentot Venus was a familiar archetype of the uncivilized, black female body; however, Jewish and Irish immigrants—and particularly women—were also common targets for such treatment. Such racist and hyperbolic representations were bolstered by medical studies that linked (non-white) race with obesity. See Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 75-81.
59 Mahoney, *50 Years of Lane Bryant*, 19.
61 Mahoney, *50 Years of Lane Bryant*, 17.
62 “Selling ‘Stouts’: Studied Service to One Kind of Buyers Wins Success at Lane Bryant,” *Printers’ Ink Monthly* Vol. 1, No. 7-12 (June 1920), 34.
mere bigness in a woman is not the only qualification to be called stout. A woman weighing 160 pounds is “stout” from the technical point of view, as long as the measurements of her body are out of proportion of the standards for regulation sizes.\textsuperscript{43}

Elsewhere, Mulas defined the stout woman as “a person who is not well proportioned, either bust or waist or hips being larger than the other two or a person who is well proportioned, but whose body has reached a size above normal.”\textsuperscript{44} Proportions side, however, Mulas further delimited a stout woman as one whose bust measurement exceeded forty-four inches, or the point at which “the peculiarities of the stout figure begin to show.”\textsuperscript{45} Perhaps not coincidentally, however, this was also the size at which standard sizes dropped off.

With the defining feature of stout bodies therefore being not necessarily a woman’s weight, but rather a more general deviation in standard proportions, Mulas identified a triad of types to which, he reasoned, the bodies of most stout women would correspond. This refined taxonomy, Mulas argued, would aid the couture industry considerably in the practice of cutting and grading more precise patterns. According to Women’s Wear,

The three types, as used by [Mulas] in his work shop [26] are: Type A—The woman with a big bust and comparatively small hips and abdomen; Type B—Women who are stout all around; Type C—Women with flat bust and large abdomen and hips, as often found in those of advanced age.\textsuperscript{46}

Basic line drawings of stout women of each proportion accompanied descriptions of Mulas’s typology, as well as a grading table based on bust measurements, which he argued that while imperfect, were chosen for the sake of convenience and to correspond with industry conventions (Figs. 10-11). Importantly, however, Mulas also underscored the fact that while all three types may generally fall under the category of “stout,” the “technical elements in the building of a garment, as designing, cutting, etc., are entirely different for each.

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\textsuperscript{43}“Scientific Specialization in Stoutness.”
\textsuperscript{44}“Science at Last,” 54.
\textsuperscript{45}“Scientific Specialization in Stoutness.”
\textsuperscript{46}Ibid.
type.”  

Even so, Lane Bryant would go on to boast that garments cut according to Malsin’s system would “fit 78 per cent of American ‘stouts’ without alteration, while the remaining 22 per cent require but little special fitting.”

While the name Lane Bryant has become synonymous with plus-size fashion over the last century, it is Albert Malsin who stands as an outsized figure in the history of stoutwear—his findings, sizing conventions and even ways of speaking about both stoutwear and the stout body casting a large shadow over the entire industry, and, it should be mentioned, over his wife’s innovations. His definition of a stout body, as well as his typology, for instance, would be widely and uncritically adopted as an industry standard—one which persists to this day. For instance, a New York Times article titled “Selling Stouts in the Showroom,” which was published four months after the Women’s Wear article announcing Malsin’s findings, described a strikingly similar tripartite system for classifying stout bodies, devised by the industry advocacy group, the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers. Although the measurements and ratios provided by the group differ from Malsin’s, they nevertheless differentiate between the “stylish stout,” the “old-fashioned stout” and the “stubby stout.” A variation of Malsin’s system for classifying stout bodies also appeared in Paul H. Nystrom’s textbook, Economics of Fashion in 1928. Without quoting Malsin directly, in the text, Nystrom matter-of-factly draws a distinction between the three different “types” of stouts—differentiating between “regular stouts,” or a stout body that is “tall and well proportioned;” the “stubby or odd stout,” which has a less developed bust and a wide waist and hips; and the “stylish stout,” which is “distinguished from the regular stout by a more fully developed bust and longer waist.”

It would not, however, just be Malsin’s sizing system that would prove influential; so too would the language he used to speak about stout bodies (e.g. “stylish stouts” as a term that connotes stout bodies that most closely resemble the fashionable ideal), as well as his manner of measuring the stout body against a norm. Indeed, while claiming from the start that he was reconsidering the process of stoutwear sizing from the ground up, Malsin nevertheless invokes the notion of a “standard body” as a point of distinction in articulating the different types of stout body. Thus, by attempting to standardize the means of producing stoutwear garments, Malsin, by turn, also standardized the stout body itself.

In doing so, he would invoke a type of scientific discourse in discussing stoutwear design and manufacturing that would eventually permeate both the design and promotion of stoutwear, too—so much so that Women’s Wear would even go on to argue in 1918 that too much emphasis was being placed on the scientific qualities of stoutwear in its promotion, and that more attention should be paid to fashion—a point which will be discussed at great length in the next

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67 Ibid.
68 “Selling ‘Stouts’: Studied Service to One Kind of Buyers Wins Success at Lane Bryant,” Printers’ Ink Monthly (June 1920), 34.
69 Today, rather than “stylish stout,” the “stout all over” and the “flat busted” stout, retailers rely on the familiar “apple, pear, hourglass” system of categorizing plus-size bodies.
A backward-glancing article published in the *Times* in 1928 echoed this sentiment, calling the early days of stoutwear “a sort of ‘furtive experiment’” and deriding the nascent industry as little more than “a size proposition…[for] so much thought was given to…dimensions that styling was, unfortunately, a secondary consideration.” Malsin’s approach and the language he invoked in providing a technical rationale for stoutwear design emerged from early twentieth century business strategies through which companies and advertisers broadly invoked “scientific and pseudoscientific justifications for new products,” which proved an instrumental strategy in convincing consumers—and, as in this case, retailers—to try new things. In articulating this typology, for instance, Malsin claimed he was able to “make sense” of stout bodies, which he also referred to in other contexts as a body that gets larger without anything like “mathematical regularity.” Frequently noting the fact that he had no fashion pedigree—claiming that his engineering degree and knowledge in “designing dynamos or making machinery” was a sufficient prerequisite for stoutwear design—Malsin kept himself at a distance from the feminized and hands on practice of fashion design, leaving the lion’s share of that work to his wife.

At the turn of the century, the fashion industry was perceived as an “antiquated” and “primitive” mode of production in the American industrial landscape, which Nancy L. Green has argued was a consequence of the fact that the garment industry was an “informal economy,” or a “women’s industry” grounded in flexible specialization and a large amount of handwork. By invoking the high-minded discourses of engineering and industrial design, Malsin flouted the notion that garment design required specialized knowledge, insisting that his experience in the field of mechanical engineering was a natural prerequisite for garment design, as, for instance, in this passage from the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* in which he recounts how he came to work in the stoutwear business:

> Why should there be so much difficulty in clothing the stout woman? It was hard for me to understand. Of course, in building machines, as I had been doing for years, many of the parts had to fit within the smallest fraction of an inch, but clothing does not have to fit as snugly as piston rods do. The maker has considerable leeway in the various parts of a garment without sacrificing either its style or its comfort. Therefore, my engineering mind could see no reason why it should be impossible to provide better clothes for a woman, even though nature had dealt most unkindly with her in the proportions of her bust, hips and abdomen to the rest of her body.

For Malsin, the practice of designing stoutwear was little different from that of fitting parts to a machine, but nevertheless a lesser intellectual pursuit—one that was “just difficult enough to

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72 “Style and Price of First Importance in Stoutwear Models,” *Women’s Wear* (December 28, 1918), 12.
75 “Science at Last Turns its Attention to Stout People,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (April 2, 1916), 54.
76 “Science at Last,” 54.
77 Green, *Ready to Wear*, 4-6.
78 “Science at Last,” 54.
appeal to [his] technical mind.” He did not require specialized knowledge in garment design or manufacturing, compared to engineering, the tailor had “considerable leeway” as clothing need not “fit as snugly as piston rods do.” As far as he was concerned, one of the principal problems with conventional stoutwear design was the fact that designers had not “reached for something higher.” While clothing design may have been a feminine pursuit, the more intellectual challenge of solving the problem of sizing in stoutwear permitted Malsin to act at a distance, but in doing so, to almost singlehandedly determine the future trajectory of the stoutwear industry.

With various patents, theories and bodily taxonomies buoying his scientific pedigree and technical approach to stoutwear design, Malsin was a major and early proponent of what would come to be known throughout the industry as “scientific” stoutwear—a notion that was perhaps most widely invoked by the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers in the years to follow. Indeed, in the year after the publication of the original Women’s Wear article describing his Stoutwear survey, Malsin embarked upon a media blitz to publicize his innovations and to position himself as an unequivocal expert in the field. Notably, the stoutwear entrepreneur published a series of prominent full-page, illustrated articles in Virginia’s Richmond Times-Dispatch for four consecutive weeks in April of 1916. In the first of these articles, a double-page spread entitled “Science at Last Turns its Attention to ‘Stout People,’” Malsin explains:

Had I not been trained in engineering and familiar with a number of other scientific branches I should never have been able to do what I have done toward making it possible for stout women to secure clothes that only fit but that make them look less stout.

In this series of articles, I am going to explain just how I have applied the laws of physics, mathematics, optics, psychology, color and other scientific branches for the benefit of the stout. And before you have gone very far into what I have to say, you will agree with me that stout women would have been immeasurably better off in health, peace of mind and good looks if the making of their clothes had been put on a scientific basis long ago. Here, Malsin explicitly positioned himself as an innovator and expert uniquely capable of “immeasurably” improving the “health, peace of mind and good looks” of stout women through his unprecedented scientific approach. In this quotation, Malsin not only explained his scientific sizing system and means of categorizing stout bodies in great detail, he also furthered the notion that scientifically-constructed stoutwear not only fits the stout consumer’s body better, but also improves her appearance, as well as her state of mind. The stout consumer—

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 See, for example, the early publicity surrounding the organization’s incorporation as in “Apparel Houses Combine to Cater to Stout Women,” Women’s Wear (September 20, 1916), 14. However, the notion that their garments were constructed on a scientific basis was also a common refrain in their advertisements that appeared in the professional media, especially through 1921 (see Fig. 12).
83 “Science at Last,” 54.
whose very definition was predicated on an essential difference from a norm—is therefore defined by more than just her body; her stoutness also signaled a compromised mindset that set her apart from her slender counterparts.

While the matter of stoutwear design and its capacities to transform both the body and the psyche of the stout consumer will be covered in depth in both chapters four and five, here the key idea is that within the sub-category of stoutwear within the wider field of mass manufacturing, Malsin had by 1915 secured his place at the top of the hierarchy—a point which resonates with Kawamura’s observation that designers are “star” figures who wield significant power in the fashion system. The engineer, however, was far from being the stoutwear industry’s sole agent of consecration. While Malsin had, for better or for worse, established a way of speaking about the stout body and of stoutwear—thereby establishing the symbolic value of the nascent industry—a host of other individuals and institutions were vying for control over its production, and therefore the power to claim the material value of this new industry. Indeed, as Kawamura has written, fashion is a collective activity and in the case of stoutwear, its value as a scientific enterprise as proposed by Malsin was not only legitimised by other competing stoutwear manufacturers, but also by the fashion media discourses in which his ideas circulated.

Binding these vast and oftentimes widely dispersed networks of designers, manufacturers and retailers is what Mary Roach-Higgins and Joanne Eicher have described as a social regulating system. Within this network, professional organizations and institutions act as crucial intermediaries that “control the mobilization process of fashion professionals and organize fashion events and activities.” In turn, the fashion media, as Rocamora, drawing on Bourdieu and Delsaut, has written, is a vital space, or an institution of diffusion, “whose role it is to institute reality.” In the case of stoutwear, it was the professional fashion media that held the power to consecrate the stoutwear industry as a legitimate sub-category of American ready-to-wear. In the following subsection, I will therefore discuss two institutions of consecration and diffusion that advocated for and pooled the knowledge of a dispersed network of stoutwear manufacturers, and which emerged around the same time Malsin was making a call for scientific specialization in stouts: The Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers and Women’s Wear’s weekly “Stoutwear Survey.”

Emerging on the heels of the earliest references to the emergent stoutwear industry, the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers was a non-competitive industry advocacy group, whose very definition was predicated on an essential difference from a norm—is therefore defined by more than just her body; her stoutness also signaled a compromised mindset that set her apart from her slender counterparts.

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3.1.3 Pooling Knowledge: The Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers & the “Stoutwear Survey”

Emerging on the heels of the earliest references to the emergent stoutwear industry, the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers was a non-competitive industry advocacy group,
networking association and collective of eight large-size garment manufacturers that focused exclusively on the design and manufacturing of so-called “stylish stout.” In its focus on stylish stout, the association explicitly sought to cater to women who possessed a youthful hourglass shape but whose bust and hips were larger-than-average but proportionate—a category which most closely corresponded to Albert Malin’s “Type A,” the “full-busted” stout woman.\(^\text{98}\) Notably, as a wholesale behemoth in its own right and a purveyor of stoutwear for women of varying sizes, Lane Bryant was absent from this group in spite of their shared mission and similar rhetoric (Fig. 12).\(^\text{99}\) As reported in Women’s Wear, the group officially associated on September 19, 1916, and had its headquarters at 47 West 34th Street in New York City—on the southernmost edge of the Garment District and only four blocks from Lane Bryant’s 38th Street headquarters.\(^\text{100}\) As an organization that vowed to “carry on the propaganda work on a much more active scale” of an otherwise unaffiliated network of stoutwear manufacturers, Women’s Wear reported their stated mission as follows:

The purpose of the corporation is to make certain facts appreciated not only by retailers but by the customers as well...

The cooperation of eight makers of women’s wear who specialize in making all kinds of ready to wear garments for stout women; that these manufacturers have concentrated their entire efforts to one specialized feature; the concentration of each of these makers to a scientific end.

They also ask suggestions and ideas that will aid them in helping retailers to develop their stout wear business.\(^\text{101}\)

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\(^\text{98}\) “United Advertising is Building a Stout Size Business,” Advertising & Selling (September 1917), 12.


\(^\text{100}\) Participating firms included Alfred Beer Co, makers of A.B.C. stout waists; J.A. Goldstein & Co., makers of “Shut-Fit” suits; the Adlington Skirt Manufacturing Co., makers of “Stylish Stout” petticoats; Weingarten Bros., Inc., makers of W.B. Redus corsets (over which the article claimed “all garments manufactured by the members of the association are made, thereby assuring a uniform fit”); Hertzberg Bros., specialists in stout skirts; H.L. Scholz & Co., wholesalers of dresses; A.D. & C. Co., makers of S.G.S. suiting and coats; and the Fox Bros. Manufacturing Co., makers of “Milford” stout underwear.”

\(^\text{101}\) For a summary of these firms, see also Keist, “The New Costumes of Odd Sizes,” 33.

Echoing Albert Mabin’s own ambitions for stoutwear, an ideological cornerstone of the group was the notion that the large-size garment industry was deeply in need of reform, and specifically of standardization. In their early promotional blitz, representatives described how the “typical” large-size garment had “sleeves too small, waist length too short [and] hips too scant or too bulky,” and therefore required significant alterations to achieve a precise fit. Elsewhere they detailed how, after conducting a thorough study of the national retail landscape, it was found that a very large percentage of the large stores that cater to women have not as yet given the stout woman the consideration which is due her, evidenced by the fact that...a majority of the retail stores of the country do not carry garments in a wide variety, specially constructed to meet her requirements.

Garments made with the collective knowledge of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers, however, were claimed to have been produced on a “scientific basis,” therefore guaranteeing accurate fits for stout women without expensive alterations. In its promotional materials, the group attributed their relative strengths in pattern cutting and manufacturing to “the individual and expert...knowledge and experience” of participating stoutwear skirt, dress, petticoat, corset and shirtwaist manufacturers. Beyond exploiting their collective knowledge of stoutwear grading and cutting, however, it was also advertised that all of their garments were produced on the foundations of so-called Svelteline Reduso brand corsets by Weingarten Brothers, Inc. (Fig. 13)—one of the eight companies in the collective—so as to ensure consistent fit across its range of goods by physically altering the shape of the stout body to more closely resemble the era’s physical

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93 Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers advertisement, Women’s Wear (January 26, 1917), 23.
94 “Apparel Houses Combine to Cater to Stout Women,” Women’s Wear (September 29, 1916), 14.
95 Without going into great depths about the basis for their scientific claims, however, the association asserted that “the clever buyer [and] the wise merchant, will investigate and know the difference between just large sizes and the scientifically made garments of speciality makers. This was according to an Associated Stylish Stout West Makers advertisement, Women’s Wear (December 26, 1916), 7.
96 Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers advertisement, Women’s Wear (September 22, 1916), 7.
ideal (a point which will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter).

In addition to its role as a clearinghouse for stout wear design and manufacturing knowhow, the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers, led at that time by Isidor Heller of I. Heller & Co.—a stout dress and shirtwaist maker who had only two years prior famously proclaimed that "the trouble is with the dress, not the woman" (see Fig. 7)—stood as a crucial lifeline between stout wear, the mainstream ready-to-wear industry and the public at large, one which quite vitally pooled the specialized knowledge of an otherwise dispersed network of producers and manufacturers. Indeed, as was reported in Women's Wear, shortly after incorporating, the association embarked on an aggressive advertising campaign "to show by word of mouth and the lavish use of printer's ink the importance of the patronage of the stout woman." Or, as Heller explained to the trade journal Advertising & Selling "After the association was formed our next step was to let the stout women all over the United States know of its existence." Before embarking on a national stout wear awareness campaign, however, the group first had to secure partnerships with stores willing to sell their garments. In these advertisements, which littered the pages of the professional fashion media, the group described the importance and marketability of its goods and services directly to buyers and retailers. According to their own in-house studies, they had arrived at the statistic that "nearly one third of all the women in the country are 'stouts.'" Among the burgeoning number of stout wear manufacturers nationally, the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers were the most vociferous advocates for the statistical

97 See section 4.2.2 for further discussion about the Svelling system. This approach was in keeping with the idea that the foundation of stout dressing was a well-fitting corset. See chapter seven, "Ordering Disorder: Self-Fashioning the Stout Body" for further discussion about the stout woman's corseting practices.

98 Along with Albert Maksin, Isidor Heller has been occasionally attributed with inventing the first stout dress. In his obituary, for instance, it read, "He is said to have conceived the idea of manufacturing the 'stout' dress." See "Obituary: Isidor Hellet," Women's Wear (October 3, 1934), 27.


100 "United Advertising is Building a Stout Size Business," Advertising & Selling (September 1917), 12.

rationale for creating a specialized industry, separate but running parallel to American mass fashion. In these ads, which were published within the pages of *Women's Wear* throughout the year 1917 with remarkable regularity, the association leaned heavily on data, claiming that "statistics show that thirty-five per cent of the women of America are in the stout class," while asking of its readers in advertisements, "What is the percentage of stout women in your locality, or don't you know?" (Fig. 14). Few retailers of mass-produced, ready-made fashion, the association held, possessed such expert knowledge and were therefore missing out on a massive profit-making opportunity—one which was compounded by the additional knowledge, parlayed to *Women's Wear* by one retailer, that "approximately 90 per cent of these women are mothers, and it must be remembered that they are the ones who purchase the supplies for the rest of their families." \(^{100}\)

The "one-third" or "thirty-three percent" statistic would become a common refrain and principal selling point for the association and was notably employed in a series of advertisements that depicted three fashionably-attired women, two of whom were slender and one stout. In one example, published in June of 1917 (Fig. 15), the association claimed,

She's 33% of your trade.

There aren't many merchants who can afford to give unsatisfactory service to one out of every three women who come into their stores—but most of them do it!

One out of every three women is stout; she cannot be fitted without alterations; she cannot be given real ready-to-wear service—unless you show her Stylish Stout. \(^{101}\)

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100 Ibid.

In these advertisements, illustrations and advertising copy worked hand-in-hand to establish the stout woman's paradoxical relationship to American ready-to-wear. While on the one hand, the stout woman, with her non-normative proportions, was deemed a statistical outlier unable to purchase garments off the rack, on the other, she was framed—at least to potential buyers—as a demographically commonplace figure. Indeed, the stout woman pictured in the illustration was not rendered as a grotesque caricature as in the aforementioned *Women's Wear* article, "How Many Fat Women in Your Town?"; rather, the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers took a subtler approach in an attempt to diminish the stout woman's difference, and therefore to make her a more attractive candidate to potential buyers, partners and investors. While here her girth is a degree wider than the more gracefully-rendered women at her sides, one would have to look twice in order to spot the differences in their physiques, suggesting to the potential partner that the stout woman actually hid in plain sight—her figure only deemed non-normative, perhaps, by fashion industry standards. Indeed, as was mentioned in other instances, stout women were wives, mothers and friends, but perhaps most importantly, they were widely understood as the "de
facto managers of the household economy and were therefore a valuable customer to have.\textsuperscript{104} With her dress rendered in black (a hue notably known for its slenderizing qualities), however, the stout woman in this advertisement nevertheless stands apart from the other two women in white—subtly underscoring her outsider relationship to and enduringly marginalized place within fashion, but also emphasizing the crucial role the fashion industry played in defining who classified as stout.

With the United States entering World War I on April 2, 1917, the association’s advertisements briefly but notably took on a more overtly propagandistic tone as they adopted the language and visual tropes of the iconic visage of Uncle Sam, whose image most famously appeared on the July 6, 1916 cover of \textit{Leslie's Weekly}, illustrated by James Montgomery Flagg. An advertisement published in the August 27, 1917 issue of \textit{Women's Wear} (Fig. 16), for instance, featured a grainy photograph of a stone-faced stout woman pointing defiantly at the reader, her body suspended in blank space above a caption that read,

\textit{I want you to know that I am 33\% of your trade.}

\textit{Every retailer will tell you his troubles trying to fit “STOUTS” [sic], but very few of them have ever realized that these dissatisfied customers represent ONE-THIRD of all their women patrons. You'll find it a big trade to asset to stock Stylish Stouts.}\textsuperscript{105}

While the fictional Uncle Sam originally promoted the Civilian Preparedness Committee, his image—or rather his forceful and familiar gesture and direct eye contact that beckon the viewer to action—endorsed a great number of organizations and commercial goods during this period, becoming one of the most iconic in American visual culture as a potent symbol of American civic and consumer responsibility, but also of American entrepreneurship.\textsuperscript{106} Within fashion industry discourse, there was a discernible effort on the part of manufacturers during this fervently patriotic time to, as Sara B. Marcketti has written, “promote the national economy, practice patriotism and disavow…Parisian models.”\textsuperscript{107} While the intentions of the Associated Stylish Stoutwear Makers were perhaps somewhat different from those of the industry at large, the group nevertheless tapped into this nationalist rhetoric in order to appeal to buyers who were perhaps somewhat reticent to embark on new ventures during wartime.

In promoting his own company, Albert Malsin similarly appealed to the buyer’s patriotism, remarking in one article that discussed the wastefulness of stoutwear manufacturing that “it is the patriotic duty of every retailer to save such waste money and thus eventually reduce

\textsuperscript{104} Ewen explains how while American consumer culture “tended to reinforce a conception of industry as a world of men, the distribution of mass-produced goods raised women to new significance in the mind of business. Their day-to-day activities were seen as integral to the sustenance of the productive system.” Stuart Ewen, \textit{Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture} (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 167-168. See also Roland Marchand, \textit{Advertising the American Dream: Making way for Modernity, 1920-1940} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 66.

\textsuperscript{105} Associated Stylish Stoutwear Makers advertisement, \textit{Women’s Wear} (August 27, 1917), 13.


the cost of the goods to the consumer.”108 By invoking the nationalist discourse of Uncle Sam, and by appealing to the American virtues of economy and thrift, these texts more forcefully underscored the fashion buyer’s longtime neglect of fat, female consumers while stoking his desire for the untold profits that could be earned by catering to this untapped and desiring consumer group. With no basis for comparison as in the earlier examples, which featured illustrations of slender models, the message is more forceful here as it is the stout woman alone who calls the buyer’s attention to this statistical inequity. Other versions of this advertisement were less persuasive in their presentation (Fig. 17), but nevertheless, the message was clear: with the stout woman standing in as a proxy for Uncle Sam, she entreats possible partners and retailers to action, lest they miss out on the earnings her patronage could reap. Indeed, a typical refrain in the advertisements read: “Here’s your chance to get the trade of the stout woman who never bought from you before.... Get that other 33%.”109

The early and aggressive advertising of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers was, however, eclipsed by an even more ambitious and far-reaching campaign launched in May 1918 to expand stoutwear beyond the remit of New York City in placing stoutwear departments in stores all over the country. From the outset, the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers were deeply embedded in the geographies and histories of New York City garment manufacturing. As Norma Raush has written, the story of New York fashion is “a story of both industry and a place and of the dialectic between the two.”110 Much the same, however, could be said of the stoutwear industry. Fed both by the late nineteenth century surge in immigration from Eastern Europe and the growing demand for ready-to-wear, the informal but burgeoning garment industry had, by the early twentieth century, outgrown the overcrowded and dangerous Lower East Side tenements from which it had emerged. Sprayed by new zoning and labor laws, and the construction of the subway system along the west side of Manhattan, garment manufacturing

108 “Who’s to Blame for Alterations?" 23.
109 Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers advertisement, Women’s Wear (July 24, 1917), 9.
eventually moved uptown to purpose-built lofts in what today is recognized as the Garment District—a geographical area bounded by 34th and 40th Streets to the north and south, and Fifth and Ninth Avenues to the east and west.  

In many ways, the garment district's move uptown in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries paralleled Lena Bryant's own migration from the poor Jewish and Italian neighborhoods of Harlem to her 38th Street loft in 1909 when demand for her products exceeded the production capacities of her one room storefront. A slew of other Stoutwear manufacturers—many of which, including the Mildred Stout Underwear Company, I. Heller & Co. Stylish Stout Dresses and Alfred Beer Co. Inc. Stout Waists, were located at 116 West 32nd Street—followed suit, thereby facilitating the incorporation of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers in 1916. Although the geographical proximity of the various firms permitted the otherwise unaffiliated manufacturers to easily and efficiently pool their collective knowledge, it nevertheless limited the reach of stoutwear beyond the confines of the island of Manhattan where the lion's share of stoutwear was both produced in Garment District lofts and then sold in 5th Avenue department stores.

In May 1918, however, all of this changed. As Women's Wear announced, the plan to introduce stoutwear to the rest of the country was set into motion by Isidor Heller with the help of Susy Collins Miller—the former managing partner of Lane Bryant's Chicago branch who had defected to the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers to organize the group’s national expansion. 

As told to Women’s Wear:

The plan of the bureau is to point out to department stores the advantage of concentrating attention and effort upon the business of dressing extra size women and to aid them in the organization of specialized departments, apart from the regular apparel departments of the store, to care for this class of trade. Mrs. Miller will offer her personal service in the work of forming the department and supplying the merchandise…. There will be no charge to stores that accept this service from the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers, the members of this body being content to derive their profit from the increased business in stout wear that they believe will inevitably follow.

Around this time, the association also underwent a rebranding, marketing its wares under the “Sveltline” label (Fig. 18). According to Heller, the rebranding occurred after it was realized that the group had “outgrown its baptismal name,” and that the term “‘stouts,’ even though accompanied by ‘stylish,’ was treading upon delicate ground.” Elaborating on this point, he explained how

the lady of unusual avoirdupois does not like to have it “rubbed in.” Henceforth, “Sveltline” system will be our identification mark, every garment made by a member of our association will bear this trademark label, and all our future advertising will push it. It is our intention to let every woman throughout the country know that “Sveltline” System

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112 “Plan to Put Stout Dept's in Stores All Over Country,” Women’s Wear (May 15, 1918), 27.
113 “United Advertising is Building a Stout Size Business,” Advertising & Selling (September 1917), 12.
Stylish Stouts will transform her from a stout woman to an enlarged edition of attractive femininity.114

In spite of the group’s efforts to rebrand stoutwear, however, the term remained popular until at least until the 1950s when it eventually fell into disuse. Yet, even as Isidor Heller’s efforts to rebrand stoutwear were somewhat unsuccessful, his bid to expand the reach of the group’s business proved to be a much easier feat. In the months immediately following Miller’s May 1918 interview with Women’s Wear, the publication announced the opening of Svetline branches in department stores in San Francisco, Seattle, Minneapolis and Indianapolis.115

After successfully introducing Svetline products to the rest of the country, the group’s imperative thereafter was to focus their collective energies more wholeheartedly on the matters of standardization and fit. In December 1921, Charles May—the former sales manager of I. Heller & Co.—took over from Isidor Heller as the General Manager of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers.116 Under his leadership, the group avowed to provide better resources to buyers and better fits for customers, while also aiming to double their profits from $70,000,000

114 Ibid.
115 On August 28, 1918, Women’s Wear announced Miller’s two-month trip across the United States in a column titled “Stout Garments” (August 28, 1918, p. 13). In the brief announcement, Miller described her itinerary, which included Minneapolis, San Francisco, and Seattle, noting, “Much to my regret...it has been impossible to take on more accounts for this season.” In subsequent articles, however, Women’s Wear announced her success. See “Svetline Will Install Stout Sections,” Women’s Wear (November 18, 1918), 1; and “Emporium Opens Svetline Shop,” Women’s Wear (September 26, 1918), 19.
116 “Stoutwear to be Promoted by Association,” Women’s Wear (December 23, 1921), 1.
to $140,000,000 annually. As May told the *American Cloak and Suit Review*, “There is too much guesswork about attempting to suit the needs of individual customers…. The retailer cannot guess anything as far as stoutwear is concerned,” and so he devised a new means to achieve precise fits. The new-and-improved Sveltline system, May told *Women's Wear*, was derived from a “special pattern system...aimed to make garments easily adjustable to fit the stout woman well.”

Under a system of mass customization, May said that it was the duty of buyers and retailers to take note of to what extent their customers deviated from the standard sizes provided by the association. Continuing, he explained to the trade journal how this system worked:

> After a store has featured stoutwear for a short time...it becomes aware of the fact that the women who patronize it are, for example, on average one inch larger or half an inch smaller about the waistline.... The next time this retailer orders merchandise from a recognized stoutwear manufacturer he states that the garments should be made one inch larger or half an inch smaller about the waist as the case may require. Hence when the same women return to his store the following season, they find that they fit into the stoutwear garments even more accurately than the season before.

By fitting the garment to the woman, rather than the woman to the garment as May proposed, the thinking was that the correlated problems of poor fit and expensive alterations could be resolved, once and for all. The viability and ultimate success of this somewhat complicated system, however, was yet to be determined.

Perhaps not coincidentally, in the years immediately following the national expansion of the Sveltline system, the professional fashion media reported on the vast success of the stoutwear trade. In a special feature on the past, present and future of the stoutwear industry published in the November 1921 issue of *Dry Goods Economist*, the trade journal reflected on the vast growth and evolution of stoutwear since the turn of the century. After years of reluctance from buyers, the trade journal noted, “pioneers in this branch of industry have begun to reap rewards of their courage and skill,” while suggesting that, “during the next ten years the development in the stylish stout apparel will be stupendous.” As if proving this premonition, only a year later, the *New York Times* business section reported that “one of the brightest spots in the garment trade this season has been that section supplying the stout wear trade.... Retailers are now giving much greater attention to this end of their business than ever before.” Another article published around the same time similarly reported that

greater attention than probably ever before in the history of the garment industry is being given the woman of generous proportions. Not only is this shown by the increase in the number of manufacturers producing stout-wear garments, but also by the great

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118 “Take up Stoutwear Wholeheartedly or Not at All,” *American Cloak and Suit Review* (December 1922), 122.
success of the specialty shops which have put themselves at pains to cater to this class of customer.…

There is a big field for development here, and the merchant who earnestly goes after business in stout wear will find his eyes opened.122

It was not just retailers that were benefitting from the vast expansion of stoutwear, however; the Times also noted that “more women are turning away from garments which, although made in large sizes, nevertheless do not have the fitness of those specially designed for stouter persons,”223 and in doing so, were finding that they had more choice than ever before, and at lower price points than in the past.224 Indeed, by the summer 1923, with profits soaring and little evidence to suggest that growth was slowing, stoutwear was in its ascendancy a mere eight years after the first mentions of a stoutwear industry appeared in the pages of Women’s Wear.

Further evidence that the stoutwear industry had been consecrated within the minds of both its own proponents and by the industry at large came in the form of Women’s Wear’s September 7, 1922 multi-page feature titled “Stoutwear Survey”—the first such instance in which stoutwear was given its own section alongside other recurring sections such as “Dresses,” “Furs” and, later in the decade, “Children’s Wear” (Fig. 19). Having been founded in 1910 to report on workers’ strikes, Women’s Wear quickly became a vital intermediary for the bourgeoning garment industry—one through which workers, retailers and manufacturers were kept abreast of the daily goings on within their field.225 Beyond its functional reportage, however, it also served a significant symbolic function. As an important medium among a spectrum of institutions (from fashion schools to trade unions), Women’s Wear was a space through which the American clothing industry was legitimized or consecrated.226 Thus, the importance of the fact that the trade journal turned over seven full pages to permit a thorough accounting of the latest trends and tendencies in stoutwear should not go unacknowledged. Indeed, less than a decade prior, stoutwear was little more than a proposal. However, through the “Stoutwear Survey,” content that otherwise had, up to this point, been dispersed across the paper on a daily basis (thereby underscoring its niche status) was aggregated into one space—an act which was remarkable for several reasons, not least of which being the fact that it legitimized stoutwear as an independent subfield of American ready-to-wear alongside other specialized industry sectors. In other words, Women’s Wear gave symbolic form to an industry that was nevertheless still very much in-becoming.

For one, the physical real estate that the feature occupied within the broadsheet was notable if only for the fact that stoutwear had not yet breached the glossy fashion press where it was still largely relegated to the classified sections. Furthermore, and somewhat ironically, the section was remarkable for the ordinariness of the reportage. Indeed, rather than the

Figure 19: The first edition of the "Stoutwear Survey" Women's Wear (September 7, 1922), 17-23.
sensationalized and speculative articles that had appeared in the periodical up to this point—namely, full-page features such as 1915’s “Scientific Specialization in Stouts,” “How Many Fat Women in Your Town?” and “Ready for the Big Ones”—the content in the “Stoutwear Survey” recounted the mundane and routine goings-on of a lucrative, high-volume national trade. For instance, the first page of the section featured coverage from the Paris openings and a discussion of “how best to reconcile [the new features] of the mode with the stout figure.” In illustrations encircling the article, various fabrics, draping techniques and embellishments were highlighted. Evidencing a manifest desire within the trade, perhaps, to move beyond the matter of scientific fit, *Women’s Wear* advocated for “greater individuality in the matter of dress” for the stout woman.127 Other columns in the section discussed the growth of the industry (“Retailers Including More Stout Apparel in Their Fall Lines”), the importance of specialists (“More Recognition for Stoutwear Specialists”) and new openings on the west coast (“San Francisco Finds Stoutwear Opportunity”)—all of which were surrounded by paid advertisements for a wide variety of specialized stoutwear manufacturers. Stoutwear had become a self-sustaining industry.

The “Stoutwear Survey” again featured in *Women’s Wear* in the October 5 and December 7, 1922 issues before going on hiatus for several years and resurfacing under the new name, “Styles for Larger Women,” in April 1925 (Fig. 20). No reason was given for the break or for the re-naming; however, in its new form, the section covered similar content although with greater frequency as it had become a weekly feature, published on Wednesdays. Quite notably, however, there was a discernible increase in the amount of commentary dedicated to the international growth of the stoutwear trade—and namely its expansion to London and continental Europe (“Modes Sponsored in London Shop” and “Lawrence Klein Back from Europe”). Much like the “Stoutwear Survey,” however, “Styles for Larger Women” proved to be short-lived. The last time that stoutwear commentary was given a dedicated section was in the February 17, 1931 issue, attesting, perhaps, to a general decline in the industry during this period. Indeed, the toll that internal disagreements were taking on the health of the industry was apparent in articles appearing on the front page of the section, one of which attributed the decline in stoutwear sales nationally on an uneducated salesforce.128 Elsewhere in the professional fashion media, similar remarks about the decline in stoutwear sales signaled the trade’s demise in the early-1930s. For example, an October 1929 article described the difficulties retailers were having in serving consumers as they struggled to adapt fashion trends—such as higher waistlines, fitted hips and princess-cut silhouettes—to stout bodies as the more body-conscious styles of the late-1920s and early-1930s only had the effect of making the stout woman appear, as one source commented, “somewhat conspicuous.”129 Elsewhere, industry leaders variously remarked upon the notion that the term “stout” had “outlived its usefulness” and that, perhaps more problematically, the entire industry was built on a shaky foundation as one manufacturer

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127 “Details from Openings in Paris Offer Inspiration to the Stoutwear Designers,” *Women’s Wear* (September 7, 1922), 17.
128 “Education of Salesforce Recognized as Departmental Need,” *Women’s Wear* (February 17, 1931), 23.
129 “Views Differ on Style in Albany,” *Women’s Wear* (October 16, 1929), 11.
Figure 20. Women's Wear (April 22, 1925), 22.
questioned whether or not there ever was any discernible “distinction between so called ‘stout’ sizes and regular women’s sizes in dresses.” Even style piracy had become rampant amongst competing manufacturers—so much so that a meeting was convened in April 1928 to attempt to remedy the problem.

Although these issues collectively proved to be the ultimate death knell for the stoutwear industry, the problems plaguing the industry were much more systemic and historical, dating back to its earliest days. *New York Times* articles dating from 1922, for instance, remarked upon the fact that “the average ready-to-wear merchant throughout the country has not yet awakened to the value of the stout-wear trade,” and that “so much attention is being lavished by producers upon frocks for the lithe, slim young woman that the more developed female figure has been almost ignored.” Indeed, although the industry itself had grown immensely in the 1920s, it seemed that mainstream retailers never embraced stoutwear as a worthwhile stock-in-trade, which in turn led to a pervasive and institutionalized disavowal of the stout woman as a legitimate consumer—a point which will be discussed in much greater depth in the next chapter. Said differently, whereas the stout woman was a central preoccupation for the stoutwear manufacturers, she was still a marginal figure to mainstream fashion.

Perhaps even more problematic for stoutwear makers, however, was the persistent problem of fit. As reported in *Women’s Wear* as early as 1922,

> That the problem of properly dressing the stout woman is felt to be a real problem not only in and about New York but also throughout the Middle West and other sections of the country, comes to us in an interesting statement from a buyer in a Sioux City, IA department store.

Charles I. Greener, who buys for the basement ready-to-wear section of Davidson Bros. Co. finds that 60 per cent of his customers wear size 40 and over, and of that number he is able to sell only about 20 per cent, and the reason for this is two-fold. First because the style and cut of the dress is utterly unsuited to a woman wearing over a size 28, and second even where the style might be admirably suitable, the fabric is cut on so scant a pattern that neither the skirt nor the sleeves have enough material so that the woman can wear the garment.

Notably, Greener's complaints coincided with Charles May's launch of the new-and-improved Svetline System, which, in spite of his lofty promises, clearly had done little to solve the problem of fit. Thus, perhaps more than anything, it was the stout body itself that proved to be an insurmountable problem for stoutwear makers who, in spite of the great time and energy dedicated to studying the stout figure and to reassessing sizing conventions, still struggled to provide the stout consumer accurate fits. In the end, the stout body was one that was unruly and one that defied numerous attempts to tame, standardize and rationalize it, but perhaps most importantly, to *define* it. It was therefore neither style or plagiarism, nor an uneducated salesforce.

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134 “Poor Patterns and Scant Cut Stoutwear Problem,” *Women’s Wear* (March 23, 1922), 27.
that led to the demise of the stoutwear industry, but the stout body itself. The following section will explore this idea in greater depth—taking a step back from tracing the historical emergence of the stoutwear industry to instead focus on the internal struggles to solve the problem of fitting the stout body, while seeking to locate the particular historical and discursive circumstances (and namely, the conventions of standardized sizing) that fed this manifest desire to define the stout body in the first place.

3.2 Constructing the Stout Body: Sizing and Standardization

As was already discussed in chapter two, Foucault conceived of the body as tangled in webs of discourse that not only provided a language for speaking about the body, but which actively disciplined and thereby created the body. The repetition and persistence of statements, Foucault argued, “link” and “animate” discourses and thereby create regimes of truth. As discussed in the previous section, the success and viability of a dedicated stoutwear industry was largely predicated on the existence of a robust population of consumers. Indeed, while fit had been identified as a key problem in the production of stoutwear, this insight was only significant if there were enough stout women to justify the industry’s branching off from the mass market. Across the media, and as evidenced in the previous section, there was a general sense that there were “more and more [stout women] all the time,” but stoutness—or the condition of being stout—was less well understood.

With this in mind, in the following subsections, I will identify three key statements that appeared within the discourse of stoutwear and which, together, functioned to give shape to the stout body: the notion that “thirty-three percent” of the population was stout; the idea that garments were improperly graded on the ideal of the “perfect 36”; and the precept that stout flesh possessed a “flowing” or “liquid” quality. In doing so, however, I will also call upon Rocamora’s insight that discourses “extend beyond the confines of the field in which they appear” in order to cast light on the cultural, historical, scientific and technological circumstances and ideals that foregrounded the discursive co-production of both the stoutwear industry and of the stout body. Herein, my aim is to pursue the notion that, perhaps rather than emerging in response to a suddenly fatter society, the discourse of stoutwear actually created the stout consumer.

3.2.1 The Calculable Consumer: Contextualizing the Thirty-Three Percent

Punctuating early commentaries on the viability of a stoutwear industry—articles that variously discussed the profitability of catering to the stout trade and which observed that the matter of

135 Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 35.
achieving good fit should be its primary focus—was a patent desire on the part of the makers and retailers to speculate on the circumstances that led to the creation of the “stout woman,” but to also advocate for the idea that she was here to stay. Among them, the comforts of modern life—and particularly those increasingly enjoyed by middle-class women—were framed as common culprits that led to the putting on of fat. In a 1919 *Women's Wear* article, for instance, an anonymous, New York-based manufacturer admonished the ready-to-wear industry for its longtime neglect of the stout woman in spite of evidence to suggest that the percentage of stout women was increasing, conjecturing, “I am sure the percentage of numbers of stout women and girls in this city must be growing. Flat life, the automobile and candy eating is surely producing obvious results, but as a class our merchants seem to be overlooking this fact.” A health and beauty lecturer made similar points to *Women's Wear* in a 1922 article in which she described how, during the course of her lecture tour, it had come to her attention “that there is certainly an increase in the number of fat women. They ride too much in automobiles and never any exercise, and this together with an unrestricted diet accounts for the added avoirdupois.”

In her own call to action, Susy Collins Miller of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers told the *New York Times*, “The stout woman we have always with us. There will always be good things to eat and automobiles in which to ride. Women can reduce if they will, but they won't. They cheat.” Likewise, in an annual meeting convened by the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers in 1916, a main point on the agenda was discussing how the general prosperity of the country, the hygienic features of the modern corsets, the labor saving devices in the home…and the almost universal use of the automobile have all undoubtedly made life easier for the American woman, and, in consequence, she has taken on weight.

Nowhere were the circumstances that led to the fattening of American women more clearly articulated, however, than in a 1917 *New York Times* article titled “Stout Women Can Now Be Stylish.” In it, Mr. D. Grotta, the manufacturing director of a wholesale stoutwear company explained,

> While there is today undoubtedly a larger proportion of stout figures than was the case a decade or so ago, the natural process of evolution has developed an entirely new type of stout figure. Success in acquiring the material things of life usually manifests itself in a gradual physical development that is more or less abnormal. Inactivity and leisure result in a gradual taking on of weight, and it is these conditions that have created the new type of figure referred to. Higher standards of living, less worry and less household drudgery have done their part in increasing feminine avoirdupois, as have the more general introduction of motor cars and the growth of club life with its gastronomic and other pleasures.

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As these excerpts demonstrate, from early on the stout woman was framed as both a victim and a product of her historical and social circumstances—their sentiments exuding a certain ambivalence toward or even fear of social and technological progress and the perceived effects they had on the body. Indeed, fatness was no longer regarded as an age-related inevitability; leisure time, motorized transportation and the increasing availability of fatty, sugary foods were all believed to have foregrounded the stout woman's arrival. However, while 1915 represents a significant moment in the history of the stoutwear industry, the question of whether or not it also signaled the emergence of a newly fat society is a more complicated question.

While at once scholars and epidemiologists do not deny an upward trend in average body weight throughout the twentieth century, they have also acknowledged that it is not as if Americans were suddenly growing fatter after 1900. Rather, as Stearns has written, it is more so that “tolerances were beginning to narrow.” This narrowing of tolerances was partly facilitated by new ways of both seeing and measuring the body, therein drawing attention to the many forms the human physique could take. In turn, there emerged new ways to speak about bodily difference, but to also construct entirely new categories of bodies designated by their deviance from prescribed norms. Without an influx of new technologies to facilitate the surveillance and monitoring of the body, however, these points of difference proved hard to distinguish. Indeed, it is only through such technologies that the body and all of its flaws could be seen so clearly.

As Armstrong has argued, the early twentieth century ushered in new ways of not only measuring but of “penetrating” the body through a number of inventions including the stethoscope, the ophthalmoscope and X-rays, among others. These technologies did not merely present new ways for quantifying and measuring the body, however; they also brought forth “a fragmentation and augmentation of the body in relation to technology,” thereby “offer[ing] the body as lack.” This sentiment has been echoed by Hillel Schwartz who explains how the final decades of the nineteenth century and first of the twentieth saw the invention of a great many new strategies and technologies for measuring the body, including anthropometric fingerprint indexing, phrenology and psychometry, the polygraph and perhaps most importantly, the penny scale. Within this context, however, older and less sophisticated technologies, such as the dressmaker’s measuring tape and the scale, suddenly took on renewed importance. While weight had previously been a vague indicator of overall health used only by doctors and other health professionals, as Stein observed, it now had the potential to be measured and monitored by a much larger population, including the general public.

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143 Donna Haraway discusses the fear of the “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities” and thereby the breaking down of entrenched dualisms that is engendered by technological progress. See Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” in Hazel Clark and David Brody (eds.) *Design Studies: A Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 295.

144 As Stearns has written, the history of American weight gain is a great anomaly: during the twentieth century, as dieting and fitness have become increasingly compulsory, American weight has gradually gone up. The pace of weight gain intensified especially after 1920 in the American population as a whole. See Stearns, *Fat History*, 129-134.

145 Ibid., 159.


professionals, as well as something that existed on a spectrum and shifted with prevailing modes in fashion and beauty, the possibility for the individual to be able to routinely and cheaply monitor minute fluctuations in body weight precipitated what Seltzer has described as a “conversion of individuals into numbers and cases” in the early twentieth century. Continuing, he argues that this signaled a confluence of “two of the crucial control-technologies of machine culture: statistics and surveillance.”

Within this context, technologies both mundane and spectacular, old and new, bolstered the coming together of statistics and surveillance and provided a new paradigm for measuring the body against newly quantifiable norms. Among them, the emergence of the modern scale is notable for the speed with which it became a ubiquitous presence first in city streets in the form of the penny scale and, later, in private bathrooms. The massive influx of this new and novel technology in the early twentieth century meant that Americans weighed themselves more frequently, but it also ushered in an essential shift in the ways about which weight was thought in American culture. Through the increasingly commonplace practice of weighing the body, overweight came to be less of a matter of natural bodily variance than one of bodily deviance, thereby entrenching categories of ideal as well as aberrant bodies, while encouraging the self-monitoring and maintenance of the flesh. To that end, while the twentieth century body was one that was being measured more carefully, with its minute changes being charted more thoroughly, it was also, as Schwartz argues, “being observed with greater clarity.”

The notion that technology ushered in new ways of not just measuring but of actually seeing the body—and I would argue, of seeing entirely new categories of bodies—is echoed by Elizabeth Wilson who argues that modern technologies “consolidated Western faith in the rational and reinforced the scientific attitude.” The “real,” Wilson argues, “was what could be seen, measured, weighed and verified.” Within the fashion media discourses of the early stoutwear industry, the prevalence of attempts to not merely speculate on what caused the influx of stout women but to also quantify them recalls Allan Sekula’s observation that there exists a

148 Georges Vigarello charts this shift, while further arguing that it was “not weight that first becomes significant, but rather circumferences and visible volumes and contours.” See Vigarello, Metamorphoses of Fat, 111-116.
149 Mark Seltzer, Bodies and Machines (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 100.
150 Although the penny scale was introduced in the United States in 1885, it was at first, however, merely a fairground novelty. By 1935, however, more than half a million penny scales would be installed in public spaces throughout the United States such as train stations, subways, pharmacies and grocery stores. See Amanda Czerniawski, “From Average to Ideal: The Evolution of the Height and Weight Table in the United States, 1836-1943,” Social Science History 31, no. 2 (2007), 273 and Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 165.
151 Speaking specifically about the scale as an innovation of this machine culture, Huff has argued that in the moment body fat was understood as “a measurable physical substance appended to the dynamic body, its presence or absence, its placement, amount, and weight, could be used as somatic barriers. See Joyce L. Huff, “A Horror of Corpulence: Interrogating Bantingism and Mid-Nineteenth Century Fat Phobia” in Jana Evans Brazier and Kathleen Lebesco (eds) Bodies out of Bounds: Fitness and Transgression (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 46.
152 Schwartz, Never Satisfied., 162.
153 Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 60.
154 Ibid.
remarkable parallelism and tension between the desire to measure and the desire to look." \[155\]

With the emergence of standard sizing in the late nineteenth century, a forty-four inch bust became the concrete threshold that separated the "normal" body from the "stout" body. In turn, the stout woman became suddenly more visible—her body looking "too large," as some commented, in her ready-made dresses. What lay beyond that symbolic and material threshold, however, was markedly less understood. Thus, manifest within the discourse of the stoutwear industry in these early days was a discernible desire to quantify the population of stout consumers in an attempt to answer the question, first raised in the 1915 Women's Wear article with which I opened this chapter: "How Many Fat Women in Your Town?" Absent an answer to this question, the rational foundation for a stoutwear industry stood on shaky ground. Indeed, without a quantifiable population of consumers, stoutwear was a risk that few retailers were willing to take.

The Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers was ultimately one of the first to provide an answer to this question during their aggressive 1917 media campaign, arguing that, according to their studies, one-third of all American women over the age of fifteen could be considered stout. Yet, even though they were one of the earliest, or at least most vocal, proponents of this statistic, they were hardly the only ones who attempted to quantify how many American women were stout. For instance, as the editors of American Cloak and Suit Review wrote in the introduction to a special stoutwear sales promotion section published in the November 1922 issue, "Thirty-seven percent of the women of this country are stouts." \[156\] A buyer for the Texas department store Joske's also offered her estimate, arguing, "A big business is in store for stoutwear, as today there are just thirty per cent [sic] of large women entering this department who formerly had dressmakers make them their clothes." \[157\] The Dry Goods Economist quoted similar data in its November 1921 issue when it forecasted that the growth of the stoutwear industry would be "stupendous" throughout the ensuing decade due to statistical data that showed that "37 per cent [sic] of the American women are size 40 or larger" \[158\]—a size that corresponds roughly to a forty-inch bust and a thirty-two inch waist. \[159\] It was Susy Collins Miller of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers, however, who offered the most generous if not alarmist estimate, telling the New York Times, "They say that one woman in three is stout, but I believe the proportion is larger than that…. I believe it is 50 per cent [sic]." \[160\]

While such figures circulated widely in professional fashion media—being quoted by a remarkable range of different stoutwear manufacturers and purveyors—it is, however, difficult to find reliable, concrete data outside fashion media to substantiate the widespread estimates that

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156 "Stoutwear’s Possibilities as Viewed by Leading Garment Buyers," The American Cloak and Suit Review (November 1922), 91.
157 Ibid.
159 "Scientific Specialization in Stouts," 8; "Say Leading Form Makers Have Right Sizes That All Others Should Adopt," Women’s Wear (March 5, 1925), 20.
one-third (or more) of the female, fashion-buying population of the United States then qualified as stout. The ambiguity around the veracity of the one-third statistic may be at least partly attributed to the fact that the health data for women in the first decades of the twentieth century is both scant and inadequate. As Schwartz has written, this is due in no small measure to the fact that women were typically not the primary holders of insurance policies and were less inclined to let physicians properly examine them, much less weigh them. Compounding this was the fact that when women were examined and weighed, they typically remained clothed in their cumbersome and body-reshaping dresses, skirts and shirtdresses. Although the composite image of the average woman was flawed, the one-third statistic nevertheless came to be widely accepted in lieu of hard data, even being reproduced in Paul Nystrom's textbook Economics of Fashion in 1928 in which he estimated that stouts comprised twenty-eight percent of the female population (Fig. 10.3). In spite of the dearth of verifiable health data, however, the prevalence of and debates about the one-third estimate suggests that there existed amongst those in the stoutwear industry a need to construct a rational foundation to pursue the trade—one grounded in hard science and statistics. What then was the basis for such a figure? And moreover, was it based on sound scientific data?

Although answers to these questions are elusive, a context for them may at least partially be located within a study jointly published between 1912 and 1914 by the Actuarial Society of

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103 Seagrave attributes this to the fact that while height and weight tables were readily available and widely-used by the 1920s, estimates remained vague and anecdotal due to the fact that they only "provided a base of sorts from which to generate estimates of obesity rates that may have been marginally more revealing and helpful than estimates made prior to 1920, but only just." Estimators therefore ranged from twelve percent to forty percent, and therefore the fashion industry's estimates fell solidly within this range. For further discussion about the difficulties in estimating rates of overweight and obesity, see Seagrave, Obesity in America, 163-167.

104 Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 156.

105 Nystrom, Economics of Fashion, 466.
America and the Association of Life Insurance Medical Directors. Within a five-volume report entitled the Medico-Actuarial Mortality Investigation, the two entities collaborated to collate and publish statistical data on the heights and weights of over 700,000 insured men and women, compiled between 1885 and 1908. The main aim of the study was to create a basis for the reliable comparison of health data to be used for insurance work. As the report explains, “There are considerable data on children, on college men, and on soldiers; but none of these give a basis of comparison with insured lives.” Thus, the information compiled in the report was to be employed by insurance companies to more accurately assess the mortality rates of their policyholders based on the report’s aggregate data on the relationship between height, weight, gender and average age of death. Although the report was created simply as a reference tool for actuaries and underwriters to use within their analyses, it also established a seemingly sound basis for comparing the relative health—and therefore desirability or undesirability—of policyholders founded on weight-based wellbeing and longevity estimations. The raw data included in the report, however, were highly unreliable. Among the report’s many oversights—including the fact that its subject pool was heavily swayed toward the urban, white middle class, as well as the relative dangers of low body weight—perhaps one of the most egregious was the fact that some measures, and particularly those of women, were based on mere visual estimations. Moreover, with women’s averages being estimated from a relatively small data set—an issue the report acknowledges—its conclusions about overweight men were problematically applied to overweight women as well.

These conclusions were summarized in the second volume of the report, which claimed that “there is an apparent steady advance in relative mortality with increasing weight.” With excess weight signaling early mortality according to the new height and weight tables, policy underwriters were armed with data that permitted them to charge individuals whose bodies fell outside of the ideal range a premium on their policies. The ramifications of this “tool of the trade” could, however, be felt far beyond the industry, and especially within the field of medicine, as the concrete terms through which human health (and worth) could be measured were both standardized and normalized. Indeed, as Schwartz has written, during the first decades of the twentieth century, “The picture of a patient on a scale, nurse or doctor hovering by the balance beam, became the popular icon of [a medical] exam,” while the scale itself became the contemporary “Scale of Righteousness,” or a modern means of practicing social regulation.

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164 Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 156.
166 Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 156.
167 As the report explains, women were less likely to take out life insurance policies than men. Thus, the original data set was compiled from fewer than 10,000 subjects, and additional data had to be donated by a handful of insurance companies after the fact. See Actuarial Society of America and the Association of Life Insurance Medical Directors, Medico-Actuarial Mortality Investigation: Volume I, 22.
168 Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 156.
170 Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 155.
backed by flimsy scientific “truths” and “hard data.” Even so, from this flawed statistical foundation—perhaps one of the most comprehensive and influential ever published by the Actuarial Society of America and the Association of Life Insurance Medical Directors—a standard was set through which both insurance companies and medical doctors came to encourage below average weights among their policyholders and patients to, as they argued, increase lifespan. The report’s spurning of averages in favor of low body weights, however, had the corollary effect of constructing a new “normal.” As a consequence, by 1924, according to the actuarial tables over half of the American population over the age of thirty-five could be newly qualified as “overweight,” even if there was no concrete basis for such an assessment. The scientific basis for the charts, however, was ultimately immaterial; what mattered more was that an increasing number of people had come to believe that a substantial portion of the population had a weight problem. To borrow the words of Joyce Huff, through the actuarial tables, we may therefore glimpse how the individual body was “subjected to a culturally informed composite picture,” composed of seemingly sound statistical data, “that reflects not so much an actual average as a cultural ideal.”

It is worth discussing the veracity and legacy of this study within the context of this dissertation if only for the fact that a striking parallelism exists between the wide acceptance of the height and weight charts as a somatic barometer to measure normal and deviant bodies in the early twentieth century and the stoutwear industry’s concurrent adoption of the thirty-three percent statistic and standardized sizing systems. As evidence of how this manifested within the stoutwear trade, one need only look to Albert Malsin’s obsessive measuring and re-measuring of thousands of Lane Bryant customers, and the fact that he cross-referenced these measurements with data aggregated from a major New York-based life insurance firm. Just like the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers who publicized the thirty-three percent statistic, however, Malsin was not the sole author of this statement; he was merely a vector through which the broader early twentieth century interest in quantifying the body to assess an individual’s worth flowed. In this instance, it is possible to see how the discourses of actuarial science transgressed its boundaries to permeate that of stoutwear. Indeed, one remarkable overlap occurred in November 1924 when Women’s Wear published a piece directly attributing the growing demand for rubber reducing corsets to a growing reticence within the insurance business for underwriters to write life insurance policies for overweight people. It was therefore (and somewhat bizarrely)

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171 Czerniawski, “From Average to Ideal,” 273.
172 There is only one reference to the term “overweights” in the first volume of the report, which lays out the study’s findings. Indeed, the dangers of overweight are only discussed in the second volume of the report, which assesses mortality risks, but only in vague terms. Nowhere in the entire study is it suggested that a significant population of the American public is overweight. Rather, the purpose of the study—rather than setting parameters for what constituted under- and over-weights—was to investigate overall averages by age, height and gender. In all of the dozens of tables printed in the report, only averages of weight for any given bodily category are listed. Based on the data presented in the report, however, it would be possible to calculate what percentage of the population was overweight, so long as a standard was set for what constituted “overweight.” See also Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 157.
174 “Scientific Specialization in Stouts,” 4; Mahoney, 50 Years of Lane Bryant, 19.
reasoned that stout women were buying scores of reducing corsets so as to create a slender appearance solely for their appearances in front of insurance agents. However, beyond these more obvious overlaps—and although these two fields may, at first glance, appear to make strange bedfellows—they shared a patent desire to make sense of and quantify the body through the discourses of mathematics and statistics: the former through the medium of the height and weight table, and the latter through that of sizing.

Indeed, both the height and weight tables and Mabin’s sizing survey reflect what Foucault deemed in *Discipline and Punish* the fascination with quantification in the discursive construction of the “calculable body.” According to Foucault the body became “calculable” during a moment that saw the transition from historico-ritual mechanisms for the formation of individuality to the scientifical-disciplinary mechanisms, when the normal took over from the ancestral, and measurement from status, thus substituting for the individuality of the memorable man that of the calculable man, that moment when the sciences of man became possible is the moment when a new technology of power and a new political anatomy of the body were implemented.

Here, Foucault draws an important parallel between scientific technologies and discourses for measuring the body and what he deems “the new political anatomy of the body,” grounding this shift beginning in the late nineteenth century. Through this process, the body became embroiled in a struggle for power that was facilitated by the possibility of seeing the body anew through the lens of technology. While this “seeing anew” may also be understood as an effect of “controlling” or “quantifying” the body, in *Discipline and Punish* Foucault argues that we should cease to describe the effects of power in these terms; rather, he argues, “power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truths. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.” Indeed, as Elaine Scarry has argued, it would not be an understatement to understand the body as something that can be “made.”

The stout body may therefore be understood in Foucault’s terms as a particular type of “calculable” body—or a body that was a product of the era’s scientific and technological discourse, and specifically of the emergent technology of standard sizing. Within the context of stoutwear, it was produced ideologically, or by the imperative to place the body into normal and deviant categories engendered by statistical and actuarial discourse, but also by the particular material demands placed upon the fat, female body by the technological limitations of ready-to-wear manufacturing and of standardized sizing. Indeed, as I mentioned at the beginning of this

177 Ibid.
178 Ibid., 194.
subsection, since Americans had not suddenly grown fatter around the turn of the century, the anxiety surrounding fat may be attributed to the narrowing of tolerances and the concurrent establishment of a “new normal.” The norms put in place by the ready-made garment industry, as well as the rampant problems in fit that accompanied traditional large-size garments created the circumstances under which the stout body could be defined, while creating a profit-making opportunity for the nascent stoutwear industry. Through this process of quantifying the stout body in industry discourses that employed pseudo-scientific statistics like those which claimed that more than one-third of all American women were stout, the stout body became something that was verifiable, knowable and increasingly visible, and therefore subject to regimes of containing and controlling it, even if there was little hard “scientific data” to back up these claims. Within this context, however, the truth of these figures becomes inconsequential; rather, it is the belief in the stout woman shared by agents within this industry that affirmed the viability of stoutwear, but which also participated in the construction of the stout consumer. This shared belief, however, manifested not only in the stout woman; it also persisted within the materiality of stoutwear itself, and specifically through the practice of cutting patterns and grading stout garments.

3.2.2 Pattern Grading Beyond the “Perfect 36”

In 1918, the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers broke with their typical marketing strategy in publishing an illustrated advertisement featuring two stylishly outfitted stout women, standing on a balance, with the caption hanging in the white space above them, “Worth Her Weight in Gold to You” (Fig. 22). In this advertisement, the weight of the stout woman is equated, quite literally, with her value to the industry. In many ways—just as the image of a patient on a scale had become synonymous with the modern medical exam—so too was the image of a stout woman on a balance a perfect, but underused, icon for the stoutwear industry: a potent symbol of how the stout woman’s bodily excesses could be leveraged for profits. In other advertisements published by the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers, the stout woman’s weight is invoked—as in one which claimed that stout garments could “see 250 lb. models transformed into apparent 175 pounders”—but to lesser effect. Here, the image of a stout woman on the scale makes her difference explicit while providing an apt metaphor for her worth in an inversion of deeply held cultural ideals in which fat becomes highly valuable and tantamount to profits. In no other advertisement from this period does Foucault’s notion of the calculable body, or a body that is seen more clearly through the aid of technology, more explicitly collide with the motivations of the early stoutwear industry.

However, while the scale may have been one of the principal and most ubiquitous ways of quantifying the body in the early twentieth century, another crucial as well as pervasive

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180 Sveltline Advertisement, Women’s Wear (February 6, 1916), 21.
technology for measuring the body—and one that has been mostly overlooked within scholarly discussions about the quantified body in the early twentieth century—is that of clothing sizing. As Ingrid Jeacle has written, “Standardized clothes sizing is perhaps the ultimate expression of a technology of the body” in the manner it “assigns a statistically generated number to every bodily form” and generates a corpus of “knowledge” or “truth” about the body.  

These processes of truth-making are, however, contested, and thus there were limitations to standard sizing—a system that took as its foundation not real bodies but an ideal body. Indeed, as Volonte has written, sizing “enabled [the] imposition of the thin ideal concomitantly with fashion’s industrialization.” Bodies that did not conform, bodies that flouted the conventions of standard sizing, were therefore understood as both deviant and endurably problematic; this did not, however, quell efforts to, on the one hand, fit, but on the other, quantify such non-normative bodies. Indeed, as Jeacle argues, while the size as a “single number labels the individual,” it also “provides society with a perception of the human form.” Thus, much like the penny scale or the actuarial table, the ostensibly ordinary (but also spectacularly powerful) technology of garment sizing gave form to the ideal body as much as it gave form to otherwise undefinable or unruly bodies by reproducing new standards.

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111 Here, Jeacle draws upon Foucault’s own conceptualization of “technologies of the body.” For further discussion of this concept, see Chapter Two, Kohler, “Accounting,” 357.


As has been discussed already, although the United States excelled and led in the mass production of garments in many ways, one of the main issues that plagued the ready-to-wear industry from early on was the matter of achieving precise fits amongst all consumers. The root cause of these difficulties lay in the science and practice of pattern grading: “The process used by clothing manufacturers to produce patterns for a garment in a range of sizes for ready-to-wear clothing.” From the earliest days of the garment industry, there was no single standard for grading and sizing garments, and each manufacturer was left to his own devices to set his own size specifications through a process of trial and error. Indeed, part of the problem with these early grading systems was the fact that they took as their base the individualistic measurements of a flesh-and-bone person. After the Civil War, however, the process of grading men’s garments for different sizes became more precise, and the knowledge of how to do so was more widespread. With new data compiled from the chest and height measurements of over one million conscripts, which was used during the war to mass manufacture uniforms—and was therefore perhaps one of the first examples of a standardized sizing system—a clearer picture of the “average” build of American men began to emerge, as did early proportional theories. This information was later compiled into tables that were made available to manufacturers of civilian clothing, but which “reinforced and refined what nineteenth century tailors had long known; that is, that certain sets of measurements tend to recur with predictable regularity.” As a nascent form of proportional theory, these tables assumed “human bodies have set proportions and that one body measurement is, therefore, a reliable predictor of other body measurements.” While in practice, proportional theories do permit relatively precise fits within large populations, flawed or incomplete data nevertheless compromise their accuracy. In the case of these early sizing tables, the data reflected the average dimensions of a relatively homogenous population of highly “disciplined” bodies. Further, there were a great number of omissions in the data (as they only included chest and height measurements), making it impossible to create a reliable and accurate scientific basis for sizing and grading garments on a mass scale.

In spite of rampant problems with fit, the industry for ready-made men’s wear nevertheless preceded that for women’s wear by several decades. While men’s wear statistics were compiled in the 1860s and 70s, a survey of female bodies was not conducted until 1884 at a number of American women’s colleges. The first of these surveys took place at Vassar College, and later at Smith College and the Pratt Institute. Occasionally, this data was combined with statistics culled from life insurance companies, but these records were even less comprehensive than the men’s, and were similarly derived from a rather narrow spectrum of body types: that of young, oftentimes affluent, and, more often than not, slender women. With these gaps in the data, the early ready-to-wear trade thus relied upon increasingly sophisticated proportional

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185 Kidwell and Christman, Sizing Everyone, 105.


188 Kidwell and Christman, Sizing Everyone, 108.
Theories, but which nevertheless did not account for the three-dimensional changing shape of the body as it grew larger.\textsuperscript{189} Based on the collected data, as well as through the principles of proportional theory, women’s ready-to-wear garments were thereby classified into three distinct groupings—misses, juniors and women’s—to accommodate the youthful, middle-aged and mature builds, respectively. Within these categories, the proportionate size ratios were based on bust measurements that generally ranged from thirty-two to forty-four-inches, and which also corresponded to the garment size.\textsuperscript{190} In spite of increasingly precise proportional theories, however, most mass manufactured garments were cut from the same pattern, and in grading sizes up or down, inches were added or removed at the bust, waist and hips uniformly.

As the bespoke garments of the nineteenth century gave way to standardization and mass manufacturing in the twentieth, however, bodies also became increasingly standardized. In this era “of increased industrialization and technology,” Cookie Woolner has written, “the modern body was more appropriately the thin or the streamlined body, and the fat body was the body that was dragging or slowing the collectivity down.”\textsuperscript{191} Standardized sizing played a central role in establishing bodily norms, around which all other bodies deviated,\textsuperscript{192} and what was known as the “perfect 36” within fashion industry parlance was the quintessence of this bodily norm. The perfect 36 referred to the pattern for women’s garments that took thirty-six-inches as its base bust measurement, and graded hip and waist measurements proportionately. Taken together, the perfect 36 was in no way based on the measurements of an actual body, but rather was an amalgam of data reflecting an intermediate size within a target market.\textsuperscript{193} As late as 1899, the perfect 36 was the pattern from which all garments were cut, with no graduated sizes, so “only a small proportion of women could obtain anything like a ‘fitting garment.’”\textsuperscript{194} The perfect 36 therefore represented a bodily ideal, rather than one grounded in reality, and therefore within this scenario, there was bound to be a number of bodies that flouted these conventions. Nowhere, however, were the problems with grading conventions more evident than on the bodies of stout women. Although by the 1920s the perfect 36 was increasingly replaced by more individualized patterns that facilitated specialization in ready-to-wear, the legacy—and problem—of the perfect 36 persisted in stoutwear discourse even as it was being dismissed by the industry at large.\textsuperscript{195}

\textsuperscript{189} Aldrich, “History of Sizing,” 30-31.
\textsuperscript{189} Although these measurements are typically considered inclusive of standard sizes, Kidwell and Christman concede that manufacturers during this period generally arrived “at their own set of measurements by a process of trial and error” in spite of rampant claims about scientific accuracy. See \textit{Suiting Everyone}, 105. For further discussion, see also Jane E. Workman, “Body Measurement Specifications for Fit Models as Factor in Clothing Size Variation,” \textit{Clothing and Textile Research Journal} 10, no. 1 (1991), 31-32.
\textsuperscript{193} Jeacle, “Accounting,” 362.
\textsuperscript{193} Schofield, “Pattern Grading,” 158.
\textsuperscript{194} Kidwell and Christman, \textit{Suiting Everyone}, 108.
Perhaps one of the earliest and most instrumental discussions of the problems inherent in the industry’s conceptualization of the perfect 36 came from Albert Malsin who, in the article “Altered Garments Cost a Huge Sum,” roundly rejected the logic of prevailing proportional theories. As he explained to the *New York Times*, “True, there are thousands of women who have a 36-inch bust measurement, but show me twenty of these women and I will show you almost as many distinct types of figure.” Elsewhere, the stoutwear manufacturer explained in greater depth how the

> “perfect 36” is an idealist’s conception of the perfectly formed woman. Whether such women exist doesn’t seem to be a factor and whether or not they exist in large numbers to demand garments of the retailer seems not to be a consideration. So the garment manufacturers keep turning out their garments based on the false premise that there are living De Milos to whom to sell perfect 36s.

Malsin, however, was far from the only voice decrying the inadequacies of the perfect 36. Isidor Heller of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers had similar reservations, describing to *Women’s Wear* what, in his opinion, were the core problems plaguing large-size garment manufacturing:

> The manufacturers always have made large sizes just as they have made very small sizes in an equally unscientific manner, that is, starting from the perfect 36, because it is a convenient starting point. Taking the best pattern they could get from this model, they merely shaved or enlarged it to fit the other sizes without taking into consideration that the lines are entirely changed.

Elsewhere members of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers explained how the average American woman has “outgrown the standard beauty of figure as accepted in the perfect 36, and increased to a considerable degree in figure measurements, until today new standards are needed to meet the clothes demands of the perfect 46.” Indeed, one article from *The Dry Goods Economist* echoed this point, explaining how the perfect 36 model could not simply be translated to stoutwear due to the fact that “the whole architecture of a stout model was different from the regular sizes.”

The proposals for new sizing systems—such as Malsin’s “Scientific Stouts” or Charles May’s “Sveltline” system—ultimately emerged from these insights about the deficiencies inherent in the perfect 36 and bolstered the notion, circulated within professional media, that stoutwear needed to be reconceived not as an outgrowth of ready-to-wear, but rather as an industry unto itself, which broke with the entrenched norms of standard sizing. Indeed, as Keist and Mareketti explain, the entrance of new conventions for grading stoutwear was symptomatic of a larger

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200 “Specially Designed Stouts,” 117.
drive toward specialization in the ready-to-wear industry during this period. As such, the perfect 36 had itself been appropriated by stoutwear makers as a selling point as was the case in one 1916 advertisement for I. Heller stout dresses (Fig. 23). However, a more critical reading of their statements suggests that the discourse surrounding the “perfect 36” pointed less to the ready-to-wear industry’s pattern making techniques as outmoded and problematic and more to the stout body itself as a “problem” or as an impediment to good fit.

Malsin himself expressed this notion in an interview with the Richmond Times-Dispatch in 1916 in which he conceded that creating well-fitting garments was only one half of the stoutwear maker’s concern:

> But the problem of clothing the stout woman is only half solved when we succeed in producing a gown all ready to wear that fits her. Many gowns that fit make their wearer look ridiculous because they are all out of harmony with the fashions of the day and because they conceal all the good points of her too generous lines and emphasize the bad ones.

While the intersections of sizing and stoutwear design will be discussed in depth in the following chapter, what is important to stress here is the manner in which Malsin frames the task of clothing the stout woman as “problem”—a point which he reiterates in another article in which he describes the “problem of manufacturing ready-to-wear garments for stouts from a different angle” due to the fact that he found that it was “impossible to fit all types of stouts by the same system.” Elsewhere in the professional media, the difficulties the stout body posed to the logic and practices of mass manufacturing were discussed in similar terms as in a 1922 article appearing in the business section of the New York Times which noted how “many differences in the figures of stout women…leads to manufacturing difficulties.” The perfect 36 was therefore an obvious scapegoat that industry voices could identify as the root cause of the difficulties in fitting the stout woman as much as it was a selling point for “specialized” stoutwear; however, it seemed that the real “problem” for manufacturers was the task of defining the stout body not in relation to an ideal, but on its own terms. In that vein, the stout woman was also a “scientific problem” of the first order—one which if solved could open up a whole new sector of the industry, and which, somewhat ironically, also made her an incredibly appealing figure to manufacturers and entrepreneurs.

It was not just stoutwear, however, that was problematic to the practices of mass manufacturing; in many ways, the entire garment industry was ill-suited to the ideologies that underpinned mass manufacturing after 1911—the year in which F.W. Taylor published his highly influential The Scientific Management of the Workplace. As Evans explains, the principles of Taylorism “aimed to increase efficiency in the workplace by a sort of mechanical ‘divide and

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202 “Science at Last Turns its Attention to ‘Stout’ People,” Richmond Times-Dispatch (April 2, 1916).


rule whereby each worker was allocated a fixed task and a fixed way of performing it in a fixed place. Henry Ford’s assembly line—a system through which workers performed a serialized task with mechanical precision—was a clear manifestation of Taylorist principles. Clothing manufacturing, however, was what Nancy L. Green has described as a “flexible industry,” that while changed by mechanical production, nevertheless persisted as one underpinned by “hand technology.” In other words, it was “a mass-production industry without mass-production methods” in the manner it still relied heavily upon batch production, hand finishing, and homework in spite of the technological interventions of the sewing machine and batch cutting. More than that, it may be argued, clothing itself was an imperfect product of mass manufacturing in the sense that, in spite of manufacturers’ best efforts to standardize clothing sizing, garments still required a great degree of after-market hand labor in order to achieve accurate fits for the consumer.

In practice, however, the ideologies of Taylorism drastically transformed American industry at all levels in the early twentieth century in the vein of making work more efficient and mechanized—a notion that was reflected in the preoccupation with waste in the discourse of costume. More than that, however, it also led to ramifications in the aesthetics and form of the products that were being produced within this system. It is no coincidence that Coco Chanel’s little black dress was colloquially referred to as the “Ford” for its ubiquity and ease of wear, but also for the serialized and standardized appearance it created for the wearer—or what Evans has referred to as the “proto-industrial aesthetic” of Taylorism and Fordism. Indeed, particularly

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200 Evans, Mechanical Smile, 74.
201 Green, Ready to Wear, 4.
202 Ibid., 4-5.
203 Evans, Mechanical Smile, 74.
in the United States, as Green has written, the appearance and form of ready-made garments “is defined and defended by American industrial discourse”—the prime example of which being the Gibson Girl, outfitted in her mass-produced shirtwaist, but which may be equally applied to the ready-to-wear industry as a whole.

Although it had been established that the technologies and conventions of ready-to-wear were ill-suited to the manufacture of stoutwear, the perception that it was the fat body, rather than the systems of mass manufacturing, that was inherently problematic was one that was pervasive in fashion industry discourse. While Taylorism had a limited impact on ready-made garment manufacturing, it nevertheless “provided a powerful metaphor” for the subordination of the body in the machine age. In the case of clothing manufacturing, sizing functioned as a “powerful disciplinary tool...to ensure conformity with established norms.” Bodies that did not conform to preexisting sizing standards therefore were reflexively “punished,” and forced to pay the price, quite literally, of custom tailoring or extensive alterations. Indeed, as Armstrong has written, the human body is something of a “‘pressure-point’ in Taylorist discourse.” The dissonance that exists between machines and bodies, or in the body’s failure to conform to the rhythms, conventions and architectures of mechanization and mass manufacturing, are particularly manifest on the body of the stout woman, however. Indeed, the stout body was synonymous with failure: it defied the conventions of standardized sizing, leading to wasted labor and materials, while shouldering manufacturers, retailers and consumers with costly aftermarket alterations. However, beyond the non-standard proportions of the stout woman’s frame, in professional discourse there also persisted a notion that the stout woman’s flesh—apart from her figure—possessed unique qualities that further set her apart from her standard-size counterpart. Her physical stature notwithstanding, it was believed that her flesh compounded the already rampant problems in fit.

3.2.3 Flow: The Problem with Fat Flesh

In numerous instances in which industry professionals commented on why stoutwear was so difficult to size correctly, the peculiar properties of the stout woman’s flesh—or the soft, malleable complex of skin and fat that resides between the “natural” or “normative” body and dress—cropped up as a perennial point of consternation. In speaking to Women’s Wear in January 1917, Edith M. Burtis—a former stout woman who lectured to industry leaders on how to handle the stoutwear trade—advocated for specially-designed and graded garments for stout women, arguing that “stoutwear should be bought from stout specialists. There is this to be remembered: the bone structure of the stout woman is not what makes her stout—it’s the extra

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209 Green, “Ready to Wear,” 115.
212 Armstrong, Modernism, Technology and the Body, 65.
flesh." Here, Burtis draws a crucial distinction between the ideal of the so-called “natural” frame—or the physical stature of the body as defined by bones and muscle—and the flesh that resides on top of it. Speaking with the New York Times a year later, Mrs. S.C. Miller of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers made similar remarks, explaining to the reader,

Now, in the first place, you have got to have the right kind of clothes for the stout woman, built for her. You can't grade up a suit made for another kind of woman. The frame of the stout woman is individual if she has covered it heavily with flesh."

The idea that fat flesh is something that is separate from and effectively “worn” on the outside of the body’s natural “frame” was also pursued by Albert Malsin who, in an article published in the Richmond Times-Dispatch in 1916, argued,

The layers of flesh which bring stoutness are not added to the human body with anything like mathematical regularity. Sometimes this added flesh appears only in the woman’s bust, her hips and abdomen remaining entirely normal. In other cases, it is only the hips or only the abdomen that becomes fleshy. Even when bust, abdomen and hips all take on flesh in about equal amounts, her arms, her lower limbs and other parts of her body may be of normal or possibly of less than normal size.

In these instances, the “layers of flesh” enshrouding the stout woman are framed as inessential and suggest that, perhaps, beneath all of that excess, there resides a more normatively-sized woman. In an illustration accompanying the Richmond Times-Dispatch article, Malsin underscored this point by exhibiting different ways that, within his tripartite system, fat collects on the “natural” female body by superimposing schematic renderings of the three principal “types” of stout women on top of average-sized frames of similar proportions (see Fig. 11). On all three figures—which represent the “full-busted,” “stout-all-over” and “flat-busted” types—their dress is conflated with the flesh as something that is fundamentally apart from their figures. The frame here is rendered as something that is natural—or the rational foundation for dress—whereas the flesh, much like dress, is ancillary or extra.

While the construct of the “slender” body will be discussed at greater length in chapters six and seven, it is important to briefly describe here the inherent tensions that existed between the stout body and what was perceived as the “normal” or “ideal” female body in the early twentieth century. With leisure time and athletics increasingly becoming facets of the average American woman’s day-to-day life, the ideal body underwent a transformation. As Lois Banner has written, the voluptuous archetype of the mid- to late 1800s was replaced in 1895 by Charles Dana Gibson’s wildly popular, shirtwaist-wearing, bicycle-riding Gibson Girl. In contrast to her forerunners, the Gibson Girl was often pictured in action—her visage at once healthful and

215 “Science at Last Turns its Attention to Stout People,” Richmond Times-Dispatch (Sunday, April 2, 1916), 54.
strong and visibly unencumbered. “Indisputably tall, with long arms and legs, her body was clearly that of the natural and not the voluptuous woman.”

Her body was thus both the “civilized” and the “natural” body; by contrast the once-voluptuous ideal had become newly synonymous with the bodies of immigrant women who were viewed with derision and skepticism—their bodies vectors of disease and symbols of the dilution of a single “American identity.”

Within this historical context, as Richard Klein has aptly written, fat had come to be conceived “as a kind of cancerous growth…inefficient to the body or its image, an excrescence, a corruption of the flesh whose removal left the body intact and in better shape.” Thus, the “normal” or “natural” (and American) body had become more or less synonymous with a slender but also physically fit physique, just as fat and thin had come to increasingly be juxtaposed by their textures: while fleshiness represented a lax attitude toward the body, firmness was what women endeavored to attain as the foundation of beauty and as an outward symbol of self-restraint and a strong moral character. In a sense, then, it is perhaps of little surprise that the qualities of the stout woman’s flesh were such a preoccupation for stoutwear manufacturers. Much like clothing, the flesh existed in industry discourse as something that was effectively “worn” and, likewise, that could be taken off to reveal the natural, unencumbered body underneath.

More than being a corporeal obstruction to the “natural” frame, however, the flesh of the stout woman was also regarded as bearing in it the capacity to compromise the cut and construction of standard mass-produced garments. This notion is perhaps most explicitly illustrated in a 1917 Women’s Wear article titled “Quality as Important as Size in Handling Stouts Trade.” In this article, a prominent fashion buyer for a Midwestern department store attempts to explain what he perceives as the particularities and peculiarities of the stout woman’s flesh:

Many of the garments brought on for the women in the class we are discussing require alterations. These should, of course, be well made in every case, but they are extremely important where fat women are concerned. They need to be substantially made, as well, for the strain on the garments of the heavyweight is greater than on the average person’s clothes. There is a semi-liquid quality about the flesh. It flows. Where draping might answer the purpose on a person of prominent bones, the excess of material anywhere in a garment for a stout person would tend to be bulged out by the flesh which is seeking some place to go. (emphasis added)

In the above quotation, the buyer claims that alterations in stoutwear need to be made thoughtfully due to the fact that, on the stout woman, the flesh possesses a “semi-liquid” quality, which permits it to “flow” into and about the garment, causing any excess or draped fabric to bulge unbecomingly. Here again, and much as in the previous example, the stout woman’s flesh is framed as something both unpredictable, excessive and wholly separate from the body proper.

217 Banner, American Beauty, 225.
219 Klein, “Fat Beauty,” 27.
220 “Quality as Important as Size,” 48.
Whereas the body itself is measurable and solid, fat flesh, on the other hand, is rendered here as a substance that is unstable in that it bears the capacity to variably seep into the wrinkles and gaps that exist between the “natural” body and dress. Stoutwear garments, perhaps more than their standard-size counterparts, he claimed, had to therefore be made with a great attention to quality because the excessive flesh of the stout woman was regarded as being capable of straining and compromising their material integrity. As the surface of the solid body beneath is compromised by the flesh, the garment itself had to therefore do the job otherwise done by bone and muscle in giving the stout body shape.

The notion that fat possesses a semi-liquid quality, thereby permitting the stout body to “flow” into garments was also pointedly addressed in the already-discussed 1915 *Women’s Wear* article titled “Ready for the Big Ones” (see Fig. 4), in which a stoutwear salesman discussed the challenges of breaking into this niche industry. Commenting specifically on the problem of fit, the salesman explained,

There is one thing about catering to big women: if you get a garment well made and of the right size, it will fit. These fat women “flow” into their clothes. They are not like the slender ones, and those with pretty figures without an ounce to spare who have to be fitted perfectly. If you give a fat woman a corset that suits her the suit or the blouse or the skirt will do their work.  

Here, as in the previous examples, the notion that fat flesh is compositionally different than the flesh of a slender woman is emphasized; however, different from his contemporaries, the salesman frames this as a potential benefit to manufacturers. Indeed, he argues that the stout woman’s fleshiness diminishes the necessity of achieving exact fits. Rather, he poses the idea that her body could potentially “flow” into any gaps—the anthropomorphized flesh, in a sense, doing the work of the tailor or seamstress. Moreover, because of the unique qualities of the stout woman’s flesh, he also puts forth the notion that many of these problems can be solved simply by creating a “firm” foundation for stoutwear with the aid of a well-fitting corset:

Fat women are easier to corset than the slight ones for the same reason that they are easier to fit in big clothes. The very excess of tissue will accommodate itself to the corset, and the large woman can be given a firm figure for the first time in many years.

While in some instances, the flesh in stoutwear discourse was conversely described as “too, too solid”—a line pulled from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and which was invoked in more florid...
ruminations on the state of stoutwear—statements about the “liquid” or “flowing” qualities of flesh prevailed in industry discourse.

In contrast to the thin, streamlined, “mechanical” body of modernity—a solid, rationalized and endlessly reproducible body—the fat body is described in these instances in all-too-human terms: as fleshy, flawed and, perhaps most notably, as flowing. Fat, however, was not only problematic within the context of mass manufactured clothing; it was highly taboo within a rapidly modernizing and industrializing America more generally. Ready-made clothing as a regulatory mechanism unable to contain and control the fat body therefore merely served to underscore the deviance of the stout woman’s excess flesh. The concerns or even anxieties about the excesses and unruliness of the stout woman’s flesh so evident within the discourse of stoutwear recalls, in many ways, Mary Douglas’ famous reflections on the manner in which pollution and transgression are treated in civil society. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas explains how all cultural systems are both highly ordered, but also highly susceptible to external pressures. Because of this, anything that is not part of such a system, or “subject to its laws” is therefore “potentially against it.” Specifically, pollution or “dirt is viewed with the utmost suspicion; “Dirt offends against order,” Douglas suggests. If ready-to-wear is understood in these terms—or as a cultural system underpinned by a certain logic, and, in the words of Douglas, “laws,” determining bodily ideals—then the stout woman, and specifically her fat flesh, is therefore a form of transgression that places pressure on the margins of the fashion system by undermining its authority to regulate the body. As such, the stout woman was frequently and brutally derided as a “freak.” While *Women’s Wear* declared the stout woman “the most important of the special classes of ‘freaks’ in the ready-to-wear trade” in June 1915, elsewhere stoutwear makers seemed amused by the notion that “even the freaks want to ‘look nifty.’” As this dismissive language suggests, this was not a consumer class to which most manufacturers and retailers were eager to cater; rather, stout women were seen as having “extreme demands,” and that the success of a stout department would therein lie in “its ability to meet any test, no matter how severe.”

While on the one hand, fat could be understood as something “worn” on the “outsides” of the body, Douglas, on the other hand, provides a framework through which fat may also be understood as an internal threat that pressed at the margins of the rational, streamlined female

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223 A full-page advertorial for I. Heller & Co. that ran in *Women’s Wear* remarked, “Let’s see, was not it Hamlet or originated that famous remark about ‘this too, too solid flesh’? These memorable words were uttered, one may also recall during the trying period in the hero’s career when his whole attention as focus on one thing, namely, reduction…. [The phrase] has since been repeated with varying degrees of anguish, disgust and exasperation by countless men and women, especially women, also bent on reduction.” See “Formerly None but the ‘Perfect 36’ Could be Suited, but Now a 250-Pounder Is as Welcome as a Debutante,” *Women’s Wear* (February 25, 1916), 7.

224 Evans has written about the stereotype of the American woman as “standardized” and “mechanical” but also lacking the feminine curves of her European, and specifically French, contemporaries. See Evans, *Mechanical Smile*, 81, 126-127.


226 Ibid., 2.


228 “Even the Freaks Want to Look ‘Nifty,’” *Women’s Wear* (March 26, 1920), 51.

229 Ibid.
body, displacing the flesh and stretching it to its limits, but also breaching the boundaries of appropriate dress. Indeed, as Douglas suggests, the margins of the body when stretched to their limits, are especially susceptible to liquid matter like “spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears [that] by simply issuing forth [traverse] the boundary of the body.”

The “fear” of the fat woman’s flesh—is exemplified by the baroque ways that industry leaders spoke about its “flowing” and “liquid” properties and its abilities to seep into the folds and gaps of dresses. Boundaries, Douglas explains, “reward conformity and repulse attack.”

Such transgressions or “attacks” are therefore subject to forms of “punishment” with the goal of imposing order “on an inherently untidy experience.” Indeed, Douglas defines uncleanness as “matter out of place.” Stoutwear is thus itself a regulatory system to put the stout woman’s fat, flowing flesh “in its place,” as it were, whereas fatness itself becomes a particularly modern form of pollution—one, somewhat ironically, born from the comforts of modern life.

Just as statements about the “thirty-three percent” and the “perfect 36” defined the stout body by its lacks—that is, its nonconformity to social regulating systems and to the manifest impulse to quantify the body—so too did statements about the stout woman’s flesh define her at once as both deficient and excessive in her blatant transgressing of social codes, here materialized through mass manufactured clothing. The notion that dress can itself be viewed as a social regulating system that punishes bodies that scorn these conventions recalls what Peter Corrigan has described as the “natural order of things,” or the shape of the natural, unencumbered body, which “is made subordinate to an abstract model that stands outside it.”

Phrased somewhat differently, it could be argued that standard size garments actually give form to a body that is ultimately “subordinate” to the mandates of dress. However, Corrigan also makes another point, noting that, ultimately, real bodies, “made of flesh and blood and not easily moldable plastic” are not ideally suited to mass manufacturing; rather, “ready-made clothing demands ready-made bodies” (emphasis added).

Here, Corrigan makes an important point that is worth underscoring: The problems presented by the conventions of ready-to-wear were not necessarily specific to stout women; rather, it affected all bodies adversely in one way or another. Indeed, to return to a notion I presented earlier, the human body is ill-suited to the practices of mass manufacturing and exists as a notable pressure point within the discourses of machines, manufacturing and technology. Within the context of ready-to-wear as an industry, the very conventions of standard sizing were built upon a flawed foundation, which took as its basis not a real body, but a statistical pastiche exemplified by the “perfect 36.” The stout body, however, stands as an exemplary illustration of how bodies that flout social codes are subject to attempts to control and contain them. It may be said that standardization ultimately breeds standard bodies; however, in spite of Albert Malsin’s,

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231 Ibid., 115.
232 Ibid., 5.
233 Ibid., 50.
235 Ibid.
Isidor Heller’s, Charles May’s and others’ attempts to create a rational foundation for grading large-size garments, the stout body ultimately resisted such attempts to define and standardize it—a notion that is illustrated by the problems in fit, which plagued the industry until its demise in the early-1930s. Thus, and somewhat paradoxically, the stout body was one that was defined through the very impossibility of defining it. In the end, what mattered more than the actual measurements of the stout body was the fact that it was beyond or outside of the norm.

Even as the stout body resisted clear definition, however, certain “truths” about it were nevertheless established within industry discourse. Statements about the “thirty-three percent,” the “perfect 36” and the “flowing” or “liquid” qualities of the stout woman’s flesh were mainstays of industry parlance and established her as other. As Foucault explains in The Archaeology of Knowledge, statements need not necessarily be based upon an exhaustive definition of an object that constitutes it on a “single horizon of objectivity”; rather, it is enough that they “make possible the appearance of objects during a given period of time.”

Thus, the terms in which the fat woman is spoken about in fashion industry discourse—whether she is “stout” as she was at the turn of the twentieth century or “plus-size” as she is today—manifest a discursive formation that systematically gives form or shape to the condition of female fatness and thereby to the body itself.

3.3 Conclusions

Throughout this chapter, I have pursued two separate strains of thought. In the first half of the chapter, I explored the discursive conditions that led to the coming together of various actors and institutions in the recognition of the market viability of a dedicated stoutwear sector in and after 1915. Among them, the shared observation that an insufficient and antiquated sizing system was the principal obstacle in designing well-fitting garments for stout women was perhaps the most important in establishing an ideological foundation, shared mission and standardized practice amongst the key actors and institutions within the nascent industry. In the second half of the chapter I pursued the somewhat contradictory notion that it was the peculiarities of the stout woman’s body that were the greatest obstacle for stoutwear manufacturers. Indeed, statements regarding stout women’s irregular proportions and the “flowing,” “liquid” qualities of her flesh underscored her corporeal deviance. Although these two strains of thought present somewhat contradictory perspectives on the origins and imperatives of the stoutwear industry, they nevertheless also evidence the productive power of discourse in bringing both the stoutwear industry, but also the stout body, into being. They also, however, established the fact that the stoutwear industry was decidedly problem-oriented in its almost singular focus on fit.

Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, 32-33.

Ibid., 33.
The difficulties and contradictions in solving the problem of fit for the stout consumer, however, came to a head as manufacturers struggled to convince retailers of the viability of the trade. Indeed, as a feature published in the November 1921 issue of the *Dry Goods Economist* noted,

If...the [stoutwear] manufacturers had not believed firmly in their platform, it is doubtful if they would have persevered. Surely they had no help from the retailer. He spoke only of the difficulties of establishing a different department for larger women; that such styles would necessitate endless alteration; that special orders would be necessary. In practically all big developments in the garment industry the movement has been conceived or encouraged by the retailers. The manufacturers of stylish stout apparel have had to work without that encouragement. Even now, one finds many a merchant who does not believe in the sanity of stylish stout apparel for his store. (emphasis in original)

Herein, the crux of the problems that plagued the industry are underscored, namely, the extra time and money required in catering to the stout woman. So too, however, is the notion that it was the manufacturers who, through the practice of conceiving new size grading systems, led the way in stoutwear innovations. Even so, and although the stoutwear industry came into its own quickly in the period from 1915 to the mid-1920s—a point which the above article actually lauds—it never fully gained the acceptance of the ready-to-wear industry.

Although more pragmatic and economic issues undoubtedly hindered the long-term success of stoutwear, the stout woman's unruly, difficult and indefinable body would ultimately prove to be the root cause of this struggle. Hers was a body that had been identified from early on as non-normative, and worse, as "freakish." However, in spite of the many attempts to regulate her non-normative proportions and to control her "fluid" flesh, she remained largely unknowable until the stoutwear industry went into its eclipse in the 1930s. Attempts to impart order on the stout body had ultimately failed due to the fact that the systems conceived to deal with her resembled the very systems from which she had been sized out. This is perhaps evidenced best by Charles May's suggestion made to the board of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers in 1916 that the "perfect 36" be replaced with the so-called "perfect 46," when in reality there could be no such thing as a "perfect 46," for manufacturers had come to believe that the stout woman's body did not grow larger with any discernible regularity. In spite of the fact that the stout woman's fat flesh ultimately resisted most attempts to control it, however, new systems of order were nevertheless imposed on the stout body. When viewed through this lens,


239 Volonté makes a convincing argument for why the slender ideal that has so permeated the discourse of fashion throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is not merely the result of a fashionable ideal, but is actually facilitated by certain practical constraints, such as, in this case, the difficulties manufacturers experienced in grading sizes larger than a forty-four-inch bust. Indeed, Volonté argues that there is a large disincentive amongst clothing manufacturers to produce garments larger than a modern size twelve due to the restrictions placed on the industry by "technology." (See Volonté, "The Thin Ideal," 1-3, 10.) This notion will be explored in greater depth (and challenged) in chapter five.

the emergence of stoutwear as an industry with its own set of sizing conventions tailored to the peculiarities of the stout body may be understood as both a technology of containing and controlling the flesh and as a way of calling attention to the fat body as deviant and of more deeply entrenching its difference. The standardization of sizing and the standardization of bodies ultimately go hand-in-hand, and by imparting a system of “specialized” sizes on the unruly stout body, a new ideal was created even if the stout body itself was never fully tamed: that of the so-called “stylish stout”—a construct that will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter.
Chapter Four — *Stoutwear Design Discourse*

The trouble with the stout woman's clothes in the past has been the utter disregard which their makers have shown for certain well-known scientific laws. They have insisted that because a woman was stout she could not dress in the prevailing styles without looking ridiculous. They made her dresses a series of broad, perfectly plain stretches of fabric unrelieved by any frills or furbelows.

There could be no greater mistake than this. The plainer a stout woman's dress is, the more unrelieved its expanses of fabric, the broader and shorter it makes her look….

It is surprising to see how much can be accomplished by a proper handling of the most trivial details about a dress.

(Albert Malsin, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 9, 1916) 1

Second only to Albert Malsin's ambition to correct poor fit in ready-to-wear garments for stout women was his preoccupation with the idea that stoutwear should not only fit but should also perform the task of correcting any flaws of the physique. Speaking about the practice of stoutwear design in high-minded terms usually reserved for the applied sciences and engineering, Malsin viewed himself as something of an architect of the body, and in his hands, seemingly superficial design elements like color, line and pattern became a means to imbue conventional, mass-manufactured garments with nearly extraordinary powers to transform the appearance of the fleshy body. At the same time, however, these “frills and furbelows” also became the materials with which he could reinvent the previous generation's “matronly” and conservative large-size garments into something more identifiably fashionable. In a series of four articles published in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* throughout April 1916, Malsin delimited his design philosophy, arguing that stoutwear should adhere to “prevailing styles” of dress while also slenderizing the body. However, in almost the same breath that he spoke about the power of dress to transform the appearance of the body when handled “properly” and with regard to “certain scientific principles,” Malsin also derided those fashionable design flourishes as “trivial.” Rather than fashion, Malsin was therefore perhaps aiming for something higher in dressing the stout woman: the appearance of being well dressed. 2 To this end, Malsin's comments reveal a tension that existed between the perceived frivolity of fashion as an enigmatic ideal and the power of dress to, in his words, “conceal the defects” of stout bodies. 3 Malsin, however was not

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1 Albert Malsin, “How Science is Helping 'Stout' People to Look Less 'Stout.'” *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (April 9, 1916), 53.

2 Quentin Bell has drawn a distinction between fashionability and being well dressed as a moral imperative, or that to which people ultimately strive when getting dressed. See Quentin Bell, *On Human Finery* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 19-20.

3 Malsin, “How Science is Helping 'Stout' People to Look Less 'Stout,'” 53.
alone in this pursuit; many manufacturers were similarly preoccupied with the function of stoutwear in altering the appearance of the wearer's body.  

With these insights serving as a jumping off point, this chapter examines the “design discourses” of stoutwear, or what Lees-Maffei has defined as “writing about design…writing which brings design into being, semantically.” Design discourse therefore reveals both the logic and practices that went into the creation of a designed object and underscores the fact that design is a physical “representation of cultural values”—a point which rings particularly true in the case of fashion design, which, as both Quentin Bell and Eileen Ribeiro have observed, has always existed as a contentious medium for ironing out social customs and morals around the body, and particularly around the female body. To this end, this chapter considers how the design discourses of stoutwear touched into and paralleled the language of artistic modernism, industrial rationalism, psychology and the high-minded ideals of modern fashion design promoted in the 1920s by couturiers such as Jean Patou and Lucien Lelong, and by “artist-designers” like Sonia Delaunay. Spanning the years 1915-1930, the peak of stoutwear manufacturing coincided with a radical evolution in the style of women's dress in the West. From the womanly S-curve prominent at the turn-of-the-century, to austere wartime suiting, to the straighter silhouette that was emblematic of 1920s fashions, both the body and dress became gradually more youthful during this period of great social and sartorial upheaval.

With the year 1922 identified as an important threshold in the evolution of the modern silhouette, this chapter is divided into two sections, with the first examining the discourses of stoutwear design from 1915-1922 and the latter, the discourses of stoutwear design from 1922-1930. In doing so, it reveals a shift in the design discourses of stoutwear, from a preoccupation with the silhouette to a preoccupation with the surface of garments. Focusing primarily on the statements made by stoutwear designers and manufacturers about stoutwear design within the professional fashion media, complemented with analyses of photographs and illustrations of stoutwear designs, this chapter reveals how discourses were put into practice and materialized through the design of stoutwear. By turn, it evidences how these discourses gave shape to and constructed the stout bodily ideal in the different eras. As Entwistle has observed, if the body is an object of culture, then “dress is the means by which bodies are made social and

4 The perceived function of stoutwear exceeded what is regarded as the utilitarian function of clothing in general: to protect the body from the elements. For further discussion about the function of dress, see Bell, On Human Finery, 20.
8 The term “artist-designer” was invoked in a 1920 feature in the American Cloak and Suit Review about dressing the “mature figure” in reference to an unnamed French artist who had applied theories of optical illusion to the design of dresses for older women. See “Costuming the Mature Figure: The Difficult Art of Creating Beauty of Line for a Neglected Consumer of High Importance,” American Cloak and Suit Review (July 1920), 155-156.
9 Breward, Culture of Fashion, 185-187.
given meaning and identity.” Given the dearth of extant objects to analyze, I argue that the discourse of stoutwear design—here framed as a record or trace of fashion design practice—is the next-best (and in some cases, better) means of understanding how the disciplinary medium of stoutwear, to borrow the words of Entwistle, made the fat, female body “appropriate, acceptable [and] indeed respectable” in the United States in the early twentieth century.

4.1 Fashioning the Feminine: Stoutwear, 1915–1922

As both Breward and Wilson have pointed out, the twentieth century has oftentimes been painted in broad brushstrokes by historians who have repeatedly characterized it as the age of “mass”—of “mass consumption,” of “mass production” and of “mass media”—which, they have argued, has stimulated a “homogenous public imagination,” and in the case of fashion, it could be argued, a homogenous manner of dressing. In the United States in particular, the technology of mass manufacturing—bolstered by both mass distribution and the mass media—is said to have enabled a remarkable uniformity in dress aesthetics that transcended class hierarchies. Gregory Votolato has even suggested that the economic success of the mass market in the United States prompted “the universal acceptance of the causal mode of dressing…for all occasions.” Indeed, while the logic of fashion privileges constant change and novelty, in the United States, egalitarianism ultimately triumphed over individualism, and standardization over differentiation. In the early twentieth century, mainstays of the modern American woman’s wardrobe were ready-made cotton shirtwaists, long, straight skirts (that in the lead up to World War I would grow wider and shorter) and utilitarian suiting, cut in a more

10 Entwistle, Fashioned Body, 7. This point is echoed by Jennifer Craik who has written that “Codes of dress are technical devices which articulate the relationship between a particular body and its lived milieu, the space occupied by bodies and constituted by bodily actions.” See Craik, Fan of Fashion, 4.

11 Entwistle, Fashioned Body, 7.

12 Breward, Culture of Fashion, 182-183; Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 12. Lipovetsky also comments on this state of affairs, writing, “As fashion was centralized and internationalized, it was also democratized. The rise of industrial dressmaking on the one hand and of mass communications on the other, the dynamics of modern lifestyles and values, led not only to the disappearance of diverse regional folk costumes but also to the attenuation of heterogeneous class differences in dress” (emphasis in original). See Gilles Lipovetsky, The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 59.


14 Votolato, American Design in the Twentieth Century, 238. For further discussion of the relationship between the mass market and mass dress aesthetics, see also Leach, Land of Desire, 91-94.

15 Green argues that the American garment industry was, from its inception, governed by the dual but dichotomous tenets of “standardization and flexibility, due to the contradictory imperatives of fashion.” See Green, Ready-to-Wear, 19. Similar remarks have been made by a number of historical and contemporary fashion studies scholars and historians who have described the element of “change” as being the central feature of fashion (as opposed to dress or clothing). See Kawamura, Fashion-ology, 25-28 for a summary of these debates.
“honest” silhouette. The simplicity of American fashion in the early twentieth century underscores Rebecca Arnold’s contention that, even in its earliest days, the American clothing industry—although operating under the specter of Parisian fashion—was promoted as its “binary opposite…and its appeal was predicated on the idea…of America’s New World democracy and practicality.” This matrix of ideals inevitably had a major impact on the very aesthetics of American clothing even before the rise of sportswear and the American designer in the 1930s. Indeed, as Kidwell and Christman write, by the early twentieth century, “the common quality of American dress served to obliterate ethnic origins and blur social distinctions.” In addition to obfuscating social difference, however, it may equally well be argued that American ready-to-wear also “obliterated” or “blurred” bodily difference. Phrased somewhat differently, mass manufactured garments in the United States were not created to merely fit the body; rather, they were also designed to help everybody fit in.

Yet, at the same time, Breward suggests that such claims about mass culture and mass fashion are somewhat overstated. “Rather than producing a sense of undifferentiated sameness,” Breward argues that the twentieth century actually “supported fashion changes as frenetic and diverse, as open to the possibilities of individuality, as any other period.” Too often the notion of the “democratization” of fashion has therefore been conflated with aesthetic uniformity when in actuality this egalitarian spirit might be better understood as enabling greater opportunities for self-fashioning and identity construction; however, fashion, as both Wilson and Entwistle have pointed out, is always a limited and limiting medium of expression. Indeed, even as the growing availability of fashionable dress enabled freer play with the ideas of artifice and authenticity in modern, industrialized metropolises, fashion nevertheless exposed “a tension between conformity and differentiation,” or the complimentary but “contradictory desires to fit in and stand out.”

Largely unable to purchase well-fitting garments off-the-rack in the first years of the twentieth century, the stout woman found herself uncomfortably subjected to the inherently ambivalent nature of fashion. Due to the problems in fitting her non-standard body into standardized clothes, the democratic ethos of early ready-to-wear—even as it blurred class boundaries and designations—did not always transcend size classifications. More than that, the design of stoutwear tended to also exhibit certain moralizing ideas about covering up and 16

As a number of authors note, this aesthetic was perhaps best embodied by the Gibson Girl. See Banner, American Beauty, 231 and Votolato, American Design in the Twentieth Century, 230. The simplicity of styles was not merely a product of fashion, however, but was undoubtedly informed by both the austerity of wartime dress and the influence of dress reformers. For further discussion of the paring-down of women’s fashions, see Patricia Cunningham, Reforming Women’s Fashion, 1830-1920: Politics, Health, Art (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2003), 15-20.


Kidwell and Christman, Suits Everyone, 15.

Breward, Culture of Fashion, 184.


Entwistle, Fashioned Body, 116.
camouflaging excess flesh, which rendered her clothing aesthetically conservative. Indeed, as the home economist and stoutwear style expert Grace Margaret Gould told Women’s Wear in 1915, “Don’t is a word the stout woman is always having said to her in regards to clothes.” The stout woman of average means therefore found herself “standing out” in the worst way possible as everyone around her was coming to look more and more alike. Speaking to this issue, a buyer for a Midwestern department store told Women’s Wear in 1915 about how he had made a discovery that it was the fat woman who was not able to buy high-priced clothing who looked fattest. The rich fat women did not look so fat. Their clothes were tailor-made by high-priced tailors and the lines were such as to diminish an expansive appearance. Merely a big dress won’t do the work; the extra sizes of all models will not fit the bill. Some of them merely make a big woman look bigger.

Much as Malsin does in this chapter’s opening quotation, here, this buyer expresses a concern with the capacity for ordinary stout garments to “merely make a big woman look bigger,” whereas specialized stout garments, custom made by tailors and dressmakers, he noted, could have the opposite effect in diminishing the stout woman’s “expansive appearance.” To this end, the appearance of stoutness was therefore also partly a product of one’s class status since women who could not afford to purchase custom-made garments were condemned, as the buyer explains above, to “look the fattest.” However, also implicit in this statement is the taken-for-granted but remarkable notion that clothing should always make the wearer appear more slender.

Increasingly attuned to the matter of dress aesthetics and the potentialities of ready-made stoutwear to actually make stout women appear more slender, in earliest days of the trade, manufacturers struggled to reconcile a number of design and manufacturing concerns: from garment fit, to the fashion edicts trickling down from Paris, to the specific sartorial needs of American women and, finally, to the tensions that existed between fitting in and standing out—all of which manifested in the ways about which the problem and practice of stoutwear design were discussed in the professional fashion media. In the following two subsections, I will explore these early design discourses in greater detail, first examining the ways that Albert Malsin of Lane Bryant invoked the language of engineering and architecture to conceive of new approaches to stoutwear design and second, the Associated Stylish Stoutwear Makers’ “Sveltline System,” the foundation of which was based on the premise of standardizing the stout body through corsetry. In doing so, my aim will be to delimit how during this earlier period stoutwear both derived and departed from prevailing styles of dress, as well as to expose the parallels between these competing “scientific” approaches, which, in the pursuit of rendering the stout woman’s body slender, actually resulted in a uniformity and conservatism in stoutwear aesthetics that manufacturers in the 1920s actively sought to dismantle.

4.1.1 Building a Better Body: The Architectural Discourses of Stoutwear Design

Some day...we may see the designer as the architect and the woman of taste and training as the decorator.

For I think a man has more gift at making the right outline for a tailored suit or dress. It seems to call for a man's handling, according to my judgment. 24

The above quotation reveals a prominent strain of thought in the discourses about the practice of stoutwear design in the early twentieth century—one which equated the practice of designing and manufacturing stoutwear with the more ostensibly masculine, and therefore perhaps more noble, practice of designing built environments. In the article, two stoutwear manufacturers from the New York-based firm Bernstein, Baum, Cravis & Co. were asked by Women's Wear, “How do you get your styles?” In their response, they explained how from one “good model” they could derive “six or seven suits.” They key, according to the manufacturers, lie in first finding the “right outline” in a suit or dress, after which, “little feminine touches” can be added—a practice which the two argued was best left in the hands of women. Continuing, they suggest that while the subject of decoration has always “troubled” tailors, for “men rarely understand it,” women “go to it intuitively and naturally.” While in this quotation the manufacturers at once elevate women's work, arguing that it is those “final touches [that] always make or mar a suit,” 25 they also establish a gendered design dichotomy (emerging from strains of modernist design thinking that will be discussed at greater length below) that equated garment design—or, the “right outline of a tailored suit or dress” (i.e. the silhouette)—with the masculine field of architecture and the superficial work of fashion design or “decoration” with women and domesticity.

The sentiments of the manufacturers from Bernstein, Baum, Cravis & Co. found their visual corollary in an advertisement for the New York-based stoutwear firm Baum & Wolff. Inc., which ran in the January 1918 edition of The Dry Goods Economist (Fig. 24). Featuring a pen-and-ink illustration of a towering stout woman (a visual means of representing stout woman as literally larger than life that had by this time become something of a visual cliché) around whom four comparatively diminutive men, donning white artist smocks, 26 gather upon scaffolding to put the finishing touches on her black dress. The accompanying advertising copy reads:

Camouflage. That's the stout dress problem! Make a stout figure appear slim—a curved line straight! … It's just “knowing” that makes our designs flatter the stout figure. Baum & Wolff models don't just fit the figure—they flatter it—change it—give it the youthfulness it needs to answer to style.

25 Ibid., 5.
26 McNeil notes that the image of the couturier in a white artist's smock is a common one within the visual vernaculars of modernism. Beginning with Christian Dior, the white lab coat or smock became a mainstay or something of a uniform of couturiers. See Peter McNeil, “Fashion Designers” in Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: West Europe, ed. Lise Skov (Oxford: Berg, 2010) 131.
Every new silhouette is in Baum & Wolff models—not just "put" there, but built into each model with a thorough knowledge of the stout figure and its needs.27

Although perhaps less forceful than the above quotation from the manufacturers at Bernstein, Baum & Cravis who correlate the work of the designer to that of the architect, the legitimizing discourses of architecture, and specifically of "building" a better body, are here invoked as a means to elevate the practice of stoutwear design to something higher than "mere" dress making or fashion design.

Indeed, with its generally problem-oriented approach to correcting the flaws of the stout body, and its discrete focus on "lines" and "scientific principles," the design discourses of stoutwear more so recalled the utilitarian, rationalizing and modernist discourses of early twentieth century design writ large, rather than that of the more artistically-inclined and intuitive language used by French and English couturiers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to describe their design practices, which they sought to unmoor from the vulgarity of

27 Baum & Wolff, Inc. advertisement, The Dry Goods Economist (January 26, 1918), 84.
commercial and mass-market apparel design. As Nancy Troy, Ilya Parkins, Jennifer Craik and Breward have all pointed out, the rarefied language of the couturiers like Paul Poiret and Charles Fredrick Worth was a means to affirm their positions as a singular artistic geniuses. Unlike the great couturiers, American stoutwear manufacturers were decidedly more embedded in the market, not only as makers of mass produced clothing, but also of mass produced ideals.

To this end, their tendency to invoke scientific and technological rhetoric when describing their design philosophies and practices—and namely, the idea that stoutwear should slenderize—rather than notions of beauty or pure aesthetics (i.e. “design for design’s sake”), tapped into Progressive Era idealism and underscored the belief, which was shared by other modernist designers, that “design, if rationally conceived, could help to solve social problems.”

Thus, even as stoutwear manufacturers invoked some of the more rarefied language of high fashion in discursively constructing themselves as design innovators in the fashion media, their dual ambition to fit the bodies of stout women and to help them sartorially fit in better aligned them with the democratic ethos of American ready-to-wear. Indeed, Baum & Wolff’s claims that their garments did not merely “fit the figure…they flatter it…change it” suggest that the practice of stoutwear design emerged from a highly specialized if not scientific knowledge of “the stout figure and its needs,” while the suggestion that “camouflage” is the “stout dress problem” further attests to the problem-oriented nature of stoutwear design and manufacturing. Rather than creating the fashionable silhouette—a practice with which couturiers were

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28 Victor Margolin notes the tendency within design studies and culture at large to separate engineering and industrial design from the more artistic and intuitive modes of design, such as fashion design. This rift manifests in the way that design is taught (that is, in engineering vs. art schools), but also in the very ways that these different design disciplines are spoken about. See Victor Margolin, “Introduction” in Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism, ed. Victor Margolin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 4, 10.

29 See Breward, Fashion, 32; Craik, Face of Fashion, 56-58; Ilya Parkins, Poiret, Dior and Schiaparelli: Fashion, Femininity and Modernity (London: Berg, 2012), 77, 123; Troy, Couture Culture, 6, 47. For further discussion of the posturing of the designer as artistic genius, see also Kawamura, Fashion-ology, 65; Lipovetsky, Empire of Fashion, 64-66.

30 At the same time, however, both Parkins and Troy have pointed out that modernists as much as fashion designers who oriented themselves with modernism were actually very invested in both the marketing of their work and public personae. See Parkins, Poiret, Dior and Schiaparelli, 10; Troy, Couture Culture, 31-36.

31 Keist notes that during the Progressive Era in the United States, manufacturers and advertisers frequently used terms like “specialized” and “scientifically designed” to entice consumers—a practice that was rampant in stoutwear promotion. See Carmen Keist, “Stout Women Can Now Be Stylish,” Dress: The Journal of the Costume Society of America 43.2 (September 2017): 99-117.

32 Margolin places industrial designers like Peter Behrens, avant-garde artist-designers like Alexander Rodchenko and architectural schools like the Bauhaus into the category of modernist design thinkers. Although their practice was different, they still invoked similar language and logic to their design work by “aligning themselves with the scientific and technological values” of the early twentieth century. Margolin, “Introduction,” 10-11.

33 This argument is somewhat different from Troy’s assertion that even as couturiers set themselves apart as singular artistic geniuses, they nevertheless engaged in practices of self-promotion while negotiating “the supposedly corrupting influence of commerce and commodity culture.” Indeed, stoutwear manufacturers, unlike couturiers, were more forthright about their connections to the mass market. For further discussion, see Troy, Couture Culture, 6-8.
preoccupied—Baum & Wolff, like many other stoutwear manufacturers, discussed their work in the much loftier terms of altering the physical appearance of women's bodies.

While this manner of relating stoutwear design and manufacturing to architectural practice could be disregarded as mere marketing bluster, it also, and quite importantly, reveals some of the core ideals that underpinned the actual practice of stoutwear design in the period spanning 1915-1922, such as an overt preoccupation with “the line” and with “camouflage,” but also with the nebulous idea of creating garments that “flatter.” Although mentions of these elements of stoutwear design were widespread across the professional media, perhaps nowhere were they more clearly elucidated than in the early writings of Albert Malsin. In April of 1916, Malsin was invited to, over the course of four weeks, discuss his design philosophy within the pages of the Richmond Times-Dispatch in richly-illustrated, full-page editorials (Fig. 25). In the first of these articles, Malsin introduced himself and described his particular qualifications for making clothing for stout women in the following manner:

I am a mechanical engineer, but instead of designing dynamos or making machinery, I specialize in the design and construction of clothes for stout women.

Doubtless you will think this is a very extraordinary combination. Probably you will be unable to see what connection there can possibly be between engineering and the clothing of a woman whose bust, or waist line, or hips are all out of proportion to the rest of her body. As a matter of fact the two things have a great deal in common. Had I not been trained in engineering and familiar with a number of other scientific branches I should never have been able to do what I have done toward making it possible for stout women to secure clothes that not only fit but make them look less stout….

And before you go very far into what I have to say you will agree with me that stout women would have been immeasurably better off in health, peace of mind and good looks if the making of their clothes had been put on a scientific basis long ago.

Although in chapter three it was already established that Malsin’s entryway into stoutwear was via his wife Lena who, by herself and prior to marrying Malsin, had already nurtured a successful maternitywear business into being, in this lengthy passage none of that background information is deemed worth mentioning. Rather, Malsin’s pedigree in engineering is framed as a sufficient prerequisite for designing stoutwear—a practice, which he goes on to explain, lies at the intersection of physics, mathematics, optics, psychology, and other scientific branches, but notably not fashion design. Indeed, Malsin in this same article derided fashion design and manufacturing practices that, to this point invoked “too little science, too much haphazard guess work and rule of thumb.”

In devising a more precise, scientific approach to stoutwear design, Malsin’s key insight, already discussed in chapter three, was that stoutwear garments had been improperly graded on the proportional foundation of the “perfect 36,” and thus the stout woman’s sartorial

35 “Science at Last Turns its Attention to ‘Stout’ People,” 54.
36 Ibid.
What Science is Doing for "Stout" People

By Albert Malotte, M.E.

A Matter of Elegance: The Importance of Proper Clothing

The role of science in the evolution of fashion and the importance of mathematics and physics in designing garments is highlighted. The article discusses how the principles of optics, color, and mathematics can be applied to improve the design of hats, veils, and shoes.

Figure 13: Richmond Times-Dispatch (April 23, 1916), 46.
frustrations, above all else, emerged from inconsistent and poor garment fits. At the same time, however, underpinning Malsin’s discussion of fit was the observation that the stout woman’s clothes tend to make her “look stout” due to the carelessness with which they were designed. What, however, did it mean for a garment to make a stout woman “look” stout? According to Malsin, “A woman’s height should be seven times the height of her head,” yet stoutwear manufacturers had, by-and-large, failed to acknowledge or respect these universal “laws of growth of the human body…and their ramifications,” and had thus created garments that only exacerbated the stout woman’s size rather than striving toward creating “an impression of height” in approximating this bodily ideal. To “flatter” the figure was to therefore create the appearance of a body that approximated this ideal by designing garments that visibly compensated for and corrected the stout woman’s “odd” proportions. In other words, height was seen as a remedy for stoutness. This, as Malsin told the Oregon Daily Journal in 1916 was a design practice “built on the idea of aspiration” toward height, but more importantly, toward slenderness. By this logic, and according to Malsin, there existed an inherently “correct” or “true” way to design clothes in order to meet these “aspirational” ends. Failed designs, however, were not the result of improper patterns or inappropriate colors; rather, Malsin argued that they had not been designed on so-called “scientific lines.”

In the second article in the series, Malsin discussed this precept in much greater detail and, notably, did so by invoking the logic of architectural discourse, rather than that of the other artistic and scientific disciplines he mentions above:

The architect knows how to arrange his materials so as to give even a very large building an effect of airy grace, height and slenderness.

I can think of nothing better for the designer of clothing for stout people to keep constantly in mind than one of the great Gothic cathedrals. Aspiration, the reaching for something higher, is the fundamental principal of Gothic architecture, and every line from the cornerstone to the topmost peak of the spire is designed and constructed with this effect in view:

It is exactly the same effect which stout women must constantly strive for in their clothes.

The above quotation is notable for a number of reasons—not least of which being Malsin’s suggestion that women, but also presumably designers, should “constantly strive” for achieving the appearance of height through stoutwear, or a notion which thereby presumed that all stout women inherently desired to look more slender. To the point of architecture, however, here Malsin draws one of the clearest parallels between garment design and architectural practice,

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Ibid., 55.


“How Science is Helping ‘Stout’ People to Look Less ‘Stout,’” 53.

This notion will be discussed at greater length in chapters six and seven which, respectively, examine the fashion media’s concurrent elevation of the slender ideal and its discursive construction of stoutness as abject and other, and the fashion media discourses around the practice of self-fashioning, or dressing to look slender.

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arguing that stoutwear manufacturers should always keep in mind the “great Gothic cathedrals” and the sense of “airy grace” and weightlessness created by their soaring lines. Continuing, he explained how, “with the right lines rightly applied, [the stout woman] can create as deceptive an illusion of height and slenderness as the architect does with his huge structures of brick and stone.” Although Malsin’s design vision was marketed within the media as both new and singular, his overt preoccupation with “the line” reverberated throughout the stoutwear industry through the teens and twenties. Indeed, in one exceptional illustration of this fact, Women’s Wear reported on new season’s stoutwear styles in the spring of 1918, noting how “it can all be summed up in two words—long lines—long lines and more long lines. Everything that makes for the latter is good style…while everything that militates against it is bad style.”

The discourse of architecture proved to be something of a through-line in Malsin’s self-promotion and professional biography. In a 1950 promotional pamphlet published to celebrate Lane Bryant’s fiftieth anniversary, for instance, Malsin’s frequent biographer Tom Mahoney described Malsin’s designs as borrowing not only the grace of Gothic cathedrals but also from the camouflage innovations of World War I. Quoting Malsin, he wrote,

Camouflage is not the exclusive property of war…but has been used for years in architecture, in landscape gardening, in house furnishings and in the making of clothes….

Broad eaves are used to make a narrow house appear wider, and a striped wallpaper is used to make a ceiling seem higher. By the same principle, if correctly applied to the designing of one’s clothes, the wearer may be made to appear smaller or larger, taller or shorter, as may be desired. Lane Bryant stout garments are not merely large sizes; instead, they are especially made with lines that create the optical illusion of slenderness.

Playing into and paralleling these architectural design discourses, around this same time Printers’ Ink declared him “a builder of gowns for stout women” and argued that “designing and building a Lane Bryant gown requires…a familiarity with the principles of architecture.” Elsewhere, however, Malsin was referred to as Lane Bryant’s “designer” in a number of advertising spots appearing within both the professional media and women’s and fashion magazines (Fig. 26).

42 “How Science is Helping ‘Stout’ People to Look Less ‘Stout,’” 53.
43 See, for example, “Cincinnati Hears Talk on ‘Line,’” Women’s Wear (April 3, 1922), 2; “Easy Joinings of Simple Gores of Novel Cut Achieve Desired Long Lines on Stout Garments,” Women’s Wear (July 12, 1918), 5; “Fabrics with Striped Designs Effect Slenderizing Lines in Stout Dresses,” Women’s Wear (April 17, 1924), 31; “Simple Lines in Biggest Demand for the too Ample Figure,” Women’s Wear (April 18, 1917), 8; “Slenderizing Lines Featured by Columbus Stores,” Women’s Wear (September 21, 1918), 14; “Slenderizing Lines for Stout Woman Stressed by Philadelphia Store,” Women’s Wear (May 1, 1924), 31; “Slenderizing Lines in Coats and Panel Dresses,” Women’s Wear (August 5, 1921), 12; “Straight Lines for Extreme Sizes,” Women’s Wear (January 26, 1926), 50.
46 Mahoney, 50 Years of Lane Bryant, 21.
47 “Selling ‘Stouts,’” Printers’ Ink Monthly (August 1920), 34.
Interestingly, these men’s lenses predict the emergence of the named fashion designer in the United States by more than a decade, while evidencing a consistent preoccupation with dress aesthetics amongst stoutwear manufacturers that expand the discourses of “good fit” already discussed in chapter three—a point which affirms Patricia Mears’ suggestion that a problem-oriented approach to “designing was and remains at the core of American fashion.” Indeed, as a “builder” of so-called “human stouts,” as he referred to both himself and to stout women in one Printer’s Ink piece, Malsin believed that the problem with the stout woman’s dress was that it had been rendered too simply and too conservatively. The plainer the dress and the plainer the unrelieved expanses of fabric, he argued, the larger the stout woman tended to appear. By utilizing panels, seams, ruffles, stripes, buttons and other “frills and turlinments”—none of which necessarily had to compete with prevailing fashion—the stoutwear designer could create the appearance of height and grace so idealized within Gothic architecture. To achieve this illusion, however, Malsin argued that every line had to “taper toward that part of her figure which she

40 Arnold argues that the “American design” was the product of an explicit marketing campaign by Lord & Taylor Vice President, Dorothy Shaver, that was staged in 1932 to publicly recognize American design talent for the first time. See Rebecca Arnold, The American Look: Fashion, Sportswear and the Image of Women in 1930s and 1940s New York (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 1-2. See also Jessica Deans, Ready-Made Miracle: The Story of American Fashion for the Millions (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1967).


50 “Selling ‘Stout,’” Printer’s Ink Monthly (August 1929), 36.
wishes to make appear smaller."  Each and every part of a gown," Malsin further explained, "must be made to assist in creating the desired illusion."

To demonstrate his design theories, in one of the Richmond Times-Dispatch features Malsin included a series of schematic renderings to show how these principles could be put into practice (Fig. 27). In each of the two figures, a woman is depicted on the far left in a dress that, in Malsin's words, makes her appear "stouter' than ever in a plain, unadorned gown." In the successive illustrations, however, Malsin applied to the same dress "vertical and slanting lines, pointed panels, broken belt line[s], curved bodies, etc." according to "scientific principles" in order to create an appearance of greater slenderness. In the second illustration in particular, Malsin emphasizes how "breaking the ugly horizontal lines of the belt and the lower coat" can effect a "pleasing transformation" of the stout woman's body. The transformative powers of these principles, however, reached their zenith in a photograph of a stout woman, over whom an illustrated dress had been superimposed, and which figured centrally in the full-page spread (Fig. 28). According to Malsin, the gown—with its tightly-tipped waist and flared hem that together create an exaggerated hourglass silhouette—represents "a good example of the surprising effects which can be produced by the application of scientific principles to the design of clothing." Specifically, the rows of buttons, according to Malsin, created "an illusion of added height and slenderness" while emphasizing "the smallness of the waist." While elsewhere, Malsin suggested that lines could be used to variously create an appearance of height, or to minimize problematic parts of the body, through these illustrations it becomes clear that Malsin's design ambition was both singular and somewhat conservative. Indeed, the appearance of slenderness was not manifested by a use of lines to either emphasize or deemphasize different parts of the body; it was chiefly created by exaggerating the smallness of the waistline and, perhaps more importantly, by creating a recognizably feminine hourglass shape. While Malsin suggested elsewhere that stoutness was not determined by weight but rather by a woman's odd proportions, these

51 "How Science is Helping 'Stout' People to Look Less 'Stout,'" 53.
52 Ibid.
53 I use the term "schematic rendering" instead of "fashion illustration" due to the fact that it is unclear whether or not these illustrations were proposals for actual garments produced by Lane Bryant.
illustrations nevertheless suggest that stoutness was, first and foremost, an affliction of the abdomen.\textsuperscript{54}

In spite of the fact that what he was proposing was not, in fact, a radical re-visioning of the silhouette or of tried-and-true fashion design practices, by couching his design practices in the discourses of architecture, Albert Mabin (as much as other stoutwear manufacturers) tapped into a strain of thought that Deborah Fausch has described as fashion's ambition to "acquire an aura of classic timelessness through a metonymical relationship with the edifice,"\textsuperscript{55} or what Bradley Quinn has described as fashion's desire to "push forward into the cultural landscape in pursuit of the accomplished forms mastered by art and architecture."\textsuperscript{56} By invoking the language of architecture, stoutwear manufacturers were therefore either consciously or unconsciously aligning themselves with prominent modernist architects and design thinkers of the period, like Adolf Loos and Otto Wagner, who in their writings disparaged fashion as "trivial, 

\textsuperscript{54}This observation emerges from Garden-Coyne and Fort's observation that the belly is a hotly political and favored site of self-fashioning. This idea will be explored in greater depth in chapter seven. See Ana Garden-Coyne and Christopher E. Fort (eds.) Cultures of the Abdomen, Dirt, Digestion, and Sex in the Modern World (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005). 1-2.


\textsuperscript{56}Bradley Quinn, The Fashion of Architecture (Oxford: Berg 2003), 133.
functional...wasteful, the antithesis of rationality and simplicity.” 57 For Loos in particular, the ideal in dress was anonymity, or “simple clothing perfected over time.” 58 Indeed, as Llewellyn Negrin has found, within the discourses of modern architecture, naturalistic ornamentation and decorative applications of color and line “implied a denial of function, purity and the essential universality of the object.” 59 By turn, these were all qualities that had, within modernist discourses at large, been equated with the feminine. 60 Whereas fashion design in Malsin’s rhetoric is both explicitly and implicitly diminished as low-skilled and frivolous, the practice of constructing a silhouette, and perhaps more importantly, a silhouette that “flatters” or “changes” a figure, is rendered the more intellectual and more exacting task. Indeed, here, the discourses of architecture become discourses of mastery. 61

On the one hand, the prevalence of architectural references within descriptions of stoutwear design practice could be written off as little more than clever promotional tactics. On the other, however, they evidence a tendency shared by male manufacturers and designers during this time to make competing statements, each loftier than the next, about having changed the shape of women’s bodies—not unlike Poiret’s overstated claims, for instance, to have altered the course of fashion in “liberating” women from the confines of their corsets a decade earlier. 62 Even modernist architects—who tapped into the rationalizing discourses of the dress reform movement in Germany and were led by figures like Otto Wegner, Henry van de Velde and even Frank Lloyd Wright—while dismissive of fashion, were during this period making proposals for how to alter and improve upon women’s dress, focusing mainly on relaxing the silhouette. 63 Indeed, this professed preoccupation with essential form (rather than ornamentation) formed the backbone of modern architectural and design thinking, but also clearly found resonance within the sphere of fashion. Within this context, the silhouette became a means to intervene and improve upon the natural and inherently flawed body where the supposed superficiality fashion

60 Ibid., 219-235; Parkins, Poiret, Dior and Schiaparelli, 25-45, 63.
61 Although it is temporally outside the remit of the present chapter, parallels between stoutwear design and architecture would persist in fashion media discourses throughout the twentieth century. Perhaps most notably, in 1934, a competition was held by the Council of Fashion Research of L. Bamberger & Co. (Newark, New Jersey) which put three hundred architects and industrial designers in competition with one another to see who could create a dress that would assist the stout woman in obtaining an appearance of slenderness. As the New York Times reported, the problem of designing for the stout woman confounded some architects, one of whom explained to the daily how he was “baffled” by the fact that while the Great Depression “thinned down and shortened our normal buildings,” it has left “our stout ladies as a lasting monument.” See Architects Plan Styles for Stout,” New York Times (October 8, 1934), 19. The competition was also reported in the “Topics of the Times” the following day. See “Architects and Fashion,” New York Times (October 9, 1934), 18.
was believed to have otherwise failed. By invoking these discourses, stoutwear manufacturers thereby became architects not only of garments, but of the body itself.

In practice, however, and as Mary McLeod has found, modernist architects proved to be less interested in dress reform than “with making beautiful clothes that allowed women to fit into their designed surroundings.” Similarly, and in his own proposals for “stoutwear reform” as it were, Malsin’s professed ambitions to reconceive the practice of stoutwear design as one might imagine drafting the blueprints for a building were not actually reflected in his illustrations. In the schematic renderings that accompanied his April 16 feature in the Richmond Times-Dispatch (see Fig. 27), for instance, the silhouette does not only not change, it does not appear to stray away from the prevailing norms in women’s dress during this period. Indeed, in the United States during World War I, women’s dress aesthetics were defined by their practicality and austerity. The average woman’s wardrobe after 1915 was comprised of ankle-grazing, gently-waist-defined dresses and military-inspired suits rendered in a conservative color palette of navy, black and khaki. As Valerie Mendes and Amy de la Haye, point out, these were garments that were lauded within the fashion press as both sensible and timeless. Reticent, perhaps, to stray too far from this national uniform, Malsin’s architectural experimentations in creating flattering lines were therefore relegated to the surface of garments.

Indeed, in looking at his various proposals, one could easily be led to believe that American women wore only one type of garment in the early twentieth century. Malsin’s descriptions of his own design practice and his attempts to align himself with modern architects were therefore ripe with contradictions; however, even if his lofty proposals did not translate to his actual designs, it could be argued that his rather conservative garments—which, while not at the height of fashion—ultimately succeeded in assisting the stout woman to aesthetically fit in. As becomes clear here, the goal of stoutwear design was therefore not merely to outfit the stout woman in well-fitting clothes; rather, through dress, the entire architecture of the body was essentially reconceived. What Malsin’s architectural discourses of stoutwear design therefore conveyed was the notion that the problem of stoutness could be solved through the artifice of dress. Indeed, although Malsin previously identified fit as the principal anathema to the stout of frame, the guiding insight to his design philosophy was the idea that the stout body itself needed to be “rebuilt.”

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64 Mark Wigley notes that an underlying premise of modernist architecture was to utilize the white wall to highlight the “machine-like smoothness” of the underlying structure. He argues that modern architecture was discursively constructed as “naked” and therefore more honest. As will become evident in this chapter, a similar impulse undergirded stoutwear design discourse as manufacturers sought to give new shape to the silhouette itself, thereby undermining the ornamentation of fashion. See Mark Wigley, White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), xviii.


66 In the fall of 1918, over a year after the United States had entered World War I, Women’s Wear reported from a Chicago stoutwear fashion show that the new offerings presented “no undue extravagance,” and that the war had eliminated “cuffs, of tunics, of all panels and possibly of certain collars.” Notably, the article also suggests that the garments were cut on straight lines, or a style that the trade journal deemed was particularly “suitable to matrons.” See “Chicago Fashion Review Shows Wartime Models,” Women’s Wear (August 8, 1918), 2.

67 Mendes and de La Haye, Fashion Since 1900, 50-52.
Similarly, the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers—Malsin's closest competitor in the stoutwear industry—also sought to transform the stout body. However, rather than being content to experiment in the realm of surface ornamentation, under their Sveltline label, the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers built their business around physically reshaping the stout body. In other words, they did not aim to make the stout body merely appear more slender; they actually sought to make the stout body more slender through a physical (albeit temporary) reduction of the stout woman's bodily dimensions. In this way, and different from Malsin, The Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers more clearly aligned themselves with the modern conception of the fashion designer as one who was inherently preoccupied with the silhouette.

The scope of the so-called “Sveltline System” was summed up in an article that appeared in the October 1921 edition of the Bridgeport Telegraph, which reported,

As when an architect designs a house he gives just as much thought to the foundation as to the higher structure and the builder gives a little more thought, so the men who thought of the Sveltline idea thought of a suitable corset and the people who carried out the plan produced a garment which met all the needed requirements. After a woman is properly fitted with a corset and brassiere of this make, the matter of selecting a suitable dress, coat or suit is very simple.

In this passage—as with Albert Malsin's design discourses discussed in the previous section—the language of architecture is invoked as a way to legitimize or elevate the practice of stoutwear design. By comparing stoutwear designers to builders who think not only about the surface decoration of the structure but also to its “foundation,” stoutwear in this instance becomes the proverbial edifice while corsetry becomes the essential foundation of a suitable appearance.

As discussed in chapter three, the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers, led first by Isidor Heller and, after 1921, by Charles May—was a cooperative of eight previously-unaffiliated stoutwear manufacturers—each of whom specialized in a different element of the stout woman's wardrobe. While each of these garments, from shirtwaists to “clever lingerie” to “smart suits,” were said to have been “built upon those correct lines which scientific study make possible,” forming the foundation, quite literally, of the “Sveltline system” was their...
patented “Reduso” corset. According to May, by first reshaping the body with the correct corseting—and thereby creating a standard bodily silhouette, or what he described as “the foundation for a slender line”—the other manufacturers in the collective could ensure a perfect fit for their garments as well. As was explained in a verbose advertisement that was printed in a 1916 issue of the *Dry Goods Economist*,

W.B. Reduso Corsets shape the stout figure by giving a smaller waistline, smoothing the over-full bust-lines and reducing the abdomen. The dresses, petticoats, skirts, waists, coats, suits and underwear of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers Inc., are modelled over W.B. Reduso Corsets thereby assuring perfect fit.

Rather than being designed for the individual stout woman’s body, it could be said that Sveltline system was based on a *stout ideal*—one that was built on the principle of reducing the waistline and abdomen and smoothing “over-full” bust lines—that, in practice, helped the company to circumvent the persistent problems in poor fit wrought by the deficiencies of the stout body. Indeed, instead of fitting their garments to the stout woman’s body, the Sveltline System required that a stout woman, through corsetry, fit her body to her garments.

Although the Associated Stylish Stoutwear Makers framed this approach as variously “ingenious” and “innovative,” the practice of reshaping the body with undergarments was hardly a new or novel practice. Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, crinolines, bustles, paniers and other architectural underpinnings dramatically distorted the appearance of women’s bodies. Beginning in the early twentieth century, however, fashion increasingly celebrated the curvature of the natural, unencumbered body in a marked contrast to past eras in which the artifice of the fashionable silhouette was more clearly evident. Even as the natural body was elevated as an ideal, however, Jill Fields notes that most women continued to rely upon shaping undergarments, while manufacturers grew increasingly preoccupied with creating foundations that, somewhat contradictorily, enhanced the appearance of the “natural”

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75 The “Reduso” name would only be used for a couple of years. In later advertisements, the corsets would be marketed under the Weingarten Bros., Inc. label and would be referred to as “Stylish Stout” corsets and brassieres. Later on, the association would also promote Mildred brand corsets and underwear, made by Fox Manufacturing, under the Sveltline Label.

76 While it was conceived during Heller’s tenure, the promotion of the Sveltline system intensified under Charles May. See “Exceptional Attendance Reported at L.S. Ayres Stoutwear Fashion Show,” *Women’s Wear* (October 5, 1922), 17.


78 As was reported in *Women’s Wear* just after the group’s incorporation, “all garments manufactured by the members of the association are made [over W.B. Reduso corsets] thereby ensuring a uniform fit.” See “Apparel Houses Combine to Cater to Stout Women,” *Women’s Wear* (September 20, 1916), 14.

79 “Science at Last,” 54.


82 Fields, “Fighting the Corsetless Evil,” 113.
Among them, the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers found in the stout woman new applications and new relevance for this old practice of reshaping women's figures by marketing their corsets as an essential component of the stout woman's dress practice. In their promotional materials that appeared across the fashion media, the company stressed both the neatness of their approach and the importance of regarding the body as a foundation for dress in a series of advertisements, which variously claimed, "The foundation for well-fitting apparel is right-fitting underwear," and, "No building is stronger than its foundation and in these corsets and brassieres every woman of large proportions will find a style to...reduce her apparent size."

A series of industry advertisements published in the *Costume and Underwear Review* in the summer of 1919 farther elaborated upon and illustrated the mechanics of the Swelline System. Stressing the fact that their foundations left the stout body unencumbered, one advertisement read, "Without any harness-like contrivances, 'Stylish Stout' Corsets make large hips disappear—waistlines more graceful—bust lines smaller and neater, and feel easy on the stoutest woman," (Fig. 29), while another explained how the corsets "simulate slimmers" and are "one hundred per cent EFFICIENT [sic] in solving the vexing problem of correct-figure-

building" (Fig. 30). Images featuring photographs of stout women, on top of whom illustrated renderings of the back-lacing® Sveltline corsets, which emphasized the vertical lines and the physical constriction of the stout woman's figure, accompanied the advertising copy. One even described how the corset, in “refining” the outline of the stout figure, establishes “the modish ‘Stoutline-Silhouette’” (Fig. 31). With its smooth, hourglass shape and full, curvaceous bust, the so-called “Stoutline-Silhouette” silhouette was more than a category of stoutwear: It was something of a corporeal archetype in itself—one which formed the foundation of the idealized stout body.

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81 Back-lacing corsets were commonly marketed to stout women as “reducing corsets” for the smoothing effect they had on the woman's stomach and hips.
and was largely in keeping with the mature, prewar feminine ideal, albeit perhaps slightly
enlarged.\footnote{Breward describes the prewar feminine ideal as tending toward “a statuesque, heavy-chested grandeur, hips thrown back and accented with flared gored skirts, or the alternative pencil-slim hobble skirt.” See Breward, \textit{The Culture of Fashion}, 185. See also Banner, \textit{American Beauty}, 124. For a discussion of “stylish stout” as a category of stoutwear, see chapter three, section 3.1.2.}

Charles May further spoke about the innovations of the Sveltline System with the trade journal \textit{Printers' Ink} in 1920. Describing the genesis of the business, May explained how

The special gods that have as their care the beauty of our women drew into the business of dressmaking one I. Heller. He was an idealist, to whom one day a joyous generation of “Stylish Stouts” will raise an appropriate monument. Mr. Heller saw, after seven years of measuring and pondering on the results, that all these sweeping forces we call nature were evolving a new type of large woman.\ldots

Let no one uninitiated in the mysteries of woman’s dress imagine “the perfect 46” is merely “the perfect 36” expanded or inflated, for the types are quite distinct, as different as the Latin and Scandinavian. And the complete requirements of this new modern type make it necessary for the new standard to reflect, not only symmetrical outline of figure, but harmony with the changing requirements of fashion.\footnote{E. McKenna, “Makers of ‘Stouts’ Band Together for Better Retailing,” \textit{Printers’ Ink} (September 16, 1920), 154.}

In much the same manner that Malsin described his design practice in terms of “building” the silhouette, May similarly speaks to Heller’s ostensibly sudden “discovery” of this “new race of women”—one which he argues elsewhere in the article (and in racist terms borrowed from eugenics) was the product of the “new economic environment” and the “mixing” of different ethnicities—and the necessity of innovating garments to suit her figure.\footnote{Ibid., 157.} In similarly laudatory and grandiose language, the trade journal went on to describe Heller’s intervention as “a piece of co-operative enterprise unique in the history of manufacturing,” while the garments themselves were said to have been a unique product of the “highly sensitized masculine mind…[of] the scientist.”\footnote{Ibid., 154, 158.}

The “Sveltline Idea”\footnote{“New Styles Give Slim Lines to Stout Figures,” \textit{Philadelphia Inquirer} (August 5, 1917), 51.} was similarly celebrated within consumer media as a revelation. For instance, a 1917 \textit{Philadelphia Inquirer} article declared that the Sveltline system “has come to stay—until all stout women are reduced to sylphlike proportions.” Continuing, the feature explained how

The current modes of the season are so adapted and adjusted by the yardstick of the Sveltline measurement that they look quite as they should on stout figures.\ldots

It is all in the cunning arrangement of proportions, in the masterly application of the watchword, “Line.”\footnote{Ibid.}
While at once recalling Malsin’s celebration of “correct lines” in his own approach to stoutwear design, the article went on to differentiate the Sveltime system from Malsin’s architectural approach, explaining that “no stout person can expect to look right in their clothes unless she starts right with a correctly fitted corset. This is the very backbone of correctness in the whole costume.”

Accompanying images depict stout women donning Sveltime garments that purport to demonstrate the slenderning effects of the system (Fig. 32). In one, a simple, black, A-line skirt was described as fitting “beautifully at the waist and hip and gives symmetry to the figure even with a loose unfitted blouse of the ready-made type,” while a coat featuring rows of buttons and seams that accentuate the garment’s slenderness was deemed “admirably becoming to the stout woman.” Similar (and in some cases, identical) images appeared across the national

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56 Ibid.
57 In several of the images across the different publications, the images are copyrighted by Underwood & Underwood, New York.
media, as, for instance, in August and September 1917 editions of the Richmond Times Dispatch (Fig. 35) and the Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Fig. 34) as part of a united national “propaganda campaign” created to sell stout women on the slenderezing effects of the Svelline system.97

However, even as the company heralded its designs as scientific and innovative—just as Malin did with his own lofty proposals for the transformative potential of architectural principles applied to dress—the designs were perhaps notable only for their ordinariness and for the extent to which they were in keeping with the conservatism of wartime dress discussed in the previous section. With Lane Bryant and the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers producing the lion’s share of stoutwear in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century,98 they had a proverbial corner on the market for stoutwear aesthetics, too. Yet, in spite of the firms’ bombastic rhetoric—declaring in advertisements that their wares were cut on “long, slender lines necessary to a swelt [sic], fashionable appearance” (Fig. 35)—some commentators were quick to point out that these innovations were not as revelatory as the firms claimed and perhaps not entirely fashionable either. Indeed, as Women’s Wear reported in 1917, 99

97 Speaking with the trade journal Advertising & Selling in 1917, Issor Heller noted that he had just completed a national “propaganda campaign” that equitably targeted consumers and retailers. Continuing, he explained to the trade journal how “trade papers throughout the country were used as advertising mediums, with unusually good layout and copy.” By partnering with local newspapers to create fashion features, he explained that his firm received “considerable free publicity.” The stoutwear lectures (discussed in chapter four) were also a part of this promotional scheme. In fact, he argues that lectures and “personal propaganda” proved to be “one of the most effective ways of pushing these garments.” See “United Advertising is Building a Stout Wear Business,” Advertising & Selling (September 1917), 12.
98 Keist, “Stout Women Can Now Be Stylish,” 100.
So much has been written and said of special fashions for stout women that one has come to expect something startlingly unusual, as if "stylish struts" were some strange new kind of fashion. In reality, however, the blouses designed for those who are in the class of "extra sizes," are very little different from those worn by the ordinary variety of thirty-sixes.

In fact, some of them seem much more attractive, perhaps because, since the style which is becoming to a stout figure must of necessity be relatively simple, they have been saved from some of the execrable examples of bad taste which one finds all too frequently in blouses of regulation size.

As this passage demonstrates, although stoutwear designs were largely in keeping with prevailing styles, or what most average American women were wearing in the teens, they did not reach the heights of fashion, nor did they innovate in the realm of fashion aesthetics. Rather, a looser, tubular silhouette that originated in the work of Paul Poiret—one which radically re-envisioned the relationship between dress and the body, presaged the shape of the silhouette in the coming decade and which almost entirely obfuscated the curvature of the natural waistline—prevailed in

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98 "Simple Lines in Biggest Demand for the Too Ample Figure," *Women's War* (April 18, 1917), 8.
the pages of the upmarket fashion press from 1908 onwards.\footnote{Buckley and Fawcett, Fashioning the Feminine, 54-55. Milbank notes that while American women largely dismissed Poiret’s more extreme designs, such as the bubble skirt and the lampshade tunic, he nevertheless had a great impact on the softening of American tailoring in the early teens. See Milbank, New York Fashion, 56.}

By contrast, stoutwear aesthetics were designed on conservative lines, meant to enhance the wearer’s feminine attributes by emphasizing the hourglass silhouette—one which was perhaps most readily evident in Malsin’s 1916 Richmond Times-Dispatch piece (see Fig. 28). Indeed, although stoutwear manufacturers, much like American ready-to-wear manufacturers at large, were still largely dependent upon Paris for design guidance and innovation during this period,\footnote{Milbank, New York Fashion, 18-19; Lipovetsky, Empire of Fashion, 58-59; Valerie Mendes and Amy de la Haye, Fashion Since 1900 (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 48-49; Véronique Paillard, “Fashion for All?: The Transatlantic Fashion Business and the Development of a Popular Press Culture during the Interwar Period,” Journalism Studies 14.5 (2013): 716-729; Troy, Costume Culture.} their concurrent interest in both the construction of garments and their surface decoration in the pursuit of altering the appearance of the body evidences an unwillingness to engage in rote copying of European models. It appears that not everything coming from the minds and ateliers of French and English couturiers was translatable to the lives (and bodies) of American consumers.\footnote{For a general discussion about the ideological rift that existed between French and American fashion, see Buckley and Clark, Fashion and Everyday Life, 41; Gregory Votolato, American Design in the Twentieth Century: Personality and Performance (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 230-239.}

Stoutwear was not merely manufactured to fit the body; it was also designed to help the wearer fit in as the illusion of slenderness and fashionability ultimately went hand-in-hand.

Within this context, and even as the discourses surrounding the fashionability and design innovation of stoutwear amounted to little more than marketing bluster, in its simplicity,
stoutwear nevertheless demonstrated certain modernist strains of thinking, and namely the privileging of the function of designed objects over form. Indeed, as Negrin has written,

The famous aphorism ‘form follows function’ encapsulated the modernist idea that in the designing of objects for everyday use, function should be given priority over form. All that which detracted from or was superfluous to the efficient functioning of the object was to be avoided… Purity, universality, simplicity, geometry and standardization were linked in modernist rhetoric in their ability to transcend the ephemeral and confront the essence.  

Applying this notion, it may be argued that the generally conservative appearance of stoutwear actually belied the modernity of its design. Stripped down and void of any non-essential elements that might unduly serve to make the stout woman appear larger, stoutwear, as the above commentator noted, was actually perhaps more “attractive” in its simplicity than garments that were more recognizably fashionable. Indeed, as Breward has written, in the immediate postwar years and in a rejection of wartime austerity, the pendulum swung back as women re-embraced “pale colors, light layered cottons, and lace or broderie anglaise borders,” or, to borrow Malsin’s phrasing, feminine “frills and furbelows” that had been deemed universally unbecoming for stout women.

4.2 From Matronly to Modern: Stoutwear, 1922–1930

In the early 1920s and as the novelty of being able to purchase ready-made stout garments off-the-rack began to wane, however, reports began to surface in the fashion media stating that stout women were growing increasingly weary of the conservatism of stoutwear design. Indeed, although stout women had been effectively relegated to the margins of fashionability, they were not immune to the experience of or desire for fashion. With fashionable styles turning over at an increasingly rapid pace and with fashion information growing evermore available in the postwar period, the chasm between stoutwear aesthetics and what was deemed fashionable merely grew wider. Reflecting on the genesis of the stoutwear trade in 1924, Women’s Wear explained how,

when the idea of making ready-to-wear clothes for large women was first conceived, it was generally believed that such apparel called for special designs—fashions created

103 Negrin, “Ornament and the Feminine,” 224. Wigley, has described the modernist rhetoric of simplicity in similar terms, writing, “The rejection of decoration in favor of the cultivated eye is explicitly understood as a form of purification.” Within modernist architecture this manifested in the “white wash” and the “white wall.” See Wigley, White Walls, Designer Dresses, 3-15.
104 Breward, The Culture of Fashion, 186.
105 See “Accent Large Sizes to Stimulate Trade in Department for Women,” Women’s Wear (April 22, 1925), 22; “Effort to Give Youthful Lines in Stoutwear Made by Manufacturer,” Women’s Wear (December 21, 1922), 30; “Stout Styles in Unusually Striking Colors—Rust and Beige Showing,” Women’s Wear (February 16, 1921), 20; “Urged by Demand, Coast Specialty Shop Will Cater to Large Women,” Women’s Wear (February 4, 1925), 27.
106 Buckley and Fawcett, Fashioning the Feminine, 54; Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 12-13.
exclusively for women of larger figure. These styles were so distinctly different from prevailing modes that women who wore them felt conspicuous, and soon tired of clothes which were so easily identified as made for one particular type.107

Another article published earlier in 1922 spoke about stoutwear design in similar terms, suggesting that the stoutwear trade had seen a “decided lack of progress, at a time when general ready to wear was taking rapid strides.”108 As these accounts make clear, in spite of the fact that stoutwear failed to lead in the way of fashion, manufacturers nevertheless managed to cultivate a discernible stoutwear aesthetic—perhaps just not that which they had intended. In its drabness and with its seemingly singular imperative to slenderize the body through the elevation of the feminine hourglass silhouette, which made it easily identifiable as designed for a particular “type” of body, by the 1920s, the design of stoutwear had itself become something of a cliché. By the end of the decade—and antithetical to the optimistic and ambitious design discourses in which it was so deeply embedded—stoutwear merely served to exacerbate the stout woman’s corporeal deviations from the norm by visually identifying her as stout.

The aesthetic conservatism of stoutwear became all the more apparent as the teens blend into the twenties and as a straighter silhouette was adopted by a growing number of American women in their everyday dress, even as stoutwear continued to reference an outmoded ideal of mature feminine beauty.109 In fashion media discourses, however, one could begin to glimpse a perceptible change beginning in the early-1920s as fashion slowly became more accommodating and inclusive of the stout body. Although more evidently youthful, the new, straight-line silhouette was believed by many to have an overall slenderizing effect, and therefore stoutwear manufacturers increasingly realized they needn’t sacrifice fashion for the sake of function. In a 1922 article on the new season’s stoutwear styles, Women’s Wear remarked upon this shift, writing,

There is a certain ease and softness in the line in suits built for stouts this fall. The usual severe effects which were deemed necessary to produce long lines appear to have vanished in the collection of M. Gross & Co.

Everything is fashioned with the same idea in mind, to achieve the slim silhouettes, and yet there are such features as curved corner panels on bodices. Certain parts of skirt sections cut circular so that they give flare at their base, even while fitting across the hips, are not eliminated.110

Reporting on a similar sartorial branching out, the trade journal wrote slightly earlier in 1921 that Lane Bryant was changing course by showing colorful blouses for the coming season, which, Women’s Wear wrote, were “somewhat unexpected” and which “in color and at a casual glance,
even in design, did not seem to belong to this category.” However, this shift in stoutwear aesthetics was perhaps most evidently confirmed in a special full-page, illustrated report on the Paris openings, published in the stoutwear pages of *Women's Wear* in September 1922, in which the journal's Paris correspondent—noting the proliferation of long lines, natural waistlines and relaxed “Greek drapes” in the fall presentations—recommended that stoutwear manufacturers should “reconcile this new feature of the mode with the stout figure.” Encircling the article were sketches of relaxed skirts and softly-draped dresses and blouses featuring decorative elements, like geometric borders, beaded cuffs and cape treatments, deemed suitable for stout women, but which stood in stark contraposition to the austere, severely-tailored suiting that was *de rigueur* in stoutwear only a few years prior (Fig. 36). In an April 1922 column, *Women's Wear* described this confluence of fashion and figure flattery as a “happy coincidence,” and deemed it “an exceptionally fortunate season for the stout woman. Never before has she been offered so extensive a choice in fabric, color and line and never before has she been able so closely to resemble her slender sister in the way of dress.”

Although the silhouette had for some time been growing increasingly relaxed and more youthful, as the above quotations demonstrate, 1922 nevertheless represented a highly significant turning point in stoutwear design discourse as the previous decade’s rigid design conventions seemed to suddenly cede to the caprices of fashion. Indeed, as the aforementioned *Women's Wear* feature went on to predict,

> It is to be expected that stoutwear designers will give up the attempt to adapt this mode to the stout figure and will concentrate rather on making the most of the novelty in color, lines, fabrics and details, which Paris offers in the new collections.

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111 “Stout Styles in Unusually Striking Colorings—Rust and Beige Show,” *Women's Wear* (February 16, 1921), 29.
112 “Details from Openings in Paris Offer Inspiration to the Stoutwear Designers,” *Women's Wear* (September 7, 1925), 17.
114 “Details From Openings in Paris,” 17.
Within this context, stoutwear garments—having adopted the tubular silhouette that was largely independent from the natural curvature of the body—themselves became something of a blank canvas upon which designers and manufacturers could engage in more “hands off” experimentations in creating the appearance of slenderness as their focus shifted from reshaping the silhouette to the surfaces of garments.

In many ways, this approach recalled Malsin’s initial architectural proposals for stoutwear design in its focus on surface ornamentation; however, in this later period, rather than that of architecture, the discourse of stoutwear design was more often couched in the language and ideals of Gestalt psychology and, perhaps more notably, of artistic modernism. At the same time, modernist designers and artists somewhat curiously looked to the stout body as a site upon which they could test and articulate the precepts of modernist design discourse—a point that will be discussed at greater length below. More generally speaking, however, the new style of stoutwear emerged at the intersection of a number of circumstances unique to the 1920s; among them, the move toward abstraction in the fine arts, but also innovations in mass manufacturing, evolving conceptions of the ideal body and, perhaps most importantly, broader shifts in American fashion at large that elevated a modernist ideal (of both bodies and dress) to which even fat bodies would not be immune. Indeed, from 1922 onwards, a new stout ideal—itself indebted to new conceptions of feminine beauty—usurped the mature, feminine ideal upheld in the previous decade.

4.2.1 Modernist Aesthetics, Modernist Bodies

As Parkins, drawing on Marshall Berman’s conceptualization of the modern, notes, fashion somewhat uniquely expresses the dual poles of modernity, which are oftentimes imagined as ideologically opposed: “an ethos of experiment and evolution in the arts on the one hand (modernism), and industrialization and urbanization (modernization) on the other.” While this merging of technology and aesthetics is evident within stoutwear design in the 1920s—a notion that will be unpacked below—it perhaps most evidently manifested in the enormously influential designs of Coco Chanel and Jean Patou in the 1920s, each of whom found inspiration in the functionality of mass-produced women’s sporting attire. Chanel, in particular, showed an adeptness at making the low-slung waists, absent bust lines and utilitarian fabrication of tennis dresses chic; however, her genius was not the result of simple imitation. With her famous Ford dress, Chanel formalized a sartorial revolution long in the making by translating the tennis dress into the “little black dress.” Although what was canonized as the “poor look” due to its simplicity was at first only adopted by the jet set, Chanel’s and Patou’s simple sportswear-inspired suits and dresses quickly became oft-imitated stalwarts of the modern woman’s wardrobe.
Perhaps more importantly, however, their simple dresses epitomized a new idea of and approach to fashion design that was deeply indebted to the tenets of artistic modernism. Indeed, as Lipovetsky writes, Chanel and Patou effectively “wiped the slate clean” and in the process, engaged in a “desublimation of fashion”—a practice that paralleled movements in modernist art, such as cubism, abstraction and constructivism.

A number of scholars have noted the exchanges, both conceptual and aesthetic, that were occurring between the worlds of fashion and art in the early twentieth century. Indeed, as Wilson writes, fashion in this period was deeply indebted to the modernist rejection of naturalism and realism and the corollary notion that “a painting was just that: a flat representation, not a three-dimensional reflection of the ‘real.” At the same time, however, Wilson argues that even as fashion drew upon the language of modernism, it was not “fully modernist since it had hardly begun to question its own terms, nor to question the whole concept of fashion.” In a similar vein, Evans, drawing upon the work of Catherine Driscoll, has advocated for a more expansive definition of modernism when speaking about the relationship between modernism and fashion—one that helps to better articulate the type of modernism that undergirded stoutwear design in the 1920s. Evans argues that modernism with a proverbial “small M” encompasses more of a sensibility or an approach to modernity, and incorporates “commerce, advertising and fashion…and not only the stylistic innovations…but also...its bodily gestures, sensibilities and attitudes.” Through fashion, Evans is therefore interested in articulating a “bodily modernism,” or how early twentieth century fashion effectively “designed bodies as modernist.” Evans’ emphasis on bodily modernism parallels Miriam Bratu Hansen’s notion of “vernacular modernism” as that which encompasses “cultural practices that both articulated and mediated the experience of modernity,” as well as Tim Armstrong’s contention that modernism is inherently characterized “by a desire to intervene in the

118 Evans, Mechanical Smile, 6.
119 Lipovetsky, Empire of Fashion, 66.
121 Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 62.
122 Ibid., 62-63.
123 Evans, Mechanical Smile, 6.
124 Evans borrows the term “bodily modernism” from the field of dance and music scholarship, and specifically from the writing of Carrie J. Preston and Rhonda Garelick. See Evans, Mechanical Smile, 6.
125 Here, Hansen includes the “mass produced and mass-consumed phenomena of fashion, design, advertising, architecture and urban environment, of photography, radio and cinema.” These, she argues, combine “the dimension[s] of the quotidian, of everyday usage, with connotations of discourse, idiom, and dialect, with circulation, promiscuity and translatability.” See Miriam Bratu Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” Modernism/modernity 6, no. 2 (April 1999), 60.
body; to render it part of modernity by techniques which may be biological, mechanical or behavioral” (emphasis in original).126 With fashion and dress standing as perhaps the most direct and evident means of intervening in the body, Evans demonstrates how, beginning at the turn of the century, the fashion industry increasingly drew upon the language and ideals of modernism by streamlining the body, and particularly within fashion shows that employed chorus line formations and “amassed human bodies to create abstract moving patterns on stage.”127 Beyond just creating modernist fashion design, Evans therefore argues that Chanel, Patou and their contemporaries also entrenched a modernist, streamlined bodily ideal.128

Beyond the remit of the fashion show, Anne Hollander has observed a similar modernist (with a small M) desire to intervene in the body in fashion illustration and photography in the 1920s. Indeed, as the art historian so famously observed, representations of fashionable dress do not so much demonstrate accurately how clothes were made, but how the clothed body was supposed to look during any given historical period. Fashionable dress, Hollander therefore argues, is a consolidation of period-specific ideals of “shape, line, trim, texture and movement,” which is itself reinforced by “the style of the pictures in which [this ideal] is represented as natural.”129 Thus, if the trussed-up, womanly hourglass was the defining silhouette of the late nineteenth century, the abstract, industrial forms of the rectangle (in two dimensions) or the tube (in three) so prevalent in modernist painting were mainstays of the fashionable silhouette in the twenties. However, rather than looking for the specific currents running between artistic modernism and fashion, Hollander argues that a more general modernist sensibility in fashion illustration increasingly accustomed individuals to see themselves as two-dimensional shapes, and thereby provided “new possible versions of the dressed self.”130 In the 1920s, fashionable dress and bodies therefore came to increasingly mirror one another with the modernist lines of the garment sublimating those of the fleshy body underneath.

This could be seen perhaps most clearly in stoutwear advertisements throughout the late-teens and into the 1920s as photography gave way to fashion illustrations that deemphasized the natural curvature of the body and accentuated the straight silhouette—a point that will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter. Beyond dress and representation, however, Hollander takes her analysis one step further, arguing that images also bear in them the capacity to shape the inward perception of the self, and thereby influence bodily comportment.131 She

126 Armstrong, Modernism, Technology and the Body, 6.
127 Evans, Mechanical Smile, 7.
128 Ibid., 211.
129 Hollander, Seeing Through Clothes, 314.
130 Ibid., 336-337.
131 She argues that people unconsciously “wear clothes and use gestures in some style approximating to a very generalized ‘fashion plate.’ Movements of the head, behavior of the legs, stance, and so on, are not just individually determined but also inwardly conceived as conforming to a general image that everyone agrees is natural and acceptable to look at.” Ibid., 315.
therefore argues that fashion during this period—a point which has also been taken up by Evans—was designed to be seen on a body in motion.\footnote{Ibid., 330-334, 339. Evans points to the genesis of these revealing fashions as occurring before the war, especially in the form of “dresses and skirts that focused to a seemingly obsessive degree on the lower leg.” However, during this earlier period, only mannequins could wear such extreme and revealing fashions. See Evans, \textit{Mechanical Smile}, 207-210.}

Both Evans’ and Hollander’s discussions about how modernism intervened in and shaped modernist aesthetics and the corollary construct of the modernist body culminate in Schwartz’s notion of the “kinesthetic of torque” as the defining feature of physical culture in the 1920s. While the construct of the “perfect 36” (discussed in chapter three) prescribed the dimensions of the ideal body, torque, according to Schwartz, encompassed a less readily identifiable and oftentimes contradictory image of the ideal body—one that was light, streamlined, mobile, efficient, and which generally displayed the logic of modern, industrialized society. “The best body,” Schwartz writes, “would have been an aerodynamic body, curved but slender, controlled but light,” an ideal perhaps most clearly embodied by the modernist dancer.\footnote{Schwartz’s exemplar of this ideal is Isadora Duncan whose “solar plexus…[was] the source of all true motion.” See Schwartz, \textit{Never Satisfied}, 79-80.}

Rather than being stiff and upright as was the constrained, corseted feminine ideal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this was a naturally slender but physically strong body whose “chief pattern was the spiral; its deepest resource was torsion,” and which expressed movement even when in stasis.\footnote{Schwartz, “Torque,” 77. For a similar discussion, see also Jessica Burstein, \textit{Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art} (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 13.} Above all, however, this body was a perfectly slender, verging on mechanical, body. Indeed, although the edict of slenderness had its origins in the 1890s,\footnote{Stearns, \textit{Fat History}, xviii.} it was consolidated by the 1920s\footnote{Evans, \textit{Mechanical Smile}, 214.} and more deeply entrenched by the straight silhouette that showed more of the body than ever, and thereby presented the “possibility of revealing deformity and excess.”\footnote{Vigarello, \textit{Metamorphoses of Fat}, 147.}

Throughout the 1920s, American fashion media forcefully underscored this point, as for instance in a 1921 article in which \textit{Vogue} commented on the “engaging youthfulness” of the straight silhouette, describing it as flattering “if one happens to be slim,” but “absurd if one’s figure is too matronly.”\footnote{“Smart Aids to Slenderness,” \textit{Vogue} (May 1, 1921): 116.} A later article titled “The Problem of the Straight Silhouette: Fitting the Flat Back to the Full Figure” went even further, suggesting that only those whose appearance verged on “emaciated” could wear the fashionable “pencil silhouettes,”\footnote{“The Problem of the Straight Silhouette: Fitting the Flat Back to the Full Figure,” \textit{Vogue} (November 1923), 44-45.} while another claimed the fact that the straight styles “demand a new figure for many wearers goes without saying.”\footnote{“Vogue’s Eye View of the Mode,” \textit{Vogue} (January 15, 1923): 41.} Herein, the agency of dress was made manifest: The new styles were said to “demand” a new figure as the straight line became the sole precept that dictated the contours of the fashionable...
silhouette. Indeed, both in art and in fashion, the directness of modernist and industrial aesthetics encouraged the eyes to linger and to contemplate the matter of authenticity. On the body, however, the simplicity of modernist fashion only exacerbated the points at which the body deviated from the straight and narrow. While the streamlining of the silhouette may have freed the waistline, Vigarelo points out that it placed new emphasis on the hips—the region that was believed to be “the first region where obesity [took] hold.”


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Attenuated and abstracted illustrations of the slender silhouette within the pages of the mainstream fashion press, but specifically in *Vogue*, merely served to underscore this fact, but perhaps more telling were illustrations of the undressed body in various features about lingerie.

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141 This insight partially emerges from Wigley’s discussion of modernist architecture as both “naked” and “stripped clown.” The simplicity of these structures thereby serves to highlight its “machine-like smoothness.” See Wigley, *White Walls, Designers Dresses*, xviii. However, in making this claim, I also draw upon the work of modernist artists, such as Kazimir Malevich’s *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918)—one of the first color field paintings—which by pushing the limits of abstraction forced the beholder to contemplate the very act of painting itself. Alexander Rodchenko would also experiment with color field painting in his *Pure Red Color, Pure Blue Color, Pure Yellow Color* (1921). The white walls of modern architecture therefore find their corollary in the undifferentiated solid-color canvases of the constructivists, but also in the simple, streamlined dresses of the 1920s.

142 Here, Vigarelo quotes a 1900 article in the French magazine *Le Caprice* which, while easy, nevertheless anticipated the continued narrowing of the silhouette in the decades to come. See Vigarelo, *Metamorphosis of Flat*, 147. A notable 1923 *Vogue* article titled “The Problem of the Straight Silhouette: Fitting the Flat Back to the Full Figure” (November 15, 1923), one which will be discussed in chapter six, expressly discusses the problems of fitting the straight silhouette to the stout woman’s hips.
and foundations (Fig. 37, Fig. 38). Indeed, in such features—even as the necessity of proper corseting was stressed—those parts of the body visibly untouched by corseting also took on a two-dimensional, straight-line appearance, lacking so much as even the suggestion of a fleshy curve. In particular, a 1925 *Vogue* article aptly titled “The Straight and Narrow,” forcefully drove home this point (Fig. 39). Prominently featuring an illustration of twelve women with nodish Eton Craps wearing minimalist foundation garments, the article juxtaposed the hourglass curves of a bygone era with the industrial aesthetic of modernist body—noting that slenderness is a prerequisite for beauty, and “a flat back—flatter than flat—is the second.” As this article attests, the modernist body was fundamentally slender, but, perhaps more importantly, it was also youthful if verging on prepubescent in its lack of curves. Echoing Schwartz’s conceptualization of the kinesthetic of torque, in her history of American beauty ideals, Banner describes the 1920s as being especially youth-centric, and feminine sensuality was therefore expressed “not through eroticism, but through constant, vibrant movement,” which a large or elderly body belied. As the voluptuous, mature feminine ideal of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gave way to the mechanical archetype of the 1920s, fitness, by turn, became a visible

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143 “The Straight and Narrow Way,” *Vogue* (February 15, 1925): 84-85. This particular image and its repetition of the slender body also manifests what Evans has described as the modernist, mechanical aesthetic of the chorus line that was such a staple of early fashion shows. See *Evans, Mechanical Smile*, 127-129.

corruption of modernist ideals and sensibilities. With the kinesthetic of torque elevated as the corporeal ideal, Schwartz argues that by the 1920s, fatness—inextricably bound to gluttony, inefficiency and a lack of balance—had become "literally upsetting, unnecessary weight and intolerable burden."\textsuperscript{145}

In response to this new ideal, however, stoutwear design—here foregrounded as a fundamentally modernist practice in the manner it aimed to streamline the body and thereby mediate the wearer's experience of modernity—shifted in order to not only accommodate but to also construct this new kinetic ideal on the body of the stout woman. Indeed, whereas mainstream fashion media discourses were more critical of the ability of the stout woman to wear the "pencil silhouette," stoutwear manufacturers saw great potential in its flat, unbroken expanses of fabric, which were coupled with new opportunities in mass manufacturing. Sizing at the confluence of modernism and modernization, the new silhouette—simpler in nearly all respects—was also easier to produce and therefore resolved many of the problems in fit that so plagued the industry in its earlier days. As was reported in a 1922 Women's Wear article, for instance, stoutwear manufacturers were suddenly finding it easier to cut their garments on the same patterns used in the manufacture of higher priced items, while the simplicity of the styles and fabric, which were made of "poor" fabrics like simple knit jersey and lacked "gaudy trimmings," brought down the cost of production.\textsuperscript{146} Running counter to Vogue's assertion that

\textsuperscript{145} Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 80-81.

\textsuperscript{146} "Popular Price Stoutwear of Improved Type Finds a Market," Women's Wear (September 7, 1922), 20.
the new styles looked “absurd” on the matronly or stout figure, Women’s Wear remarked on the “loose and free” lines of the 1922 collections and provoked the trade journal to declare, “You need not be young, you need not be slim—to wear these two-piece models.”147 Several months later, the journal reaffirmed this point, writing in September 1922 that the new season’s collections coming from Paris were “not only suitable to the stout woman, but in fact particularly becoming.”148

For a brief moment in the early-to-mid-1920s, the fleshy corporeality of the stout body therefore proved to be largely immaterial as stoutwear designers trained their focus on the surfaces of garments in order to manifest in the stout woman the kinesthetic of torque. As in the earlier period, the imperative shared by makers of stoutwear throughout the 1920s was to make the stout body appear more slender; the difference, however, lay in the fact that the ideal and the discourse had shifted. Although the stout body was, for all intents and purposes, decidedly not modern—its weight having become an intolerable burden and fleshy abomination of the modernist bodily ideal—through the newly-streamlined stoutwear aesthetic, it nevertheless, and quite literally, came to wear the ideology of modernity. Specifically, in this later period stoutwear manufacturers evidenced a preoccupation with the design precepts of “the line” and of “optical illusions” in their design discourses. However, stoutwear manufacturers were not the only figures considering the potentialities of the new, straighter silhouette to fashion the stout body as modernist. Indeed, their work was paralleled by similar experimentations and discourses within the realms of high fashion and in the artistic avant-garde. In the 1920s, stoutwear design discourse did not only evidence the impulses of “little M” modernism described by Evans; rather, it emerged as an unlikely site of experimentation for practitioners within the field of “big M” artistic modernism, too.

4.2.2 The Science of Looking Slender

In his 1928 book, Economics of Fashion, the economist Paul Nystrom reflected on, among other things, the current state of fashion design in the United States.149 Focusing principally on the intersections of fashion and art, Nystrom drew a number of parallels between the concepts of

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147 “Accent Large Sizes to Stimulate Trade in Department for Women,” Women’s Wear (April 22, 1925), 22.
148 “Details from Openings in Paris Offer Inspiration to the Stoutwear Designers,” Women’s Wear (September 7, 1922), 17.
149 Nystrom’s volume was mostly focused on fashion as a social process and therefore stands as an attempt to reveal the underlying logic of fashion change; however, it also includes a great deal of didactic instructions about apparel aesthetics, manufacturing and design. Other chapters in the volume explored topics such as, “Utility in Relation to Fashion,” “The Haute Couture of Paris,” “Technical and Industrial Advances in the Production of Fashion Goods” and “Standardization of Sizes and Types in Apparel,” and attempted to answer meta-questions such as “What About Fashion?” John Styles places Nystrom’s book within a canon of early twentieth century fashion literature that rejected the trajectories of dress history, and which instead examined economic, sociological and psychological theories of fashion. For further discussion, see John Styles, “Dress History: Reflections on a Contested Terrain,” Fashion Theory 2, no. 4 (1998): 383-390.
rhythm, harmony and balance employed within the realms of interior design and musical composition, and similar principles he observed being applied within the field of fashion design:

A beautiful style in furniture or garment design illustrates good balance of its parts, harmony, unity and in the detail of its design may even suggest rhythm.

One of the major purposes of art as at present conceived is to make the best effect possible from the means at hand both from the standpoint of fashion and good taste. Apparel art is intended to make the wearer look as pleasing as possible. Lines, masses and colors are skillfully manipulated to create illusion or to make impressions which, without art, would be completely lost.

Perhaps the most commonly used are the line illusions. By clever use of line, short persons are made to look tall, tall persons to look shorter, and stout persons slimmer. Individual defects are minimized and good points are strengthened by the same method. Many of these illusions are described in books on design or psychology.  

In the above excerpt, Nystrom offered that one of the core tenets of “apparel art” was to “make the best effect possible,” which in the case of fashion specifically amounted to making “short persons…look tall, tall persons to look shorter,” and, quite notably, to make “stout persons slimmer.” Rather than by means of physically reshaping the body, however, Nystrom wrote that the principal tactic for meeting this end was through so-called “line illusions.” Continuing at length in the proceeding pages, Nystrom explained how these design techniques had been derived from “familiar…illustrations of squares divided by widely spaced horizontal and vertical lines” that, when applied to dress in various ways, functioned to “add height” and thereby reduce apparent width in the wearer.

By-and-large, however, Nystrom’s discussion centered less on the matter of “making tall persons look shorter,” for instance, than on techniques employed to make stout people appear more slender, and therefore on those used by stoutwear designers. Describing what he referred to as “mass illusions,” which pertained to either increasing or decreasing the apparent weight of an object, Nystrom argued that a space divided looks larger than an unbroken space, and thus a plain dress had the effect of making a “large person appear smaller.” Breaking with stoutwear design discourses so prevalent in the earlier part of the twentieth century, and which stressed the importance of severe tailoring in defining the contours of the stout body, Nystrom also posited that one effective way to achieve this was through “soft drapey [sic] materials [that] are, as a rule, more becoming to a large person than are stiffer materials which make angular lines.” Invoking similar language, he also suggested that “large persons should also avoid brilliant or very light colors as an area of black or of dark color looks smaller than an equal area of brilliant or light color.” Above all, however, Nystrom stressed the prevalence of the scientific use of lines in garment design that had a “distracting influence” from “marked irregularities in the

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152 The notion of “mass illusions” with regard to stoutwear design was also discussed in Carl N. Wernitz, “Selling the Customer Smartness Through Basic Art Principles,” *Women’s Wear* (August 23, 1924), 10.
154 Ibid., 119.
figure,” and which, he noted, were derived from “modernistic design.”

Writing during the latter years of the 1920s, and therefore with the benefit of hindsight, Nystrom had indeed picked up on a prominent ideological current that underpinned stoutwear design discourse in the 1920s, and which notably tapped into the rhetoric and ideals of science and of the artistic avant-garde, and specifically the precepts of optical illusion. The preoccupation with creating the illusion of slenderness—rather than with physically reshaping and compressing the flesh in the vein of creating a firm foundation as the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers had advocated in the previous decade—cropped up in numerous articles discussing stoutwear design in the 1920s as, for instance, in an article titled “The Short Taller—the Large Smaller, Aowved Aim of Special Stout Wear” that ran in a 1922 edition of the Dry Goods Economist. Noting how designers and manufacturers were increasingly employing design features like knife pleats, side panels, uneven hem effects, close-fitting sleeves and a tendency to “exaggerate the waistline,” the trade journal deemed their efforts to “create the illusion of height and slimness to the stout form” largely successful. Elsewhere in the professional media, it was said that the design of stoutwear was “governed to a great extent by the necessity of creating an illusion of slenderness” (emphasis added), which, echoing the Dry Goods Economist, was said to be achieved through “the low waistline, uneven hem effect and complicated sleeve features” that also happened to adhere to the prevailing mode.

A 1926 Women's Wear feature titled “The Selling Points of Your Merchandise” visualized these design discourses in a series of sketches that highlighted the specific features that fulfilled the stout woman's “desire to attain the appearance of slenderness” (Fig. 40). Emphasizing the

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155 Ibid.
156 “The Short Taller—the Large Smaller, Aowved Aim of Special Stout Wear,” Dry Goods Economist (March 11, 1922), 121.
157 “Style Features are Incorporated in Stoutwear,” Women’s Wear (July 5, 1922), 28.
importance of creating visual interest near the waistline, for example, the feature explained how the many of the pictured garments "place the chief details of construction and trimming near the center of the figure, keeping the outlines subdued and devoid of emphasis so as to create an impression of slenderness." Speaking specifically about a two-piece ensemble comprised of a straight skirt and flowing tunic with attached scarf (Fig. 5 in the original article), the piece stressed the slenderning effect of strategically placed decorative elements:

Striking detail, either similar or sharply contrasting in character, placed at extreme ends of a figure lead the eye quickly from top to bottom, giving, because of the uninterrupted sweep, an impression of greater height. Speaking in similar terms about how design elements could be employed to keep the eye moving around the figure—and thereby not lingering on an errant curve or bulge—it described the horizontal stripes on another ensemble (Fig. 7 in the original article) as causing the eye to be "led rhythmically up and down" and "crosswise...as the eye travels from stripe to stripe" to again exaggerate the wearer's apparent height and reduce her overall width.

Similar optical effects were elevated in an August 1922 Women's Wear feature that celebrated the diversity of the new stoutwear offerings while at the same time stressing the effectiveness of straight lines to "break up the width [of the stout woman's] back" and circular arm treatments that "carry the eye across instead of up and down...[causing] the eye to waver and suggest confusion to the beholder" (Fig. 41). Likewise—and in one of the very few extant photographic depictions of stout dresses purported to have been

Figure 4: Women's Wear (August 3, 1922), 23.

155 Ibid.
156 Ibid.
designed on scientific lines—in December 1922, the American Chic & Sail Review, presented some of the new “youthful” stoutwear dresses, such as a “sports frock,” designed by I. Heller & Co. (a member of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers) that featured an “adroit arrangement of stripes” (Fig 42). While stripes were a common theme within these discourses, there was little consensus about which optical illusions or which arrangement of stripes were most successful in the creation of a slender appearance with some articles, for instance, advocating for horizontal stripes even as others suggested that vertical stripes were the most slenderizing.

Indeed, and as one article aptly, but somewhat contradictorily put it, “There is no definite set of rules to govern the designing of dresses for the stout woman,” while claiming later, “Of course the natural aim of the designer of stout dresses is the slenderizing silhouette.”

Even as the slenderizing effects of these various design features were detailed at great length throughout the professional media, rarely were these discussions embedded within a larger discourse pertaining to the science behind the optical illusions. A notable exception, however, came in the form of a twelve-part series of instructive articles titled “Selling the Customer Smartness Through Basic Art Principles,” written by Carl N. Weratz, an instructor at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts and published in Women’s Wear between June and September 1924. In the series’ opening article, Weratz put forth the notion that lines, regardless of what they may do in making a dress well fitted, fashionable, properly cut or practically constructed, have an effect on our seeing organ (our eyes) which is transmitted to our minds, giving us—regardless of their special meaning a pleasant sensation or an unpleasant one.

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100 Ibid.

The stated aim of the twelve-part series was to delimit the so-called "psychology of line," and to unravel the popular notion that there was a single "good line" upon which all dresses should be built.104 Rather, Wemitz, like his contemporaries, was a proponent of the idea that dresses—especially for the stout—should be designed with the aim of creating a "pleasant sensation," rather than with fashion in mind. While he discussed the precept of dressing well in more universal terms in the first few articles of the series, in the fifth and sixth installments, Wemitz went into greater detail about the psychological principles underlying what made a line "good" versus what made a line "bad." In a diagram that featured prominently in the fifth article titled "Adapting a Model to Different Figures," Wemitz introduced an effect, conceived within the field of Gestalt Psychology known as the Müller-Lyer illusion,105 which explained how line segments of equal length can be made to look shorter or longer depending upon which way the arrowheads appearing at either end of the line segment are facing (Fig. 43). Within the realm of fashion, he argued that this principle could be fruitfully applied to "adapt selected models to suit abnormal figures."106 In the following week's feature, Wemitz further argued that the illusion, while little understood, had long been used by dressmakers to adapt dresses for "normal figures," but could specifically "do much for the heavy figure to add apparent height and correct unbecoming proportions."107 Continuing, Wemitz further speculated on what made the stout

104 Ibid.

105 The Müller-Lyer illusion dates to 1889 and is named after the psychologist who discovered it. For further discussion about the history of the illusion and the debates surrounding it, see Marjory Bates, "A Study of the Müller-Lyer Illusion, with Special Reference to Paradoxical Movement and the Effect of Attitude," The American Journal of Psychology 34.1 (January 1923), 46-72.


figure so “unbecoming,” describing it as an abomination of “artistic” lines:

What we call the over-heavy figure is much admired by some nations. We find such a figure artistically undesirable, because its lines are obvious — unquestionably bulging and round. To correct this, it is necessary to have the uprightness and strength of the lines rather obvious in a dress for this figure. The correct lines of a dress should then be more noticeable than the artless lines of the figure. A single wide, straight line is perhaps too obvious rather than on the side of subtlety. Be sure, above all else, not to let the dress of the fat woman be tight.108

In an accompanying illustration (Fig. 44), Wernitz showed how straight, long and “strong” lines when applied to a stout woman’s dress (Fig. G in the original article) bore the capacity to “correct the unpleasant visible effect of her sagging tissues.”

Throughout the series, Wernitz vividly illustrated how fatness had come to be regarded as an abomination of modernity and, specifically, of the modernist body. This manifested in the visceral language he used to describe, on the one hand, dress as an expression of the modernist desire to intervene on the body and, on the other, the fleshy imperfection of the fat body.109 If artistic lines were “straight” and “strong,” the fat, female body, on the other hand, was deemed “sagging” and “unbalanced” in Wernitz’s discourse. In spite of the desultory language with which he spoke about the fat woman’s body, however, Wernitz offered her a minor concession, arguing that “the artistic difference between the normal, fat and thin figures, is not entirely a matter of size,” but rather could at least partially be attributed to the careless application of “weak” lines in

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108 Ibid.

109 In a later installment, Wernitz suggested that the fat woman was a product of “prosperity, automobiles and increased eating” in the postwar period. See Carl N. Wernitz, “Selling the Customer Smartness Through Basic Art Principles: No. 10. Suiting the Heavy Figure by Mass Psychology,” Women’s Wear (August 23, 1924), 10. For further discussion about how the stout women was discursively constructed as a victim of modernization within the fashion media, see chapter six.
her dress. By referring to the fat body as "artistically undesirable," Wernitz did not, however, speak to an eternal or absolute conception of beauty—even has he furthered the notion that there was a "correct" way to design dresses—but rather to the modernist sensibilities of mechanical simplicity, straightness and flatness. Although Wernitz, in the detail with which he investigated the applicability of optical theories to contemporary dress design, stood alone amongst those speaking about optical illusions within the practice of stoutwear design, the modernist tenor of stoutwear design discourse was not, however, unique. Indeed, optical theories spilled over into advice discourses, too.

This crossover is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the style guide, Dress and Look Slender (1924)—a text that will be discussed at greater length and within the context of advice literature

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171 Wernitz discussion was, however, preceded by Albert Malins own preoccupation with optical illusions. Rather than deriving these ideas from the field of Gestalt psychology, however, Malins claimed to have worked alongside scientists at the University of Iowa who were conducting independent experiments into the tendency for "the human eye to overestimate the height of everything it sees." See Albert Malins, "How Science Is Helping 'Stout' People to Look Less 'Stout,'" Richmond Times-Dispatch (April 9, 1916), 33; Albert Malins, "Making 'Stout' People Look Less 'Stout,'" Richmond Times-Dispatch (April 16, 1916), 47. Malins theories of color and would resurface several years later when a trade journal reported on the enduring relevance of his approach, and would even reproduce many of the same illustrations, diagrams and charts. See "Sizes 38 and Up—Lane Bryant's Specialties for Stout Women," Dry Goods Merchants Trade Journal (January 1920), 26-28.
at large in chapter seven—written by the home economist Jane Warren Wells, who opened her popular volume with the sentiment,

There is magic in the principles of “optical illusion” and rightly applied it is a kind of magic that one can make a permanent reality. But magic is subtle. It requires skill, watchfulness and a close abiding to the rules if every “trick” is to be a success.\textsuperscript{122}

In the ensuing pages, Wells explained the subtleties of the precept of dressing to look slender without engaging in a physical reduction of the flesh. Hence, Wells framed the practice as a distinctly modern one that permitted the stout woman to know how to make “every dress, every coat, every hat... give height instead of width, youth instead of matronliness [i.e., slenderness and grace instead of heaviness]” (emphasis in original), thereby liberating her from the oftentimes lacking options in Stoutwear departments.\textsuperscript{123}

In terms perhaps more lucid and clear than those of either Nystrom or Wernitz, Wells described how four different optical illusions, each of which was derived from the Gestalt school, could be applied to create the straight line silhouette demanded of stout women within fashion discourse—a practice which she juxtaposed with that of just wearing garments built on straight lines. As a means of illuminating this idea, Wells set up a fictional scenario in which a

\textsuperscript{122} Jane Warren Wells, \textit{Dress and Look Slender} (Scarsdale: Personal Arts Company, 1924), iii.

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid. 17.
Figure 47: Ponzo Illusion in in Jane Warren Wells’ Dress and Look Slender (1924), 30-31.

distraught stout woman expressed her frustrations with not being able to achieve a slender appearance, writing.

"I cannot understand why I look so short and dumpy," she wails despairingly. "My dress is made on perfectly straight up-and-down lines and yet I look fatter than ever." Of course she does, because instead of extending the straight-up-and-down line by a small upturned hat or some sort and an unobtrusive skirt hem, she has broken the line top and bottom and there by shortened her appearance.174

Reproducing the Müller-Lyer illusion, which Wernz had also discussed in Women’s Wear, Wells demonstrated how "a straight line effect can be either accentuated or shortened by the lines that run out from it," which in the illustration manifested in the addition of a taller hat and the application of geometric line details on the dress itself that quite literally reproduced the illusion (Fig. 45). Later in the text, Wells showed the similarly slenderning effects of the Hering Illusion, invented by the psychologist Ewald Hering in 1861 and which demonstrated how straight, vertical lines can be made to bulge outwards when placed on a background of lines radiating outward (Fig. 46); the Ponzo Illusion created by Mario Ponzo in 1911, which demonstrated how a central line could be made to look significantly longer when flanked by longer parallel lines (Fig. 47); and the Poggendorff Illusion, invented by Johann Poggendorff in 1860, and which showed how an expanse or line may be made to appear broken up by bisecting it with vertical

lines (Fig. 48). Within each of these illustrations, the basic silhouette of the dress changes very little; rather, Wells, not unlike her contemporaries, effectively viewed the surface of the fashionably tubular silhouette—made all the more expansive by the stout woman’s non-normative proportions—as a blank canvas, ripe with potential to transform the frame without resorting to more drastic means. Although she did not refer to any of these illusions by name and even as they were couched in the discourse of fashion, Wells exhibited a mastery of these concepts and thereby positioned herself as a translator of sophisticated theories into layman’s terms—a practice which Charlotte Nicklas has pointed out was prevalent even in mid-nineteenth century fashion advice that framed color theory as essential knowledge for fashioning appropriate appearances, and which itself was deemed only one branch of a larger body of scientific knowledge women were expected to possess in order to ensure the proper functioning of the domestic sphere. ¹⁰ Even beyond the remit of couture, however, and, somewhat surprisingly, amongst artists and haute couturiers, the tubular, straight-line dress proved to be an enticing canvas to engage in further experimentation in visual perception—a space in which art, fashion and science collided to solve the modernist problem of the stout body.

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4.2.3 Artistic Interventions on the Stout Body

Although Nystrom’s, Werntz’s and Wells’ respective focuses were mainly on how optical illusions could be employed to make the body appear more slender, within the wider field of fashion, this modernist impulse was more generally characterized by what Wilson has described as a preoccupation with making the invisible logic of science visible by investigating the nature “of reality and perception,” as well as by “its attempts to come to grips with the nature of human experience in a mechanized, ‘unnatural’ world.” Stoutwear manufacturers’ preoccupation with optical illusions were a clear manifestation of this impulse in their borrowing of optical theories from the field of Gestalt Psychology. Born from a growing interest in the laws of perception amongst scholars working in the adjacent fields of physics, psychology and philosophy in mid-nineteenth century Europe, the underlying concern of the German school of Gestalt psychology was the question, “How do we see?”—a question which sought to probe the relationship between the eye, as an organ, and the cognitive functioning of the brain. Although a number of paradigms were conceived to answer this complicated question, the Gestalt psychologists departed from other schools of thought in their interest in the individual components of perception, and the idea that the brain tends to group discrete elements (i.e. dots, lines, voids, etc.) in order to create a complete picture. The platitude, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts”—a poor translation of the Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka’s sentiment, “The whole is other than the sum of its parts”—formed the cornerstone of their practice. In order visualize their theories, the Gestalt psychologists conceived a number of optical illusions such as the aforementioned Müller-Lyer illusion, which came to be well known not only in Europe but also in the United States where a number of prominent members of the school had sought asylum in the 1920s. Even beyond the remit of psychology, their theories proved highly impactful—inspiring early modernists like Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, and undergirding modernist movements like De Stijl.

Working somewhat closer to the field of fashion, Sonia Delaunay’s modernist robes and dresses expressed a similar preoccupation with the Gestalt school’s theories of perception. In applying the principles of Simultaneism to fashion, the Ukrainian-born French artist—not unlike stoutwear manufacturers during this period—was expressly uninterested in the cut of garments and instead focused on how color and texture could work together to destroy the illusion of a

180 Although it is difficult to trace how and to what extent early modernists were actively engaging with Gestalt psychology, van Campen has identified clear currents between the two movements, arguing that “early abstract art and experimental Gestalt psychology share a common history. The discussed theories of perception were not entirely new. Although revolutionary within their disciplines of the visual arts and experimental psychology, the experiments with visual principles were in fact rooted in the Kunsthissenschaft (science of art) in the late nineteenth century.” See Crétien van Campen, “Early Abstract Art and Experimental Gestalt Psychology,” *Leonardo* 30, no. 2 (1997), 135.
well-defined silhouette. As Craik further explains, “She then took the surface of the fabric and the way in which it draped the body as a canvas on which she designed unique body paintings.” For her, a dress was little more than a wearable painting animated by the kinetic movements of the body—the contrasts of color used to “fuse the wearer’s body with the dress.” As in her paintings in which she fractured shapes into cubist planes of color that permitted multiple views of an object simultaneously, in her dresses and robes, Delaunay sought to create unity between the disparate planes of the body and those of the garment to create a single, uniform impression.

For members of the Russian, German and French avant-garde, dress was not just a fashionable covering for the body; rather they believed in the potential for clothing to be a catalyst for social change and upheaval—a conduit or mediator of modernity, so to speak—rather than just a reflection of it. Just as the body figured centrally in the changes that were occurring within Western culture at large, however, so too did the body figure centrally in their proposals. Indeed, a defining characteristic of the sartorial experimentations of artist-designers like Sonia Delaunay was the manner in which straight-cut dresses that “liberated” the body, and which had their roots in earlier dress reform proposals, were treated as blank canvas upon which they could explore the relationships between silhouette, color and line in their efforts to create harmony between dress, the body and its environment. Although these proposals took many forms, they nevertheless bore striking similarities with the period’s stoutwear design discourses—namely in their preoccupation with the surface of garments and with creating the impression of a body pulsating with kinetic energy—while more broadly sharing a pronounced rejection of fashion’s tendency to treat surface decoration as subservient to silhouette. This may in no small way be attributed to their shared interest in Gestalt psychology. Indeed, as Radu Stern has pointed out, a number of figures within the European avant-garde, including one of Kandinsky’s students, Sofia Beliaeva-Ekzempiarskaia, “tried to apply the laws of perception formulated by Gestalt psychology to optically correct a body’s shortcomings.”

Although it is difficult to trace the seemingly unlikely channels through which these high-minded ideals emerging from the European avant-garde came to infiltrate the design discourses

181 Stern, Against Fashion, 65. Steele also notes how Delaunay perceived her garments as being contemporary in silhouette alone. See also Steele, Paris Fashion, 230; Jennifer Craik, Face of Fashion, 2.

182 Craik, Face of Fashion, 2.

183 Stern, Against Fashion, 68. Much like Delaunay, the Russian Constructivist designer Nadezhda Lamanova was also interested in the relationship between the body and dress. Upholding the belief that even the most minor details were essential to the whole, Lamanova espoused the idea that, when working on a garment, “one has to keep in mind the integrity of the general project” in order to create harmony between the discrete parts of the garment and the “geometric planes” of the body. See Nadezhda Lamanova, “Concerning Contemporary Dress” (“O svremenem kostiume”) in Radu Stern, Against Fashion: Clothing as Art, 1850-1930 (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 174-177.

184 Evans explains how Delaunay’s partner, Robert Delaunay applied the theories of Simultaneism in his modernist painting La Ville de Paris, which like a three-way mirror permitted a simultaneous view of the body. Although Sonia Delaunay was not known for her figurative art, the same principles apply to her abstractions. See Evans, Mechanical Smile, 46-47.


186 Stern, Against Fashion, 58.
of American stoutwear manufacturers, Richard Martin has helpfully argued that when thinking about the parallels between modernism and fashion during this period, which are so visibly and obviously apparent, if impossible to pin down, it is permissible to view this relationship as “openly and as broadly applicable,” for it was “almost inevitable that the planes, cylinders, mutable optics and dynamic motion of [modern] art would engage fashion.” More specifically, Martin contends that it was not so much a specific and codified set of modernist principles or aesthetics that changed the world of fashion in the early twentieth century, but rather a more transient “culture” of modernism, and explicitly of Cubism, that infiltrated all facets of visual culture. Steele echoes this point when she explains how, not unlike “the new painting, the new music and the new literature,” fashion during the 1920s was inevitably bound to undergo its own “internal stylistic revolution.” Namely, it would be the modernist interest in visual perception, which was itself indebted to the Gestalt psychology, that trickled down to the manufacture of everyday dress, and specifically, to the practice of designing slenderizing dresses. Indeed, as Martin explains, the greatest contribution modernism made to fashion was its disintegration of the “obdurate silhouette” into something more visibly modern, and which allowed for “multiple readings and ambiguities” both of garments and of the body—a notion which clearly resonated with stoutwear manufacturers’ preoccupation with effecting the appearance of slenderness on the stout frame.

At the same time, however, it may be argued that the intense interest in perception that manifested in the work of the Impressionists, Cubists and Surrealists that trickled down to fashion, was less of an inevitability, as Martin suggests, than it was a response to a massive reorganization of knowledge that occurred beginning in the nineteenth century. Wilson, for instance, describes how new discoveries in the natural sciences revealed the underlying logic of the field of vision and showed how “the visible world is the result of invisible energy or unseen chemical combinations.” Even early experimentations in chronophotography by Muybridge and Marey revealed that human and animal locomotion was mechanized and rational, but also highly abstract. This evolution in scientific discourse and visual literacy had ramifications across culture, but its effects could very clearly be glimpsed in the fine arts as well as in fashion. Indeed, as Jonathan Crary writes, in many ways, “art and science were both part of a

187 Martin, Cubism and Fashion, 11.
188 Ibid., 16.
189 Steele, Paris Fashion, 232.
190 Martin, Cubism and Fashion, 16.
191 Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 62.
192 Evans, Mechanical Smile, 23–24.
193 For instance, Michel Eugène Chevreul's groundbreaking work on the logic of color harmony was in no uncertain terms a precondition for the Impressionist movement, while Ogden N. Rood's Modern Chromatics (1879) formed the theoretical basis for the Neo-Impressionist work of Georges Seurat and Paul Signac. See Faber Birren, “Color Perception in Art: Beyond the Eye to the Brain,” Leonardo 9.2 (1976), 106.
single interlocking field of knowledge and practice.” To this list, however, we might also add fashion.

Although there are multiple sites within the field of fashion during this period in which the close associations between art and science could be observed, stoutwear is one, somewhat improbable, site in which these ideals that were often limited to mere sketches and prototypes manifested at the level of everyday dress. Even at a more conceptual level, however, the potential for fashion to be utilized to specifically bring the fat, female body more in line with the modernist body was not entirely lost on the artistic avant-garde. Indeed, as the Russian Constructivist Nadezhda Lamanova explained in her 1923 essay, “Concerning Contemporary Dress,”

It was thought possible, for example, to fight a massive figure by lacing it tightly in a corset or in narrow clothes; in fact, this had the opposite effect, emphasizing even more the lack of proportion between the parts. The fight against a corpulent body has to take a different direction; a silhouette cannot be slimmed except by hiding disproportions, breaking them into planes of a different shape.

Similarly, the painter Leon Bakst—whose experimentations in fashion and dress were only limited to stage costumes, but which were suffused into mainstream fashion discourse in multiple sites by way of a series of public lectures in 1923 that detailed his theories of color harmony and line illusions—wrote in a Vogue article about how he had come to appreciate the more “serious ramifications” of the “art of costuming,” and specifically the ability of dress to “hide imperfections” without “correcting the incorrigible.” In an illustration that accompanied the editorial—and which shared much in common with images of slenderizing stoutwear that appeared within the professional media and which have already been discussed—Baskt demonstrated this notion through side-by-side illustrations that showed the slimming effects of vertical lines and the “disastrous” effect of horizontal ones on the stout body (Fig. 49), which had been printed earlier in the pages of Women’s Wear (Fig. 50). Bakst proffered similar advice during lectures in Toronto in New York that same year, arguing in one that women should “correct what [is] correctable but do not touch anything that is not correctable,” and in another, offering the platitude, “What one cannot see, one imagines to be beautiful.”

Working more explicitly within the field of fashion, the so-called “kinetic designs” of the French couturier Lucien Lelong were another expression of this modernist design ethos, which had somewhat unlikely connections to stoutwear design discourse. Indeed, as Women’s Wear reported in August 1925, Lelong had come to be considered a disciple of what was described as the “modern school” of haute couture due to the fact that he was an active exponent “of the

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195 Lamanova, “Concerning Contemporary Dress,” 175.

196 Leon Bakst, “A Famous Artist Analyses the Slim Silhouette,” Vogue (December 1, 1923), 9.

197 “Color and Costume Theme of Bakst Lecture in Toronto,” Women’s Wear (March 8, 1923), 2.

present era of high powered motor cars, outdoor sports and informal social creeds," which culminated in his "emancipatory" designs. A week later, and on the occasion of the first presentation of his kinetic designs in Paris, Women's Wear reported that Lelong's new dresses embodied "the fundamental spirit of modern times" and rejected the old ways of designing garments "statically." In his own words, Lelong described his new collection in the following manner:

Every model in the collection before you is a kinetic design. Every one is a study in movement....

We have discarded, thrown away, simplified, altered, tried this and that device, until each has represented the best we could do with that particular theme.

And away with the idea of the future movement of the gown—always visualizing it when its future wearer is in motion.

In practice, and in spite of his rather inflated claims about the innovativeness of his design practice, Evans notes that Lelong's designs largely derived from old dressmaking principles, such as gathers and pleats set into straight skirts to create movement, and which many designers

201 Ibid., 2.
employed that year as dress aesthetics veered away from the severe lines upon which they had been built in previous seasons. Although much of Lelong’s rhetoric amounted to little more than clever marketing spin, Evans notes that his work is notable for the manner in which it attempted to make visible the “abstract concepts of movement and modernity in the 1920s, not unlike how Gestalt psychologists aimed to resolve the science of perception.”

Lelong’s imperative to make the tenets of modernism visible perhaps manifested most clearly, and somewhat surprisingly, in his own discussion of the suitability of his designs for stout women. In speaking with Women’s Wear about the sartorial plight of the stout woman—an exceedingly rare instance of introspection emerging from the rarefied world of Parisian fashion, which otherwise ignored the stout consumer—Lelong explained:

Last season I emphasized the point that the present silhouette is particularly well adapted to the stout figure. Kinetic design has only enhanced this quality of the modern line to impart slenderness and the look of youth to its wearer. I feel sure that the woman whose figure is not so youthful as it once was will find consolation when she puts on these gowns.

Lelong was again quoted in Women’s Wear’s “Styles for Larger Women” section in October 1925, wherein the couturier spoke in more detail about which features of his designs were specifically becoming on the stout woman, suggesting, for instance, that “by commencing at a point slightly above the normal waistline in the front, gradually flaring until the hemline fullness is contrived... the effect of a gradual circular flare” is created on the wearer. While elsewhere in the fashion media, Lelong spoke about the suitability of his kinetic designs for the circumstances and

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\(^{206}\) Evans, Mechanical Smile, 133.

\(^{207}\) Ibid., 134.

\(^{204}\) “Lucien Long Declares,” 2.

\(^{205}\) “Lelong Tamps His Models Suitable to Mature Styling,” Women’s Wear (October 26, 1925), 32.
rhythms of modern life, in the above quotations Lelong explicitly attests to the power of the fashionable silhouette to “ impart slenderness and the look of youth to its wearer”—qualities that were synonymous with the construct of the modernist body. Emerging from the discourse of “mathematics, logic and art,” or what Lelong himself declared “logic in design,” the rhetoric of kinetic design was said to bear in it the capacity to imbue not only garments, but also the wearer’s figure “with the characteristic dynamism of the age.”

In spite of the appeal of Lelong’s rhetoric, however, Evans points out that his designs were, in actuality, more in keeping with the present mode promoted during these years by both Vionnet and Doucet, among others. Indeed, as has already been discussed in the introduction to his section, the general consensus was that the looser, sportswear-inspired mode of the early-to-mid-1920s, which, quite notably, was cut generously around the waistline to permit “absolute freedom of movement,” also happened to do a better job of concealing excess flesh than the more waist-conscious silhouettes popular in previous years. This fact, however, did not stop stoutwear manufacturers and retailers from invoking the highbrow discourses modernism to market their wares as new and innovative, nor did it deter modernist artists and fashion designers—from Leon Bakst, to Nadezhda Lamanova, to Lucien Lelong—from explicitly framing the stout body as a site of modernist speculation and experimentation. Indeed, in the hands of these designers, the discourses of modernism became potent rhetorical tools that enabled them to secure their positions as design innovators.

4.3 Conclusions

Although the discourses of stoutwear design were markedly different in the periods spanning 1915-1922 and 1922-1930—with the former notably being informed by and overlapping the discourses and ideals of architecture and the latter those of Gestalt psychology and artistic modernism—they shared an impulse to make the stout body appear more slender in what may be deemed a “slenderness imperative” of stoutwear design discourse (a concept that I will develop more in the conclusion to the dissertation). Although the silhouette of the earlier period was defined by the feminine hourglass, the latter drew upon the straight lines of modernist art and architecture. What was common to both periods, however, was the fact that each eschewed fashion as frivolous, and thereby instead elevated a pared-down aesthetic with the marked goal of making the body appear smaller. By turn, decorative elements came to be regarded as purely functional, and were thereby imbued with what Negrin has defined as “significant content” in a

206 “Lelong Considers Logic in Design for Present Modes,” Women’s Wear (August 16, 1926), 6. “Lelong Ends Study of Business Here,” Women’s Wear (December 5, 1925), 16, 22. For further discussion, see also Evans, Mechanical Smile, 133-134.


208 Lucien Lelong double-page advertisement, Vogue (France) (August 1, 1925, xxvi-xxvii, quoted in Evans, Mechanical Smile, 132 n. 101.

209 Evans, Mechanical Smile, 133.

210 “Sports Theme Rules Today, Says Lelong,” Women’s Wear (October 14, 1925), 1.
modernist rejection of ornamentation. Within this context, lines, pleats, patterns, gussets and trimmings—or all the “frills and furbelows” of fashion design, to borrow Albert Malsin’s phrasing—were not placed on dresses to create a pleasing or fashionable effect. Rather, in the hands of stoutwear manufacturers—and, to a lesser extent, artist-designers like Leon Bakst and Lucien Lelong—they were regarded as tools and technologies to confuse the eye and to challenge the laws of perception, or to keep the eyes moving around the topographies of the body so as to distract from fleshy bulges or errant curves, and, in the latter period, to animate the body with the kinesthetic of torque.

Indeed, although the construct of the stout body was an abomination of modernist ideals, and specifically that of the modernist body, modernist design was nevertheless regarded as a powerfully effective way to correct the frame. While the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers and, to a lesser extent, Albert Malsin had, in the earlier period, advocated for a physical reshaping of the stout body (through corseting, etc.) to bring it more in line with the corporeal ideal, stoutwear design discourse was largely and decidedly modernist. As I have shown throughout this chapter, in the hands of manufacturers, a straight-line dress—with its large expanses of fabric—was not just a way to cover up and conceal fat flesh; it was quite literally a blank canvas upon which the laws of perception could be tested in an effort to actually give the appearance of the flesh transformed. Returning to a quote from Entwistle with which I opened this chapter, stoutwear manufacturers engaged in a delicate balancing act by both tapping into and negating the mandates of fashion, which largely manifested in adapting the silhouette to make the fat, female body “appropriate, acceptable [and] indeed respectable” within the socio-historical context of early twentieth century America. Indeed, the design discourse of stoutwear ultimately reflected the values of appropriate and fashionable femininity in each era. Phrased somewhat differently, as Wigley has written in regard to architecture, the “delicate layer” of white paint that was so characteristic of modernist architecture held “together a vulnerable conceptual structure that starts to be exposed when the layer cracks or flakes.” Much the same could be said of stoutwear, which was highly vulnerable to the rapid changes in fashionable styles in the early twentieth century. When the fashionable silhouette would shift, the high-minded discourse of stoutwear design would, by turn, show its cracks.

As the teens bled into the twenties, for instance, the conservative appearance of stoutwear superseded its capacities to slenderize. Stoutwear had itself become a design cliché, known for its conservative lines and drab color schemes. Around 1922, however, fashion suddenly became more accommodating of the stout body—the straight lines and simple construction of the tubular silhouette having proved to be an effective way to create a slender, streamlined appearance, even on larger bodies. Indeed, in this later period, the rupture of the ideal silhouette and its straightening out into a more forgiving shape permitted more space, both literally and figuratively, for the stout body in fashion. With the turning over of a new decade, however, and as the tubular silhouette was traded for the clinging bias cut of the 1930s, the body

212 Entwistle, Fashioned Body, 7.
213 Wigley, White Walls, Designer Dresses, xviii.
was suddenly more on display and as a result, the stout woman found herself out of fashion once again. Indeed, as one stoutwear manufacturer remarked to Women’s Wear in 1930, the industry had begun to “atrophy” as shifting beauty ideals mandated that it was no longer “fashionable to be fat,” when in reality it had just been easier in previous years to conceal the defects of the frame underneath the generously-cut silhouettes of the 1920s. Even as the retailer argued that this was due to the “swift pace of present day existence” and to the growing prevalence of gymnasiums, “Hollywood diets” and women’s sporting clubs, he nevertheless placed most of the blame at the feet of fashion designers who had formerly catered to stout women in the 1920s, but had increasingly begun to “condemn curves.” Although stoutwear manufacturers variously derided and dismissed fashion as “trivial” and as unbecoming for stout women within their design discourses, the industry was not immune to the caprices of fashion—a fact which ultimately signaled its demise in the 1930s.

The design discourses of stoutwear, however, did not exist in or emerge from a vacuum. Rather, they were bolstered by a network of advertisers and retailers who, through marketing materials and person-to-person interactions, convinced the stout consumer of the transformative capacities of stoutwear. Indeed, given the largely conservative or at least unremarkable appearance of most stoutwear garments, which did not forthrightly reveal the scientific ideals that underpinned their making, the practice of selling, broadly defined, was a necessary addendum to stoutwear design discourse—a notion that will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter Five — Selling Stoutwear

Every city of any size has its freak fat lady, and I was just hoping that the fattest woman in Buffalo would walk into the department. Well, she did. She must have weighed 400 pounds, and looked hopeless and despondent of ever getting anything ready made to fit. All the customers and shoppers in the department paused and watched her, curious to see whether we could give her anything to fit.

It just happened that we had two smart models in her size, which we had purchased as “freak” sizes for just such a call as this. Both them fitted her well, and the poor girl was so delighted she actually embrace me and almost wept upon my neck. No one but a stout woman can understand the humiliation and discouragement which she must have undergone in her efforts to get clothes to fit her.

(Women’s Wear, March 1920)

The stout woman is acutely sensitive about her inability to find her fit in ordinary-sized garments. This sensitiveness renders her unable to adequately help herself in obtaining garments which will fit. She expects that the saleswoman will attend to that, with the least embarrassment to the customer.

(The American Cloak and Suit Review, November 1922)

The above quotations evidence two sides of the same problem. In the former, Susy Collins Miller of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers explains to Women’s Wear the importance of carrying what she deems “freak” sizes—or, garments with a fifty-six-inch bust and larger—in a stoutwear department for the customer of extreme proportions. In making her case, Miller recounts a story about confronting a woman who was so large that both the salespeople and other customers took pause and stared when she walked into a major department store in Buffalo, New York. Struck by her size, they were incredulous that she might be able to purchase garments off-the-rack. Much like the monstrous figures in the illustration that accompanied the article “How Many Fat Women in Your Town?” (see Fig. 3), here the stout woman stands in stark contraposition to both the other patrons and to the rationalized architecture of the department store—her body a physical manifestation of disorder and of her inability to conform to normative beauty and body ideals. In spite of a dearth of suitable sizes, however, Miller was nevertheless able to find “two smart models in her size.” Although Miller is an unreliable source—the story, if true, likely hyperbolized in order to make an emotional appeal to the readers of Women’s Wear about the benefits and moral satisfactions of extending their size ranges—the story nevertheless exposes a perspective that is rarely accounted for in the pages of the trade journal: that of the stout woman and her vulnerability.

1 “Even the ‘Freaks’ Want to Look Nifty,” Women’s Wear (March 26, 1920), 51.
2 Virginia M. Richards, “Selling Stoutwear is a Science in Itself,” American Cloak and Suit Review (November 1922), 94.
The second quotation expands on this. As Virginia Richards, formerly of Lane Bryant, told *The American Cloak and Suit Review*, in her years of catering to the stout trade, she had come to believe that attending to the stout consumer was “nothing short of a science.” Echoing the retail experience of the “four-hundred-pound” stout woman described in the first quotation, Richards underscores the stout woman’s ineptitude as a consumer, explaining how she had grown so sensitive to her non-normative proportions that she lacked the ability to “help herself,” and therefore had to be treated by salespeople with the utmost care—a practice that verged on being a “science.” Taken together, both quotations suggest a major preoccupation of stoutwear retailers and advertisers: beyond her non-normative size and the attendant difficulties in fitting garments to her body, the stout woman, unlike her standard-size counterpart, was believed to be psychologically compromised as well. The questions of how to best handle her, but also of how to understand how she came to be this way, were therefore persistent in industry discourse.

This chapter examines how the discourse of stoutwear was systematically applied to the practice of “selling stoutwear” through advertising, marketing and retail strategy. Progressing in three stages, the chapter first situates the stout woman within the broader context of the emerging consumer culture in early twentieth century America—and namely within the context of the growing interest in consumer psychology—by showing how, within fashion media discourses, she was constructed as emotionally fragile and psychologically stunted. Much as in the discourses around the practice of sizing and grading stoutwear discussed in the previous chapter, within these spaces, the stout woman was herself deemed a “problem” in need of solving—or as one commentator remarked, she was an “interesting” object of “psychological study.” Building upon this foundation, the first section also discusses the etymology of the term “stout” and how it was reluctantly chosen as the preferred adjective for describing women of larger sizes. The second then explores how these ideas manifested visually through an analysis of how the stout woman was depicted within stoutwear advertisements and editorial content. The third and final section further considers how, once inside, she was attended to in dedicated stoutwear departments. A key discussion within this section will be how and why stoutwear departments came to be segregated from standard-size lines within retail spaces in the first place. Taken together, the three sections that comprise this chapter will demonstrate how discourse bled into actual fashion practices in the selling of stoutwear and in the construction of the “ideal” stout consumer.

### 5.1 Fitting the Mind

In a 1922 interview with the *American Cloak and Suit Review*, Charles May of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers explained to the trade journal that “fitting the body” of the stout woman was but one half of the retailer’s job—and perhaps the easier half. “Fitting her mind,” May went on to argue, “is an entirely different part of the task…. The woman must be studied
carefully and the selling must be done on something which almost approaches a scientific scale.”

Echoing the quotations from Miller and Richard with which I opened this chapter, there is a sense in May's appeal that the stout woman, in spite of the advances that were being made in the stoutwear sector, was still something of an “unknown” to retailers, manufacturers and buyers. As May explained,

I cannot impress too strongly upon the mind of the buyer that he must buy for an unknown market. Strange as this may sound it points the way to the most successful policy. The retailer cannot guess anything as far as stoutwear is concerned. It is not a case of gambling—a plain and simple hazard for what some merchants have found to be big stakes.

Unlike her standard-size counterpart who was in many ways more “knowable,” the stout woman was a confounding figure. Ostensibly, a disorderly mind accompanied a disorderly body and she was thus in many ways inscrutable; or, in May's terms, rather than a “sure bet,” she was a “gamble.” However, even as the stoutwear industry struggled long into the twenties to accommodate the stout woman's non-normative frame, fit, it seems, was only one half of the problem; the problem of “fitting the mind” of the stout woman, as May suggests, seemed to be an equally urgent one.

With the phrase “fitting the mind,” May obliquely referred to the process of first getting the stout woman through the door of the department store via consumer advertising, and second, of making the sale. Through his own experience, May had found that “argument will not bring the desired results…. She must be assured that it is a simple matter of fit for her,” rather than some other perceived prejudice. As May attests, looming large over the practice of selling stoutwear was what was regarded as the stout woman's lingering feelings of inadequacy, or a general sense of not belonging exacerbated by years of neglect by the industry. Less acknowledged, however, were the entrenched prejudices of advertisers evidenced in the oftentimes disdainful or derogatory way about which the stout woman was spoken within these sources, nor the fact that the majority of copywriters were men and thus lacked the ability to identify with their subjects. Nevertheless, in this quotation, May, perhaps unwittingly, taps into a major preoccupation of not just stoutwear retailers but of retailers at large in the early twentieth century: that of harnessing the latent desires and perceived shortcomings of individuals through “emotional appeals” that bore the capacity to trigger consumption. As many others have written, however, this preoccupation with understanding and harnessing the consumer's desire was far from unique to the stoutwear industry.

According to Leach, beginning in the late nineteenth century there emerged a capitalist culture “forged by merchants in the company of enthusiastic politicians, reformers, educators

3 “Take Up Stoutwear Wholeheartedly—Or Not at All,” The American Cloak and Suit Review (July-December 1922), 122.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Walker-Laird, Advertising Progress, 286.
7 Marchand, Advertising the American Dream, 69.
and artists...so powerful as nearly to dwarf all alternative cultures.” This confluence of circumstances gave rise to the birth of “consumer culture,” or what Celia Lury has defined as “a culture of the use of appropriation of objects or things.” While, on the one hand, an influx of new things formed the material foundations of the new consumer culture, advertising, on the other hand, served as a vital medium for the creation of a desiring buying public and as a means of controlling demand—or, in other words, of “creating consumers.” During this time, Marchand writes, the business of advertising began to evolve equally intensely “beyond the poster and the slogan” to a more complex means of suggesting “consumer benefits” and of presenting “life as it ought to be.” Suddenly, advertisers were in the business of “integration propaganda,” or the practice of reinforcing and intensifying economic and social institutions in the vein of moving product. Many early twentieth century advertisements therefore adopted a familiar formula in which a previously unknown lack or shortcoming was presented to the consumer, after which the advertiser intervened with a helpful way (via a good or service) to improve upon the self. At the same time as they promoted products, advertisements offered “expertise and solace in the face of those modern complexities and impersonal judgements that made the individual feel incompetent and insecure.”

Undergirding the practice of modern advertising was therefore discernible current of psychoanalytical thinking as retailers and ad men strove to understand (and manipulate) their audiences. Writing in 1921, Walter Dill Scott, author of a popular and widely-referenced advertising manual titled *The Psychology of Advertising*, provocatively suggested that advertisers must not merely think like but be a psychologist in a statement that captures the general ethos and approach of advertisers from the second decade of the twentieth century onward:

Ordinarily the business man does not realize that he means psychology when he says that he “must know his customers wants—what will catch their attention, what will impress them and lead them to buy,” etc. In all these expressions he is saying that he must be a psychologist. He is talking about the minds of his customers, and psychology is nothing

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10 This term is borrowed from Ewen. See *Captains of Consciousness*, 33.
11 Marchand also notes that while the early twentieth century ushered in a slew of new technologies and innovations, they only “made a dynamic impact...when the great mass of people learned of their benefits, integrated them into their lives, and came to lust for more new products.” See Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 1-2.
12 Marchand further explains how advertisers were aware of “their stake in the contemporary configuration of economic and social institutions, and thus found little reason to portray realities that might bring the system into question. See Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, xvi. Jacques Ellul, quoted in Marchand (ibid.), coined the term “integration propaganda” as a term to describe “ideas and images that reinforce and intensify existing patterns and conceptions.” See Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda*, trans. Komrad Kellen and Jean Learner (New York, 1965), 74-76.
13 Marchand suggests, however, that advertisers did not manifest or make up these lacks or shortcomings, but rather preyed upon “values and attitudes” already held by the target audience. They were thus in the business of discovering what the beliefs and drivers of consumers were. See Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, xix-xxi.
but a stubborn and systematic attempt to understand and explain the workings in the minds of these very people.  

Beyond just “knowing” his customers as Scott suggests, however, the businessman-turned-psychologist sought to apply these psycho-social insights to the singular goal of spurring consumption. Within this context, observed weaknesses and social and physical maladaptations became potential boons to industry. Advertisements, in a sense, had therefore become vectors for alternative identity construction in which consumers could at once locate their own flaws and insecurities while glimpsing improved versions of themselves enhanced by a vast array of new and evermore spectacular products and services. Reflected back at them from the pages of magazines and newspapers, consumers saw not themselves as they actually were, but as they could be. Ewen has even gone so far as to describe advertising as a “civilizing processes,” or as “productive of a homogenous national character” within the context of “advanced capitalist production.” Indeed, if mass manufacturing created standardized bodies, then it was advertising that both democratized and standardized desire across a heterogeneous population. In the United States in the early twentieth century, the ethos of consumption had grown increasingly central in American identity. As Frank Trentmann argues, “consumer” is thus both an identifiable subject and object, born from modernity—or what Lury describes as a “master category of identity.”

However, even as “consumer” came to be a master category of identity in the United States, this did not mean that all Americans were necessarily “ideal” or “desirable” consumers. A key example of an individual who broke this mold was the stout woman, but so too did other ethnic and racial minorities as well as those who were economically disenfranchised. Different from these other “undesirables,” however, the stout woman was acknowledged to possess buying

15 Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 41-42. Elsewhere, Ewen and Ewen more forcefully make this point, arguing that “Americanization was a process by which a cultural transformation was enacted, a process by which memory came under assault as people were coerced into equating consumption with survival…. ‘Americanization’ was a process through which all Americans had to pass.” See Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 32-33. Ewen and Ewen’s use of the term civilizing also brings to mind Norbert Elias’ discussions of the “civilizing of the West,” or the historical processes through which certain norms and customs are adopted within society as “civilized.” See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). Others have argued that fashion is one vital manifestation of the civilizing process. See Buckley and Clark, *Fashion and Everyday Life*, 44-49; Green, *Ready-to-Wear, Ready-to-Work*, 25; Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 13.
17 Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 63-66. Marchand explains how advertisers disqualified and intentionally neglected individuals who “economically did not qualify as ‘citizens’ at all.” This group, which was comprised of ethnic minorities and people at the lower economic echelons of society, actually made up the majority of Americans due to the fact that the mass audience that was the principal concern of advertisers was comprised only of white Americans with higher-than-average incomes. Laird makes similar observations, noting that in the early twentieth century, advertisers were quick to discount “undesirable” consumers. See Walker-Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 284.
power and therefore had the potential to be a “good” consumer. For manufacturers like Albert Malsin and Isidor Heller, for example, the stout woman was regarded as an intriguing if not exciting challenge not dissimilar to the design problem of stoutwear discussed in the previous chapter. In many ways, the stout woman’s ability to consume was written all over her body, materialized through her corporeal excesses. As a number of scholars have pointed out, however, both advertising and manufacturing share a normativizing agenda: Where mass manufacturing and standardization create standard bodies, advertising stands as a space for promoting archetypal and idealized identities. Thus, because the stout woman was such a “problem” for manufacturers of ready-to-wear, it therefore stands to reason that she existed as an ambivalent figure to advertisers as well since she was not an “ideal” subject of consumer culture. Much as with the immigrant for whom advertising functioned as a civilizing medium, with the stout woman advertisers and retailers faced the complex task of familiarizing her—a figure who was for so long exiled from the spaces, places and practices of ready-to-wear garment consumption—with the very practice of consumption itself. It was therefore believed that she required singular appeals, more strategic keywords and an all-around different approach to the practices of advertising, marketing and selling clothing than those employed by advertisers to win the favor of her slender counterpart.

Before implementing such strategies, however, retailers and advertisers had to better understand with whom, exactly, they were dealing—an issue that was cause for much debate within industry discourses. In the following two subsections, I will therefore recount these debates as they appeared within the professional media—chief among them being the issue of what to call her, whether it be “stout,” “fat” or otherwise. In doing so, I will aim to reveal the processes and practices through which stoutwear retailers and advertisers attempted to reconcile the so called “problem” of the stout woman by attempting to better understand both her mental and emotional flaws, as well as her needs and desires as a consumer.

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18 In one Women’s Wear article, for instance, an advertising expert mused, “What a field of interesting psychological study there is opened up by the stout woman and her dress problems.” See Edith Sampson, “Some Small Advertisements for Large Sizes,” Women’s Wear (July 17, 1920), 43.
19 Jeacle, “Accounting.”
20 See Ewen, Captains of Consciousness, 41-42; Marchand, Advertising the American Dream, xvii; Trentmann, Making of the Consumer, 2.
21 Angela McRobbie has noted that studies of early twentieth century female consumption have instead perpetuated ideas about how women were produced as “ideal subjects of consumption in early twentieth century America,” or how women “flocked the department stores,” which have been branded as “safe spaces” for identity construction and consumption. Although she does not deny the importance of these discussions, McRobbie simply aims to point out that the invitation to consume was not extended to all women independent of means and status. However, I would extend McRobbie’s point to also include women of non-standard bodily proportions as well. See Angela McRobbie, “Bridging the Gap: Feminism, Fashion and Consumption” in Feminist Review 55, no. 1 (March 1997), 74.
5.1.1 Stout Bodies, Thin Skin

By the second decade of the twentieth century, there was growing consensus that women were an increasingly powerful consumer group.\(^{22}\) Indeed, even as they comprised the majority of the population in the United States by only a razor-thin margin, they were disproportionately represented within consumer advertising. However, even as the female consumer became the object of intense interest amongst advertisers who vied for her attention, she was nevertheless enduringly linked with the damaging stereotypes of being vice-driven and addiction-prone—a holdover from the mid-nineteenth century.\(^{23}\) Into the twentieth century, as Marchand explains, female consumers continued to be regarded amongst (a largely male population of) advertising professionals to be emotionally stunted, intellectually inferior and fickle in tones of “scientific assurance.”\(^{24}\) This “scientific” confidence in the demographic makeup as well as the drives and desires of the female consuming public, did not, however, trickle down to the stout woman who seemingly evaded categorization beyond her status as “other”—even as both the stout woman and her normative counterpart were both believed to be impulsive and emotionally maladjusted (at least compared to men).

Second only to the issue of fit, the matter of the stout woman’s character and emotional wellbeing was thus a prominent one in professional media as advertisers and retailers attempted to construct a composite picture of the “typical” stout consumer. Much like standard sizing, the goal of mass advertising from the 1920s and beyond was to appeal to the widest swath of consumers possible even amid a growing emphasis being placed on market segmentation and specialization.\(^{25}\) In delimiting the needs and wants of the stout woman, however, what advertisers and retailers ultimately struggled with was the fact that, just as there was no typical stout body, there was no typical stout state of mind. In industry discourse, the stout woman was therefore often painted as a figure who had no impulse control, was capriciously emotional and, perhaps most importantly, lacked basic consumer intelligence. In short, she was believed to be deeply flawed—even more so than her slender counterpart—but also stood to potentially benefit greatly from the interventions of various consumer goods.\(^{26}\) Even with her proverbial “thin

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\(^{22}\) This recognition was preceded by earlier demographic trends, such as the fact that, as early as the 1840s and 1850s, shopping had become a woman’s job, “reflecting the gender differentiation of roles that resulted from the separation of workplace and home that was supported by the rise of wage and salaried male labor.” See Leach, “Transformations in a Culture of Consumption,” 332-333; Jackson Lears, Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 183-192.

\(^{23}\) In this block quote, Marchand pastes together references to a number of primary sources from the era that dealt with the matter of how best to advertise to female consumers. See Marchand, Advertising the American Dream, 66.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 76-77.

\(^{25}\) It should be said that the stout woman was not unique for the manner in which she was framed as emotionally maladjusted—indeed, all female consumers were regarded as capricious and compulsive—but only for the degree of her social and emotional maladaptation. As Peiss has written, “Consumption is coded as a female pursuit, frivolous and even wasteful, a form of leisure rather than productive work.” See Kathy L. Peiss, “American Women and the Making of Modern Consumer Culture,” The Journal for MultiMedia History 1, no. 1. (1998), 1.
skin,” she therefore had the potential to be a good consumer; advertisers just had to figure out a way to tap into her insecurities without driving away her patronage.

This struggle to qualify her peculiar disposition can be glimpsed in an article titled, “Quality as Important as Size in Handling Stouts Trade,” published in Women’s Wear in January of 1917 in which an unnamed male stoutwear retail manager attempted to describe to the trade journal the emotional state of the stout woman:

The fat woman is extremely sensitive about her proportions. She herself may make a joke about her dimensions when among her best friends, but nobody else should try making the joke unless he wishes to lose his popularity. One of the reasons why the “hefties” are touchy on the subject of their weight is that they have a guilty conscience. Their flesh is usually the price they pay for indulging themselves in the way of eats, and they know it.

…Our fat sisters are mostly as sensitive as they are fat. Everybody knows the habitual hurt looks that the big women wear. Quizzical looks and open ridicule does it. Before one of these nerves herself to enter the department where “stouts” are to be had, she has hesitated many a time. So when at length she does come into the department, its force is in duty bound to put her at ease, which is best done by a judicious use of compliments. 27

In the above quotation, the retail manager draws an important parallel between stout women’s size and their patent unease within retail spaces, arguing that they are “as sensitive as they are fat.” Continuing, he claims that this sensitivity is an embodied manifestation of their guilt, framed here as the price paid for “indulging themselves in the way of eats.” At once singing the praises of their patronage, the retail manager’s contempt for stout women is nevertheless thinly veiled. Not only were they deemed guilty, they were also pathetic, variously and derogatorily referred to as “hefties” and “our fat sisters”—and elsewhere, as “freaks”—and perceived as being totally unacquainted with the norms and customs of consumerism. Namely, stout women were deemed wholly ignorant to the practice of perusing and purchasing garments off-the-rack. Crippled with guilt over their own gluttony, they were regarded within industry discourse as emotionally fragile individuals, and salespeople were instructed to treat them with care, putting them “at ease” by masking any prejudices and feigning compliments.

Discussions about the stout woman’s feelings of not belonging and especially of her perceived guilt were widespread across the professional media and were invoked regularly within discussions about the difficulties of handling the stoutwear trade. In a September 1919 report on the state of the industry that appeared in Women’s Wear, for instance, Maurice Gross of the stoutwear manufacturing company M. Gross Stylish Stouts explained to the trade journal how “the regular sized woman doesn’t come into buy with a worried or embarrassed look on her face.” Directly addressing other retailers and manufacturers, Gross suggested,

You may talk all you like about a fat woman being happy, but…she gets very serious when she steps into one of New York’s stores to buy a garment, for she feels certain that she is going to walk out again not suited….

27 “Quality as Important as Size,” 47,
28 See, for example, “How Many Fat Women in Your Town?” Women’s Wear (June 11, 1915), 3.
There are many, no doubt, who take the view that stout women are sensitive concerning their size and that, on this account, a stout department blazingly announced in big letters would get little patronage. This is true, in most counts. In fact, there are few who smilingly make the confession that they are “stout.”

Much as in the last quotation, here Gross emphasizes the stout woman's reticence to identify as such, and in doing so reveals a paradox that bedeviled more than one stoutwear retailer: How does one publicize that they sell stoutwear without unduly calling attention to the stout woman's size?

This issue was raised more explicitly in a September 1919 *New York Times* article titled “Catering to the Stouter People,” which asked, “Why more effort is not being made to obtain a large share of the stout woman's trade than is now being enjoyed by the big stores?” An answer, somewhat unsurprisingly, was located in the stout woman's flawed psyche:

No person on earth...is more sensitive than a stout woman. A stout man's feelings are armor-plated by comparison. Some women of this type are so sensitive about their size that they often seem to go out of their way in trying to find something to get offended at.... They know they are fat, but they resent having that fact called to their attention.

As this quotation illustrates so well, behind the scenes and within the “safe spaces” of the professional media, advertisers and retailers did not mince words, showing little pity for the plight of the stout woman at the same time they debated about how best to win her favor. Attacks such as these, however, did not acknowledge how the retailers’ and advertisers’ own practices may have been implicit in contributing to her grim disposition. Indeed, as Stearns writes, at this time it was so apparent that fat women were emotionally and physically flawed that “no explanation for criticism seemed necessary.” Said so, it must nevertheless be asked: How did the stout woman come to be such a reviled figure in the first place, and how did these stigmas against her become so entrenched in industry discourse?

As has already been discussed earlier in this dissertation, in the early twentieth century, America's emergent fat stigma sat at the intersection of a number of different factors—cultural, technological and medical. Chief among them, however, was the fact that, even as fatness was increasingly being medicalized—or treated by doctors as an illness—it was not treated in the same way as inborn genetic diseases. Instead, fat was regarded as being a malady of the body, but also a uniquely pathological disorder, or an embodied punishment for a lack of willpower and impulse control. According to Stearns, the imperative to manage one's weight had less to do with health and was more so “a matter of demonstrating character and self-control in an age of

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29 “Stout Garments,” *Women’s Wear* (September 2, 1919), 33.
31 The above article was published in the dense “Business” section of the Times, which was written for buyers, advertisers and merchants, and which, in many ways, mirrored the layout and content of trade journals.
32 Stearns, *Fat History*, 84.
excess.” The fat person was therefore an object of pity and disgust, but not of empathy or compassion the same way a “genuinely” sick person was. Within this context, Stearns points out that “even when doctors called fat [people] ‘sick,’ they meant morally or mentally defective, not uncontrollably ill.” However, even as men and women were in some ways equal targets, the cultural stigma against fat women was far more pronounced and much more deeply entrenched in American culture. This was due to the fact that fat was read differently on the bodies of men and women: While a degree of fat in boys and men could connote strength, or, conversely, could be worn proudly as a badge of humor, for women it always symbolized failure. The consensus was that “that not only was fat ugly, but fat women were particularly flawed.” In his own survey of the history of obesity, Vigarello draws similar conclusions, noting that the particular flavor of fat stigma in the early twentieth century, and specifically the growing biases toward fat women, was tinged with an overt and growing concern with aesthetics. As more of women’s bodies was increasingly on display, there was more to judge, and it therefore became easier to correlate one’s appearance with one’s mental and emotional state.

The emotional and cultural maladaptation of the stout woman reached a level of hyperbole in turn-of-the-century carnivals. This was the era of the “fat lady” as a ubiquitous freak show spectacle (Fig. 51). Fat ladies—alongside thin men, bearded ladies, dwarves and conjoined twins, among others—were a source of morbid entertainment for audiences curious about exotic and unfamiliar bodies. The freak show was a space in which the rising middle class could enjoy carnivalesque humor in a culture that increasingly required the careful maintenance and self-regulation of the body. However, these everyday spectacles were not mere entertainment; they also reinforced and, perhaps more importantly, normalized cultural biases against fat bodies. In their shows, the fat ladies performed exaggerated stereotypes for their paying audiences in order to realize preconceived notions about the behaviors and dispositions of fat women, thereby not only revealing but also perhaps more deeply cementing prejudices against and fears of female overweight. One such fat lady who went by the stage name “Jolly Mabel” was mentioned in a 1913 New York Times article that recounted the Coney Island Freak Show’s temporary move to Broadway for a limited-time “pocket performance.” Weighing over six-hundred pounds and with what the reporter described as a mean temperament, Jolly Mabel, who yelled at everyone around her with “a voice that could make the mountains to rock” was, ironically, not so jolly. Carnival “freaks” like Jolly Mabel performed in the aggrandized mode, thereby enhancing their character and underscoring stereotypes, heightening the entertainment

33 Ibid., 117.
34 Ibid., 117.
35 Ibid., 78-84.
36 Ibid., 79.
37 Vigarello, Metamorphoses of Fat, 141-148.
value of their performances. Mabel’s outbursts therefore would have been perceived as going hand-in-hand with her grotesque size. Not unlike Jolly Mabel, stout women were seen as emotional cripples who ate to excess in order to mask other problems.

With negative stereotypes about stout women deeply engrained in the American consciousness, the professional fashion media was accordingly littered with anecdotes about temperamental and incredulous stout consumers. Indeed, stout women were regarded as not only ignorant to behavioral mores; they were also believed to be unaccustomed to the practices of proper consumption. Different from the poor, proud stout woman whom Susy Collins Miller described in the quote with which I opened this chapter as being so grateful to purchase a ready-made dress she “almost wept upon [Miller’s] neck,” a 1915 Women’s Wear article described two buyers’ encounter with one particularly difficult customer:

The two stood back to watch what happened as a bulging matron approached laboriously and asked with a belligerent laugh-if-you-dare expression:

“Can you fit me in a wash skirt? I saw your ad.”

The salesgirl took the lady's measurements and responded pleasantly with no sign of amusement, that she certainly could and proceeded to do it.... Her doubt and resentment gave way to hope and then to delight and instead of buying one, she bought three, the first, she said, she had ever bought ready-made in her life.41

Within these spaces, the issues surrounding the uneven temperament of stout consumers were discussed with little factual or psychological grounding; however, none was really needed. It was taken as fact (if not for granted) that the stout woman was difficult, temperamental and emotional—the carnival fat lady functioning as a hyperbolic archetype of the “typical” stout woman. The professional fashion media therefore served as yet another space in which negative stereotypes about stout women were normalized.

In many ways, fatness for stout women had therefore come “to be lamented as a badge of irretrievable personal shame,”42 with consumer culture merely serving to more deeply cement her feelings of difference. Indeed, during this period, as Annamma Joy and Alladi Venkentash explain, individuals who did not “meet the aesthetic norms of commodity culture” were loathed within society at large.43 For the stout woman, her marginal status was merely exacerbated by her literal inability to wear mass manufactured garments, which by the 1920s were increasingly becoming a mainstay within the average American’s wardrobe. In some instances, however, it was acknowledged within the discourses of stoutwear that the garment industry—and the sense of guilt it engendered in women who could not approximate contemporary beauty ideals—likely had something to do with the fat woman's low self-esteem and fragile character. In a rare instance of introspection, the Dry Goods Economist advised buyers,

If you want the stout trade, you must not “rub it in” by insinuating that women of over 42 in. busts are abnormalities, requiring specially designed clothes.... She knows that nobody loves the fat lady who looks fat. She knows, moreover, that the general public’s ideal figure, at least for some years past, has been that of an enlarged and animated clothespin.44

In this quotation, the trade journal at once underscores (and advises against) the tendency for stoutwear retailers and salespeople to “rub in” the face of the stout woman—here, reduced to her bust measurement—the difficulties of fitting her. Moreover, it suggests how the stout woman's emotional shortcomings were at least partly informed by the fashionably slender silhouette, humorously described here as looking like an “enlarged and animated clothespin.” This notion was echoed in a 1917 Women's Wear article in which a representative of the Jordan Marsh department store entreated his fellow stoutwear retailers to "never look upon the stout woman as a freak, she is an enlarged edition of femininity only."45

41 “Ready for the Big Ones,” 3.
42 Brottman and Brottman, “Return of the Freakshow,” 118.
45 “Outline of Salesforce Talk at Jordan Marsh: The Knack of Selling the ‘Stout’ Person—The Importance of This Class of Trade,” Women's Wear (October 20, 1916), 9.
With this knowledge, the stoutwear industry therefore turned its attention away from the matter of fitting the customer's body to, in the words of Charles May, “fitting her mind.”

Through this process, advertisers and retailers had come to believe that the stout woman had grown reticent to identify as such, and understandably so, given that fat had become so stigmatized. However, it must be asked: How were advertisers and retailers supposed to apply this knowledge to selling and advertising practices? And perhaps more importantly, how were they to address her without calling attention to her difference? As one retailer had suggested, the stoutwear maker couldn’t simply emblazon his storefront with the word “stout” in big letters. Beyond understanding the “total” world of the stout woman, advertisers and retailers therefore had to accomplish the deceptively difficult task of figuring out what, exactly, to call her.

5.1.2 Fat, Large or Stout? The Problem with Terminology

You know every traveling man moves heaven and earth to convince you that his line is right and every other is wrong. I had a man here today who tried to sell me “stout” undermuslins. I told him of course that I had plenty, and anyway I called mine “extra sizes.” He said that I was way off—that there was no such thing as “extra sizes.” “Stout” was the name of the line.

Meanwhile, I was casually looking over his samples. So I asked him what a “stout” garment was anyway. “For a short fat woman,” was the way he explained it. Then I lined into him. I asked him if that was what “stout” meant and [if] he handled only stouts, why was he carrying 44 and 46-inch skirts and 58-inch gowns. This gentleman hadn't another word to say. He just thought he could get me to buy this line for something in addition to “extra sizes.”

The above quotation comes from an article titled “Battles for Truth” that appeared in the October 15, 1915 edition of Women’s Wear. It recounts the experiences of a buyer of corsets and undermuslins referred to throughout as “Miss Dixon.” The account, which was published only a few months after the first articles to discuss the future of the stoutwear industry, is notable for the fact that it gives a snapshot of a moment during which the discourse of large-size women’s garments was very much in flux. Miss Dixon, accustomed to buying what she had come to know as “extra sizes,” explains to Women’s Wear how she felt as if the manufacturer was being deceptive, remarking elsewhere in the article that she felt “coerced into doing something [she] didn’t want to do,” and suggesting that the term “stouts” was little more than a new way to repackage an old convention for demarcating larger women’s sizes from standard sizes. The article, which quickly dismisses the term stout—and notably so considering the flurry of commentary on the market potential of stoutwear appearing elsewhere in Women’s Wear during this time—thereafter goes on to describe an interaction between Miss Dixon and an advertising creative who had helped her to pen a promotion for a sale on “extra sizes.” The advertisement—

46 “Take Up Stoutwear Wholeheartedly.” 122.
47 “Stout Garments,” Women’s Wear (September 2, 1919), 33.
48 “Battles for Truth: In Which the Store is Saved from Putting One Over on Extra Sizes,” Women’s Wear (October 15, 1915), 4, 7.
the success of which was attributed to its “alluring” wording—was said to have drawn stout women to the shop in such droves that the sale looked like a “circus sideshow” and caused Dixon and the ad man to question the construction of stairs, elevators and floors, which they feared would “give way under such ponderosity.”

Beyond recounting a pivotal moment shortly before “stout” ultimately usurped the more antiquated and short-lived “extra sizes” as the preferred term for referring to large-size garments, this article stands as a testament to both the ambiguity surrounding the term stout, which was a perennial source of debate within professional discourses, but also to its very constructedness. Indeed, the term stout first functioned as an important branding tool—one used with great success by early stoutwear entrepreneurs like Albert Malsin, Charles May and Isidor Heller as a way to differentiate their “scientifically” designed large-size garments from others, such as those labeled as extra size. As Miss Dixon observantly points out above, however, the truth to such claims was shaky at best. What was the difference between a forty-four-inch extra size garment and a stout garment? Even the manufacturer couldn’t seem to parse it out. Ultimately, however, the difference between so-called stout apparel and extra sizes would prove immaterial, for the term stout would ultimately do a better job at drawing clear boundaries around stoutwear as a new sub-category of ready-to-wear—one which was founded on new and innovative sizing and grading practices—but perhaps more importantly, provided a convenient, albeit somewhat contentious, shorthand for referring to both large-size women’s garments and bodies without directly referring to size.

The matter of establishing a term that could be invoked to refer to not just large-size dress but also to the larger-than-average consumer as a signaling or labelling device for advertisers was a matter of the utmost importance for manufacturers of large-size garments. Indeed, as one advertising expert remarked to Women’s Wear, “Of course the first problem in advertising to fat women is to let them know that they can get their sizes.”49 Although the matter of terminology was a particular problem for stoutwear manufacturers, advertisers and retailers, it was not without historical precedent. Although the “curvaceous” silhouette is oftentimes uncritically conflated with the fat body within the cultural imaginary, there are exceedingly few, if any, moments in the history of the modern West during which fatness was idealized. Certainly, more voluptuous silhouettes have gone in and out of vogue,50 but all over corpulence—and especially corpulence at the waist for women—was never itself an ideal per se, at least from the

50 Almond, “Fashionably Voluptuous,” 199.
end of the seventeenth century onward. As such, there has been no shortage of terms throughout history that have been variously employed to deride or diminish the fat person, and to call attention to their bodily difference. At the same time, however, this has meant that there have been comparatively few impartial or objective terms for referring to the fat person. Indeed, Abigail C. Saguy argues that one would be hard pressed to find a neutral term for those with body weights that exceeded the historical norm in any given moment “due to the extent to which fatness has been condemned and pathologized” in Western culture. As early as the sixteenth century, Vigarello points out, a variety of terms began to emerge that formalized different types or stages of fatness. “The increasing variety of terms,” he argues, “testifies to the increasing discrimination of the eye.” However, this proliferation only intensified in the nineteenth century. During this period, fat people began to experience a great social decline when they increasingly came to be perceived as physically at odds with the architectures and rhythms of modern life. In turn, the embarrassment of the fat person in American public life, as Schwartz writes, “blushed from language itself.” “Fat” had by this time become an “ugly word,” and, after midcentury, “dumpy,” “pudgy” and “tubby” had emerged, none of them quite as pejorative as ‘porky’ (1860s), ‘sod-packer’ (1880s), ‘jumbo’…or ‘butterball’ (1890s). In spite of this proliferation of terms for fat, however, all of them proved pejorative.

Within fashion discourse, “matronly,” “generous,” “odd sized,” “large” and, of course, “fat,” were all terms invoked to refer to both women and to large-size dress from the second decade of the twentieth century onward, yet not interchangeably, for they all carried with them different discursive baggage. Matronly, for instance, connoted both a manner of dressing and a body that were closely associated with old age (a point that is discussed in great depth in chapter six). In devising a pattern grading system for stout women whose bodies were large but did not deviate far from the fashionable silhouette, however, Isidor Heller coupled the term “stylish”...
with stout in an attempt to distance his brand from any lingering associations with the old styles of large-size dress, as well as any connotations with the generous proportions that were an inevitability of the aging process.\textsuperscript{57} Differently, the term odd sized was invoked most frequently to refer to women who were both short and somewhat overweight, but was a term that predated stout by a decade or more.\textsuperscript{58} Although each term connoted a different “type” of female corpulence, it may be argued that both terms emphasize the fat woman’s embodied departures from beauty ideals by framing her body as a “problem”—a notion that is particularly evident in the case of the term odd sized, which forcefully underscores the fat woman’s “odd” proportions beyond the spectrum of standard or “normal” sizes.

Within this constellation of terms, however, “embonpoint” and “avoirdupois,” which were invoked occasionally within fashion discourse to euphemistically refer to or label women of larger proportions, were singular outliers. The term embonpoint, for instance, originated in France in the late eighteenth century as a complimentary but infrequently used term that referred to a person who was plump, but who had a generally “well-nourished” appearance.\textsuperscript{59} It would not enter the English lexicon, however, until the early nineteenth century when the spelling was anglicized, even as the positivistic connotations remained. Derived from the old French, the term avoirdupois, by comparison, was a much older term and was used throughout the duration of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to refer to a standard unit of weight used in Great Britain, and only came to be an uncommonly used adjective to describe heaviness in the mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{60} When invoked within fashion discourse in the early twentieth century—as in utterances like, “those with only a tendency to avoirdupois”\textsuperscript{61}—the usage of such terms, albeit infrequent, tapped into a broader tendency within the discourses of fashion to borrow terms and phrasings from French (e.g. “mode,” “vogue,” “camisole,” “boutique,” etc.) as a means to create an aura of desirability and fascination around an object (or in this case, a body) by tapping into the heritage and legacies of French fashion.\textsuperscript{62} When applied to the fat, female body, the terms thus lent a momentary sense of fashionability or even beauty to bodily corpulence. On the whole, however, the many euphemisms for referring to women of large size operated within a framework that effectively othered them. Among them, however, no term was deemed as universally problematic as fat.

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\textsuperscript{57} “Apparel Houses Combine to Cater to Stout Women,” Women’s Wear (September 20, 1916), 14. It should also be noted that for Heller, this was also a clever tactic for differentiating Sveltline garments from his competitors’ as well as an attempt to co-opt or re-appropriate the term in an attempt to carve out a market niche for his “scientifically” designed stoutwear.

\textsuperscript{58} “Manufacturers in Increasing Numbers, Concentrate on Small Women’s Sizes,” Women’s Wear (July 29, 1924), 30.


\textsuperscript{61} “Large Stores Organize Reducing Sections in Corset Departments,” Women’s Wear (July 24, 1924), 20.

\textsuperscript{62} Paulicelli remarks on this, but in the Italian context during the early twentieth century, noting that there was a fascination amongst Italian consumers with clothing that “spoke French.” See Paulicelli, Fashion Under Fascism, 74-98.
Although the term fat was used liberally if not gleefully within professional media—or spaces safe from the curious eyes of consumers—it was widely acknowledged that advertisers and salespeople should avoid publicly invoking the term at all costs or risk alienating the consumer. For instance, in a *Women's Wear* feature about the practice of writing “sensitive advertising,” the trade journal explained how:

Advertising to fat women is a very delicate matter indeed. While excess flesh is not exactly an infirmity, it comes very near to it in the feelings of its possessor. It is a close approach to calling attention to a person's age or his deafness, or some other defect of which he has not, or thinks he has not the mastery.  

Nearly all of the advertisements carefully sidestep the word “Fat” .... “Fat” pictures a sad state.  

With the term fat, to borrow the words of Schwartz, deemed an “ugly word” in the discourses of stoutwear as much as in the cultural parlance, retailers and advertisers were therefore advised to, as one article suggested, rely heavily on their thesauruses to find suitable and positivistic synonyms for fat:

[When] the buyer who is catering to the business of the stouts desires to interest them in his line, he will find that it pays to get him a book of synonyms and use all the euphemistic words in the list instead of making a straightforward, frank appeal to the fat woman. Speak of “women with dress requirements out of the ordinary,” or of “women who have difficulty in getting fitted in ready-to-wear garments of usual sizes” or sometimes the word “stout” may be used to advantage. Another good way to reach the “cornfed” is to put the emphasis on the “sizes in stock” and mention them in connection with the statement in some pretty language that any stout in town can find something that will fit her.  

The ultimate resolution for the problem of how to speak about and how to advertise to women whose bodies fell outside of the spectrum of standard sizing without calling them fat, or any other term that might cause offense, was therefore to be found in an intricate game of word play—one in which the emphasis was placed on garment fit and the availability of so-called extended size ranges, rather than on women's bodies. Even in this passage, however, the salesman grapples with how to refer to the fat woman herself, even derogatorily referring to her at one point as “cornfed”—his casual slur attesting, perhaps, to the degree to which fat stigma was embedded within American culture. The general consensus, however, was that any terms that directly

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63 See, for example, the comments made by the stoutwear buyer at a popular Midwestern department store to *Women's Wear*: “There is no concealment of the fact that the customer is fat,” and “Our fat sisters are mostly as sensitive as they are fat.” See “Quality as Important as Size in Handling Stouts Trade,” 47. This opportunistic usage of the term fat also appeared in the earliest articles about the stoutwear trade, such as one in which stoutwear was referred to as the “fat women's trade.” See “How Many Fat Women in Your Town?,” 3. See also “Ready for the Big Ones,” which featured the byline, “A New Angle on the Fat Woman's Wants.”


65 Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 89.

66 “Quality as Important as Size,” 47.
addressed the customer's corpulence were to be avoided. Notably, however, he argues that the term stout could nevertheless be used to “advantage” in some instances.

Far exceeding circumstantial or occasional usage, however, stout ended up being the best among a number of bad options as far as advertisers and retailers were concerned. With 1915 representing a notable turning point—one captured in the passage with which I began this subsection—stout, an old term, found new usefulness as a discursive shorthand for large-size garments (and perhaps less successfully, for large bodies) widely invoked both within and outside of industry discourse. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest uses of the term stout, which derives from the French “estout,” may be located in the early-fourteenth century when it described an individual who was “proud, haughty or arrogant.”

Through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it enjoyed similarly positivistic usage, connoting objects (e.g. ships), animals (e.g. horses) or persons who were “sturdy” or “resolute.” Notably, when stout entered the American English lexicon in the late eighteenth century, it connoted an individual “of strong body” or with a “powerful build.” However, a notable shift occurred at the very beginning of the nineteenth century when its meaning shifted for the worse. Referring to a person “thick in body, not lean or slender…inclined to corpulence,” the term irrevocably took on negative connotations. By 1860, as Schwartz writes, “‘stout,’ once a fine word for all ages, had become ambiguous if not uncomplimentary.” Yet, even as men could be a bit stout but also vigorous or strong, in women stoutness was unflatteringly equated with advanced age and a matronly appearance.

This gendered discrepancy is underscored nowhere more forcefully than in a column titled “Between the Lines with the Ad Men” that ran in a May 1922 issue of *Women’s Wear* that juxtaposed the terms used by advertisers and retailers to refer to fat men versus those used for fat women, which noted that the R.H. Macy & Co. had

hit upon a merry and yet unoffending name for the man of “heroic proportions,” “Mr. Avoirdupois” is pitied for the trouble he is put to in shopping for his own apparel, unless at Macy’s where “A physique of robust proportions may be clothed from head to foot as

67 Although it is hard to quantify how frequently “stout” was used over other terms across different sources (i.e. fashion magazines, trade journals and women’s periodicals) due to the varying searchability of digitized archives and to the sheer impossibility of accounting for usage in every advertisement and editorial over a fifteen year period, a keyword search in the *Vogue* and *Women’s Wear* archives reveals a notable uptick in the incidence of the term “stout” and “stoutwear” (terms that, opposed to “stout” were more frequently used in reference to clothing rather than within the context of more generalized weight loss and corsetry advertisements) beginning around 1920. More specifically, while there are 12,994 hits for the term “stout” in *Women’s Wear*, the term “fat women” yields only 103 hits over the same period, showing a clear preference for the various permutations of “stout.”


69 Ibid.

70 Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 89. This point is confirmed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which notes that by 1855, the term stout was being used humorously within the satirical magazine *Punch* to lampoon fat people.

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quickly and as satisfactorily as one of regular dimensions and at lowest-in-the-city prices.\textsuperscript{71}

While men of larger proportions are here described as “heroic” and “robust” with Macy’s promising to outfit him “head to foot” as quickly as his slenderer contemporaries, in stark contrast, stoutness in women connoted that she need no longer “worry about the matters that once concerned her, and she can accept reality.”\textsuperscript{72}

As these passages demonstrate, while the stout man was regarded as a discerning consumer who was invested in his appearance despite his size, the stout woman was regarded as being uninterested in or outside of fashion. Indeed, as the \textit{Dry Goods Economist} explained as late as 1922, the stout woman was “the matronly, motherly type of woman…. Hers was a figure uncorseted, usually, or, if corseted at all, carelessly with little attempt to confine the figure or to make the most of lines that should be beautiful.”\textsuperscript{73} In other words, the stout woman was a woman who, for all intents and purposes, had given up on maintaining a normatively beautiful appearance. When invoked in reference to a body (as opposed to dress), in industry parlance stout had come to signify a silhouette that was generally undefined, big all over, less than feminine and, perhaps most importantly, out of fashion. Manufacturers like Isidor Heller attempted to breathe new life into the term (while also carving out a market niche) through the designation of so-called stylish stouts—or large-size garments cut to fit younger stout women who retained a more fashionably hourglass shape—but the equivalence of stoutness with age persisted. As a 1917 \textit{Women’s Wear} article on stoutwear sales tactics explained, “Stoutness among American women is a sort of national characteristic. Maturity is likely to bring stoutness…. When stoutness is a sign of advancing maturity, women are apt to be very sensitive about their size.”\textsuperscript{74}

With stoutwear framed as a problematic term, one advertising executive in a special feature that ran in the April 2, 1917 issue of \textit{Women’s Wear} commented on how “the subject [of stoutwear] is one which has dynamite in it and will explode if handled clumsily.”\textsuperscript{75} The “explosive” nature of terminology was attributed to the stout woman’s own unpredictable disposition and mental fragility—an idea that was further entrenched in the industry’s imaginary through statements that appeared in the professional media such as, “There are few who smilingly make the confession that they are ‘stout,’”\textsuperscript{76} and, “They know they are fat, but they resent having that fact called to their attention.”\textsuperscript{77} Within this discursive minefield, stout, an ambivalent term, was adopted as a standard by retailers and advertisers, but only reluctantly, as the aforementioned quotes from the professional fashion media reveal. Aware of the power of

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{71} “Between the Lines with the Ad Men,” \textit{Women’s Wear} (May 3, 1922), 37.
\bibitem{72} Stearns, \textit{Fat History}, 23.
\bibitem{73} “Looking Backward and Forward in the Development of Stylish Stout Wear,” \textit{Dry Goods Economist} 76.4053-4062 (March 11, 1922), 117.
\bibitem{74} “Outline of Salesforce Talk,” 4.
\bibitem{75} “In the Ad World: Filene’s Glad Tidings for the Stout Woman,” \textit{Women’s Wear} (April 2, 1917), 23.
\bibitem{76} “Stout Garments,” \textit{Women’s Wear} (September 2, 1919), 33.
\bibitem{77} “Catering to the Stouter People,” \textit{New York Times} (September 28, 1919), 43.
\end{thebibliography}
this word, advertisers were essentially caught in a double bind. On the one hand, stout, when invoked in references to the category of dress known as stoutwear, had designated a new and scientifically-grounded practice of large-size garment manufacturing (e.g. I. Heller & Co. “stylish stouts”). On the other hand, however, when used in reference to the woman herself, it conjured images of an old, unfashionable and less than modern body, and of a woman deficient in mind and manners. In short, the act of explicitly labelling the fat, female body as stout was one of great consequence as well as controversy.

Through the process of applying the term stout to the fat, female body, it could be argued that advertisers, retailers and manufacturers effectively participated in the construction of the stout consumer, while creating a whole new set of meanings for the word itself. Indeed, there was great incentive for manufacturers and retailers to foment desire amongst an identifiable, nameable, group of consumers, even if those consumers were essentially flawed. In putting forth this notion, I draw upon ideas furthered by philosopher Ian Hacking who in his essay “Making Up People” theorizes the process through which categories of people are constructed—a practice, he argues, that proliferated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries amid a wave of immigration to the United States, advancements in medicine and clinical psychology as well as a growing interest in demographics. Hacking’s explicit focus on labeling may easily be applied to fashion discourse as an entity that effectively “makes” categories of bodies (e.g. petite, stout, tall, men’s, juniors, etc.)—a point which Jeacle has pursued to describe the processes through which categories of “normal” and “deviant” bodies are made through the construct of standard sizing. In the case of stoutwear, however, the practice of labeling a body as stout—a term that had a long history, but which gained new relevance when invoked within fashion industry discourse—proved to have far-reaching consequences beyond body size alone.

Indeed, one consequence of labeling according to Hacking, is that “people spontaneously [come] to fit their categories.” If stout is understood as such a construct, it stands to reason that while there have always been fat people (just as there have always been thin

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78 Ian Hacking has identified ten ways that people are “made” via practices of labeling. Importantly, the fifth step involves the medicalization of individuals as a way to explain or rationalize a shortcoming. Hacking uses the example of the “obese” person to demonstrate how that label not only designates a certain amount of excess weight above a norm, but also renders the afflicted as disorderly and other. See Ian Hacking, “Making Up People,” London Review of Books 28, no. 16 (2006), 23-26.

79 Adopting a post-structuralist stance highly indebted to the thinking of Michele Foucault, Hacking argues that social categories of people are not inherent, but rather are the product of “social change” and that labeling is a crucial component of this process. Elsewhere he argues that a technology like the census, for instance, is not a “mere report of developments. It elaborately…creates new ways for people to be.” Different from Foucault, however, Hacking’s focus is solely on the practice of labeling in the making of people; by contrast, for Foucault, discourse is only one element in the “constitution of subjects.” See Ian Hacking, “Making Up People” in Thomas C. Heller and David E. Wellerby (eds.), Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality and the Self in Western Thought (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 223-226.


81 Hacking calls this “dynamic nominalism,” or the process through which “a kind of person came into being at the same time the kind itself was being invented.” Later in the essay, he further pursues this notion, arguing that if new modes of description come into being, new possibilities for action come into being in consequence. See Hacking, “Making Up People,” 228-231.
people), the stout woman, specifically, is the product of the practice of labeling her as such in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—a practice that is revealed through the debates and discourses that surrounded the matter of terminology within the professional media. In other words, by applying the word stout to a category of bodies, they were also putting a name to a perceived disorder—or perhaps more accurately, to a disorderly body. At the same time, however, advertisers were effectively, and perhaps more productively, putting forth a proposal for how to be stout as well. Within this discursive scheme, the stout body was deemed one that was past its sexual and reproductive prime, unfashionable and, in a sense, incomplete. Given that it was so highly stigmatized in the United States, stoutness was not something to which many, if any, women aspired, and thus the stout woman was a figure who was always distancing herself from her embodiment—as is revealed, for example, by the stout woman’s reticence to identify as such. Hers was a restless body—one that was always in a state of becoming (either gaining weight or losing weight, but never stable); stoutwear, however, as retailers and advertisers would go on to suggest in fashion media discourse, could play a vital role in making her body complete.

Even so, the whole premise of the stoutwear industry was built on the idea that retailers were in the business of selling garments to fit women’s bodies as they were and not as they could be, which in itself was somewhat antithetical to the practice of modern advertising. Through images and copy, advertisers were in the business of weaving dreams, promulgating ideals, promising fantastic transformations and conjuring images of beautiful, idealized bodies. Yet, in the practice of advertising to the stout woman, they pursued a somewhat different agenda: Unable to omit or completely censor the stout body from advertisements, they had to sell to stout women only slightly better or improved versions of themselves. Indeed, without stout women, there could be no rational basis for a stoutwear industry. It was thus imperative that, at the same time advertisers and retailers distanced themselves from stigmatizing terms and ideologies that they also invoked them in more subtle ways. In practice, this meant that instead of selling a wholesale re-visioning of the stout body, advertisers and retailers had to toe a fine line, depicting a body that was idealized but within reach, familiar but aspirational and always in need of work. Perhaps most importantly though, they had to sell the notion that stout woman now had more choice and more sartorial agency than ever. Discursive signaling and labeling were thus only one half of the battle to win the stout woman’s favor; the other and perhaps more important half lay in proposing better ways to be stout, while educating the stout woman in the very practice of consumption itself. Indeed, these were practices that ensured the stout woman’s dependence on and loyalty to stoutwear makers by more deeply entrenching her feelings of inadequacy at the same time they proposed routes to sartorial salvation.

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82 Bordo has remarked on how the persuasiveness of advertising lies in the manner in which it presents the body as a lack. She argues that advertisements wield power over women by impressing “the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity,” which in turn results in a greater expenditure of time dedicated to attaining an ideal. See Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 165-167.
5.2 From Style to Slenderness: Stoutwear on the Page

The notion that stoutwear advertisements should go beyond the remit of the “typical”83 clothing or fashion advertisement to also educate the stout woman in the practices of modern consumption and of “appropriate” self-fashioning is well illustrated in a July 1920 *Women’s Wear* feature titled “Some Small Advertisements for Large Women” written by Edith Sampson, advertising authority and author of the popular instructional book *Advertise!* (1918).84 In discussing the best practices for advertising to the stout woman, Sampson remarked,

> What a field of interesting psychological study there is opened up by the stout woman and her dress problems.

> The advertising writer should think of her as studying the fashion magazines and seeing all the smart clothes and the svelte clothes and longing with all the longing of the slender woman, of the girlish figure, for all the charming fashions which are just before her gaze….

> There is many an advertising campaign that might be planned along the lines of educating the large sized woman in the art of good dressing. How much safer is she when she selects her clothes ready to wear in a store where styles are especially designed now, by those who make a study of the large figure! At home with the dressmaker as her chief adviser, and the fashion magazine with its alluring suggestions before her, she is far more apt to go astray in styles than she is in selecting things especially cut for the large size figure.85

By suggesting that the stoutwear advertisement “be planned along the lines of educating the large sized woman in the art of good dressing”—therein exalting the broader mission of stoutwear advertising—Sampson taps into what Ewen has described as the “civilizing function” of some early twentieth century strands of mass advertising. A product of the demands of capitalist production, the so-called “Civilized American,” or the target of consumer advertising, “could locate his needs and frustrations in the terms of the consumption of the goods rather than the quality and content of his life.”86 Indeed, modern advertising, Ewing argues, at once repudiated antiquated and foreign habits and practices, while simultaneously offering “mass-produced solutions to ‘instinctive’ strivings as well as to the ills of mass society itself.”87

Although the stout woman was not necessarily a social outsider in the same sense as the immigrant, her deviant body nevertheless placed her at the margins of acceptable, American femininity. More concretely, however, her non-standard bodily proportions also prevented her from engaging in the everyday practices of fashionable consumption enjoyed by her slender and

83 A functional definition of “fashion advertisement” is offered by Paul Jobling who describes the modern iteration as both “a sufficient means of attracting and establishing a suitable clientele” and as a way “reinforce the reputation of the shop in question.” See Jobling, “Fashion Advertising,” 276.
84 In the foreword to her book, Sampson advocated for a scientific approach to advertising, noting, “Advertising is a chain of ideas, carefully linked together, forcefully expressed and scientifically calculated to produce a cumulative reaction upon a definite group of people.” See Edith Sampson, *Advertising*! (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co. Publishers, 1918), i.
86 Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 43.
87 Ibid., 44.
normatively-sized counterparts and thus limited her full participation in consumer culture, but also in American life—a notion which finds interesting parallels in Susannah Walker's work on African American beauty culture in the 1920s.

Indeed, as Walker writes, for disenfranchised African Americans in a nation cleaved by segregation and racism, participation in American capitalism seemed to be a clear pathway to full citizenship, requiring the "consumption of mass-produced goods and, perhaps more important, recognition of this consumption by advertisers and marketing executives."86 Since advertisers regarded the average consumer citizen as white and middle class, however, African Americans were largely neglected within mainstream advertising through the 1930s.87 Yet, if the advertisements of the era are any indication, this consumer citizen was also slender. Although the stout women and African Americans were similarly underrepresented in consumer culture in the early twentieth century, merchants and advertisers nevertheless acknowledged the stout (and white) woman's consumer citizenship far earlier than they discovered that of African Americans. Even so, much as with the socially and culturally ostracized immigrant—or, as Walker points out, the African American—the stout woman's body was one that was in need of discipline in order to reflect the mass ideals (as well as mass aesthetics) of the "Civilized American."88

When viewed through this lens, Sampson's rhetoric about "educating" the stout woman in the ways of proper consumption acquires a new sense of urgency and gravity: Beyond merely peddling garments or bolstering the reputation of brands, stoutwear advertising, as Sampson suggested above, was a space in which retailers could present ways for the stout woman to, borrowing Ewen's words, become a "civilized" consumer, as well as solutions for how she might be able to "civilize" her body. Elsewhere in the Women's Wear piece, Sampson further underscores this latter point, arguing that there is no reason that the stoutwear department "should not be used as a place where fat women might be given good advice to the means of reducing," or at least of looking more slender, too.89 Consumer advertising was therefore the most direct as well as the most impactful medium for communicating not only the availability of large-size garments to stout women, but also an entire matrix of ideals—and perhaps most importantly, the promise of a more slender or "improved" appearance—to a geographically dispersed and economically diverse population of consumers. Indeed, even a cursory survey of stoutwear advertising makes one point abundantly clear: The dual tropes of style and slenderness were key selling points in stoutwear advertising.

Building upon this contextual foundation, in the following two subsections, I will take a closer look at the art, craft and discourse of stoutwear advertisements, focusing principally on the output of Lane Bryant and, to a lesser extent, that of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear.

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86 Walker explains how this was an idea most famously furthered by Booker T. Washington who thought that consumerism should precede attempts "to gain social or political equality with whites." See Susannah Walker, Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975 (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 12.
87 Ibid., 12.
88 Walker points out that African American beauty ideals as put forth in mass advertising were derived from white standards of beauty. Ibid., 8.
Makers. Different from those that appeared in the professional media and which were so central to my analysis in the previous chapter, the advertisements analyzed here were created to be consumed by the stout woman herself. Thus, throughout the following sections, I am to show how those concerns about the stout woman’s emotional wellbeing and the complicated matter of what to call her—so prominent within the professional media and discussed at length in the previous section—coalesced with the overriding discourses of slenderness and style within consumer advertisements that appeared in the pages of newspapers, fashion magazines and women’s periodicals. In doing so, I aim to show how discourse was actively put into practice on the page, so to speak, both in text and in images, but to also demonstrate how the problems of labeling and signaling to the stout woman, were inevitably resolved.

5.2.1 The Discourses of Disorder

The fashions are all for the slender.  
The models displayed are all small.  
From the pictures I judge the creations  
Aren't made for the obese at all.  

The counters are crowded with women  
Who look at the book plates thereon  
And think that they will resemble  
The prints in the latest Bon Ton.  

Oh, why doesn’t some one [sic] in Paris  
Successfully launch a campaign  
To glorify embonpoint beauty,  
And comfort the “stylish stout’s” bane?  

The above poem comes from a Lane Bryant advertisement that appeared in the Sunday, June 26, 1927 edition of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Fig. 52). Titled “Song,” it is said to have been written by a stout woman named Eleanor Alletta Chaffee and sent to the New York Sun where it was published on the “Women’s” page as an op-ed. Bemoaning the prevailing fashion for the “boyish” silhouette, Chaffee’s “Song” critiques narrow beauty norms, but also the fashion industry for failing to provide “creations” for the “obese” and for generating these norms, thereby placing blame squarely at the feet of French couturiers. Although critical of the limited options for stout women desiring “stylish” clothes, the poem, when co-opted by Lane Bryant,

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92 This is due to the fact that Lane Bryant and the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers were the most prolific advertisers of stoutwear within the women’s and fashion press and thus afford the greatest opportunity for comparison as well as for tracing changes in rhetoric and style over time.
93 See, for example, advertisements produced by the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers and designated for retailers that put forth the notion that stout women comprised 33% of the female buying public in the United States.
94 Lane Bryant Advertisement, Brooklyn Daily Eagle (June 26, 1927), 10.
95 I was unable to track down the original letter, if it was published at all, within The Sun’s archives.
becomes fodder for the company to situate itself as a sympathetic intermediary in a hostile consumer landscape—one attuned to the plight of the stout woman and committed to effecting change:

There is no other comparable feminine beauty. Sixty out of every hundred American women have embonpoint beauty, in more or less degree. And since, according to Worth, the great couturier of Paris, woman herself is the final arbiter of Fashion, these sixty will dictate the normal trend of fashion...and Paris will express that trend in Styles...But

..."The models displayed are all small." They ARE—except in the Lane Bryant shops, where you may see the same, current Paris styles in LARGER models.

Had you known this, it never would have occurred to you to write your song." (emphasis in original)

Continuing, the verbose advertisement describes the history of Lane Bryant and how the company—a singular presence in the geographies of the garment district as the self-designated “only service of its kind in America”—grew from having only six to over one thousand employees with department stores in seven cities, along with a robust mail order business. Among extant stoutwear advertisements, this one is remarkable for a number of reasons, not least of which being the manner in which it so directly speaks to the plight of stout women for whom Chafee serves as a kind of surrogate, as well as the frankness with which it remarks upon the fashion industry’s role in dictating beauty norms. Indeed, more clearly (and in more words) than other stoutwear advertisements, “Lane Bryant’s Reply,” as it is called, points to the very constructedness of the slender ideal while at the

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same time promoting the notion that “embonpoint beauty” is the most essential and truest form of beauty. In its final lines, the advertisement—which is signed off by Lane (née Lena) Bryant herself—notes, “Paris creates the styles…Lane Bryant fits them to your figure. That sums it up” (emphasis in original).  

This advertisement was the object of analysis in an article that appeared in the “Merchandising and Promotion” section of Women’s Wear a week after it was originally published in The Brooklyn Daily Eagle. Commending the company for its decision to reproduce the poem in full, Women’s Wear noted that the effective appeal would surely resonate even with women of standard proportions as much as it would stout women. Touching upon several universals, the advertisement also critiques the continued hegemony of Parisian fashions over American clothing design and production, as well as the contentiousness of the boyish silhouette. Not unlike the professional advertisements published by the Associated Stylish Stout Wear makers that invoked the patriotic visage of Uncle Sam, it also tapped into certain nationalist discourses (albeit more subtly) by implicitly juxtaposing impractical and unaccommodating French fashions with their more democratic American counterparts. Within this hostile climate, Lane Bryant (the person) stepped forward, presenting herself as an ally and friend to the stout woman—one who offered simple solutions to structural and endemic problems. In short, Lane Bryant’s message is that it is not the stout woman’s body that is the problem, but rather the industry and the matrix of ideals that it perpetuates. Thus, the solution to the persistence of the slender ideal was to shop at Lane Bryant Stores, or spaces in which the stout woman had equal footing and “the youthful styles of Paris [are sold] in Lane Bryant Sizes 18+ to 28+” (emphasis in original).

This advertisement is an example of what historian Roland Marchand has described as the “side-by-side” approach—one which was in its ascendency during the interwar period. Marchand explains how this new manner of writing advertising copy “set forward a model of life’s struggles that was well-tailored to strike a responsive chord among people conscious of the increasing dependence of their life ambitions on large organizations and impersonal judgements.” Tapping into and exploiting the consumer’s “inferiority complex,” this new approach was a direct consequence of the psychological bent of modern advertising and the overt concern with the inner life of the consumer: “As society’s increasing pressures and complexities made the consumer uneasy, the advertiser intervened with sympathetic advice on

By this point, Lena Bryant, the woman, and Lane Bryant, the company’s sympathetic figurehead (and product of a clerical error) had fused into one individual. Indeed, there was little mention of “Lena Bryant” in the professional media.

Although there are few of them, such “meta-analyses” of stoutwear advertisements present an invaluable opportunity to learn about how certain stylistic and discursive decisions were made, hence why I include these as supplements to the analysis of my primary sources (i.e. published advertisements).

“Poem Citing Style Woes of Stout Woman Answered in Ad That Sells Store’s Slenderizing Service,” Women’s Wear (July 2, 1927), 5.

The fashion media were critical of the excessively slender ideal at the same time it championed slenderness. For further discussion of the slender ideal, see chapters six and seven. Lears also notes that in the early twentieth century, women’s magazines regularly assailed the “fashionable woman” as “frivolous” even as she was held up in the fashion press. See Lears, Fables of Abundance, 184.

Lane Bryant Advertisement, The Brooklyn Daily Eagle (June 26, 1927), 10.

Marchand, Advertising the American Dream, 13.
how to triumph over the impersonal judgements of the modern world.” 103 Within the context of fashion advertising, Jobling has similarly noted the shift from “reason why” advertisements, popular through the late nineteenth century, to more “modern” and “atmospheric” advertisements during the interwar years, which were a product of the rise of ready-to-wear as well as the professionalization of advertising. 104 In this instance, Lane Bryant identifies the oppressive system or institution (Parisian fashions), the problems (narrow beauty standards and a lack of choice) and the solution (Lane Bryant’s fashionable large-size garments), but not without a thinly-veiled barb at the author of the poem’s intelligence (a proxy for the consumer) that read, “If you had realized this, you would have been much happier.” 105 Signed off by Lane Bryant, the advertisement was intended to strike a personal and emotional chord with the consumer—not unlike a letter to a friend. 106

Also of note, however, is the manner in which the advertisement manages to so delicately sidestep the issue of how to refer to the consumer—using a host of euphemisms and turns of phrase to artfully avoid invoking the term stout. Throughout the advertisement, the phrases “embonpoint beauty,” “women like you,” “correctly proportioned larger sizes,” “not slender,” “larger models” and “Lane Bryant Sizes” all stand in for the terms stout and stoutwear, which do not appear anywhere in the advertisement. Indeed, by the mid-1920s, some were beginning to believe that the term stout had “outlived its usefulness.” 107 By this time, too, it is likely that Lane Bryant had become more or less synonymous with stoutwear, obviating the need to provide further clarification about the type of garments being promoted. Even so, Lane Bryant’s seemingly pointed omission of these terms is nevertheless in keeping with conventions in stoutwear advertising in the mid-to-late-1920s. As discussed in the previous section, from early on, advertising experts warned copywriters that they should avoid using “explosive” terms when speaking to and about stout women, 108 and here, it is possible to glimpse how this directive was put into practice. Throughout this specific advertisement, the stout body is elevated as an ideal,

103 Marchand, Advertising the American Dream, 14. In his own reading of advertisements during this period, Lears is somewhat more pessimistic, suggesting that while in their advertisements copywriters made an effort to seem like they were on the side of the consumer, most of them believed that “ordinary folk” were so “stupid” that they could not “negotiate the complexity of modern life without the aid of experts like themselves.” See Lears, Fables of Abundance, 233.


105 Elsewhere in the advertisement, the consumer’s intellect is also called into question, as in a passage that read, “And, as someone recently said, “you can easily identify the embonpoint woman who doesn’t know Lane Bryant—SHE ISN’T SMART” (emphasis in original); here, “smartness” can also be understood as the appearance of smartness. Lane Bryant Advertisement, Brooklyn Daily Eagle (June 26, 1927), 10. This advertisement, and especially the thinly-veiled critiques of the stout consumer’s intellect, causes the advertisement to somewhat uneasily toe the line between emotional appeal and argument—another tendency Marchand has identified in 1920s advertising, which had “a polarizing tendency that pitted advertising persuasiveness against buyer resistance.” See Marchand, Advertising the American Dream, 13-14.

106 Marchand notes that this was a common technique that permitted the brand to “smile with them, frown with them, and suffer with them.” See Marchand, Advertising the American Dream, 14.

107 “‘Stout’ Said to Have Outlived its Usefulness,” Women’s Wear (January 10, 1929), 9. Extant sources reveal, however, that the term would continue to be used through the 1950s; see, for example, Lane Bryant’s Fall/Winter 1951-1952 catalog, which advertises “Slenderizing Fashions—Everything for Stout Women.”

while blame is cast on the American garment industry’s blind adherence to the narrow beauty conventions trickling down from Paris. Different from purveyors of so-called “Paris fashions,” however, Lane Bryant—in an acknowledgement of the stout woman’s plight—positions itself as a translator of fashionable Parisian models into “LARGER [sic] sizes” to create a more equitable and democratic shopping experience for the stout woman.

Women’s Wear’s in depth analysis of the Lane Bryant advertisement was, in many ways, in keeping with the psychological, self-reflexive tendencies of advertising and of the professionalization of the field from the 1920s onward. Similar analyses, in which advertisements of all kinds were carefully studied by “experts” to assess their persuasiveness, were a mainstay in the pages of Women’s Wear, but also in trade journals like Printers’ Ink, Dry Goods Merchants Trade Journal and Dry Goods Economist during this time. Given the potentially “explosive” nature of stoutwear advertisements, however, it is not surprising that there were so many words dedicated to the issue of selling to the stout woman. In another such feature, an advertisement by William Filene’s Sons Co., Boston was analyzed by Women’s Wear in its regular “In the Ad World” column (Fig. 53). The advertisement, deemed “mostly successful” by the trade journal, was said to have found its strength in the manner it inspired “self-assurance and confidence” in the stout consumer. Continuing, the feature explains how, through a deft use of euphemistic language, Filene’s successfully mitigates the timorousness which many large sized women feel when buying ready to wear. In the left ear of the advertisement appears the reassuring information that “Recent scientific investigations reveal that 40 per cent—almost half—of American women are ‘stout.’ 17 per cent—almost one in every six—wears size 44 or over.” Then the advertisement goes on to comfort the large sized woman with the thought that the inability in the past to get well-fitting garments was due, not to any fault of her own, but to the fact that though “almost half of the American women are stout, yet the average store devotes much less than half its attention to larger women. Filene’s women’s shops,” however, they assure her, “are working out her problem scientifically.”

Notably, and in keeping with advice published elsewhere in the professional media, the advertisement carefully sidesteps invoking the word stout, opting to instead refer to garments as “large-sized” and consumers as “larger women.” Likewise, the use of statistics and scientific data, Women’s Wear observes, are employed to reassure the stout woman that her body was the rule, rather than the exception. Quite critically, however, Women’s Wear also notes that this was the second in a series of stoutwear advertisements published by Filene’s; the previous iteration had directly addressed the stout woman in a salutation which was deemed by the trade journal to be a costly mistake.

In addition to discussing the practice of advertising to the stout woman in general, the aforementioned feature, “Some Small Advertisements for Large Sizes” penned by advertising authority Edith Sampson, similarly compared five separate stoutwear advertisements in order to

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110 “In the Ad World: Filene’s Glad Tidings,” 23.
Figure S3: Women's Wear (April 2, 1917), 23.
assess their relative persuasiveness (Fig. 54). In comparing the five plates, Sampson noted that while the advertisements avoid using the term fat,

they do, however, make pretty free use of the next worst word to it, which is “Stout.” But many of the advertisements approach the customer entirely as a “large woman.” There is a fine line, too, in this choice of words because a woman may be “large” without being “fat” or “stout.” She may indeed be a “noble woman, nobly planned, to warm, to comfort, and command.” “Large” gives one the idea of good proportion of flesh, perhaps, but flesh that is well distributed...and “stout” says, in another way, “too fat.”

Delving the anxieties surrounding the word stout that were discussed elsewhere in the professional media, Sampson notes that while stout conjures a singular image of a woman "too fat," the term "large" is deemed more generalist in tone and inclusive of a range of sizes and body shapes, bringing to mind a body of "good proportion." Even so, a survey of the reproduced advertisements nevertheless reveals that three of the five advertisements invoke the phrase "stout women" when addressing the consumer—perhaps attesting to the enduring utility of the term—while one used the more euphemistic but somewhat less precise "large women" and the other, the clumsy turn of phrase, "for women who require larger sizes." What Sampson's analysis reveals, however, is just how volatile the issue of terminology was in practice for
advertisers who, even with a small discursive slip or careless turn of phrase, risked offending or alienating potential customers.

Lacking a standard convention for referring to consumers of streetwear, extant sources reveal that the only recourse for advertisers was to resort to what can only be described as discursive tongue twisters and the heavy application of euphemisms. A prime example of this word play can be found in an April 1928 Lane Bryant advertisement that appeared in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Fig. 55). With the phrase “If You Are Not Slender” emblazoned across the top, the advertisement entreats women to “Let Lane Bryant make you appear more slender. We lead in this service because we concentrate upon it—presenting the latest fashions in better-fitting sizes” (emphasis in original).112 Notably, in the bottom register and in small text, the advertisement also differentiates between “Misses’ Plus Sizes 16+ to 30+,” and “Stout Sizes 38 to 56”—this being an exceptionally early (and isolated) use of the term “plus size.”113 Another advertisement from the same year, which also appeared in several editions of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Fig. 56), invoked similar language, again utilizing the phrase “If You Are Not Slender” to signal to female consumers reticent to identify as stout, while also noting that the company offers the latest fashions (“transparent velvet”) “without


113 The earliest usage of the term “plus-size” that I have been able to locate in my primary research appears in a July 5, 1927 issue of *Women’s Wear* in an advertisement for William Hendricks Inc. promoting “Incomparably Chaste, Smart, Graceful, Skim-Necking Plus Size Frock and Gown.” Lane Bryant, however, also began using the term, but only in a limited capacity, by 1928, as in the above example, and with little explanation as to how plus-sizes differed from stout sizes. Another Lane Bryant advertisement, also from 1928, provides more context, describing it as “a new size range for the woman of Individual Figure who finds regular Women’s sizes too large, and regular Misses’ sizes too small.” Continuing, the advertisement further explains, “Misses’ Plus Sizes offer women of individual figure the most exclusive modes in an infinitely varied size range used by no other store—measurements in waist, bust, hip and sleeve length, to suit women who differ from the stereotyped measurements.” See Lane Bryant Advertisement, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (October 29, 1922), 14.
any of that aggravating tightness around the hips which is so destructive of
smartness." Continuing, the advertisement
further notes that the "absence of tightness
around arms and hips...is the
distinguishing feature of all Lane Bryant
frocks. Precisely the same styles worn by
the smartest of slender women."

While these examples are notable
for the inventive manner in which they
avoid using the terms stout or stoutwear,
they also, however, reveal a major
preoccupation of stoutwear advertisements
from this period—that being the emphasis
placed on the on the ideas of style and
slenderness. For instance, in an earlier Lane
Bryant advertisement that appeared in the
Brooklyn Daily Eagle in October 1922, the
company announced the opening of its
Brooklyn location, describing it as "The
Doorway to Style, Slenderness & Saving
for the Stout Woman" (Fig. 57). Although the
term stout is invoked here—indeed, this
was prior to Women's Wear's 1929 declaration that the term had "outlived its usefulness"—as
with the previously discussed advertisements, there is nevertheless a demonstrable effort
to diminish the power of the term through a pointed use of euphemistic substitutions and a focus
on style throughout the advertisement, which read, in part, "The House of Lane Bryant presents
for the women who require individual sizes and styles, an exclusive variety of modish apparel
that will fit your style ideas as well as your figure" (emphasis in original). An earlier example from
Lane Bryant, which appeared in a November 1920 edition of the New York Times stressed similar
points, but in an even more forceful manner (Fig. 58). Advertising "Fashions that Slenderize for
Every Occasion" across the top register, it goes on to somewhat boldly declare that "Lane
Bryant ameliorates the woman of the large figure from the tailor and dressmaker... Exclusive
fashions and authentic modes are skilfully adapted to the particular needs of the stout
woman."

The Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers would draw upon strikingly similar ideas and
invoke parallel discourses in their own consumer advertising as, for instance, in the organization's

124 Lane Bryant Advertisement, Brooklyn Daily Eagle (October 28, 1928), 12.
126 Lane Bryant Advertisement, Brooklyn Daily Eagle (October 29, 1922), 14.
127 Lane Bryant Advertisement, New York Times (November 14, 1920), 19.
first Vogue advertisement (Fig. 59), which appeared in the November 1, 1917 issue, and which read:

This label is the mark of a style service for stout women which bears the enthusiastic endorsement of more than Five Hundred Fashion Editors of leading style magazines and newspapers throughout the country.

The Svethline label is a message which says to the stout woman that she is at last freed from the cradle, ill-fitting makeshifts of other days, and that she may now appear as smart and stylish as her more slender sister.19 (emphasis in original)

Much as in the aforementioned Lane Bryant advertisement, here, the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers similarly emphasize style, while also furthering the notion that their products “free” the stout woman from antiquated—and implicitly inferior—modes of garment production. A later Svethline advertisement (Fig. 60), which promoted an Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers “style show” (a phenomenon that will be discussed a greater length later in this chapter), echoed those points but in simpler terms, reading, “Come In Stout—Go Out Stylish.” The Svethline System for transforming the stout figure to one that suggests becoming slenderness, to a degree never before imagined by the most optimistic.20 In these instances, stoutwear is bestowed with the extraordinary power to mitigate fat stigma by helping the stout woman to “appear as smart and stylish as her more slender sister,” as in the former, and to “come in stout and go out stylish,” as in the latter.

Bringing together Hacking’s notion of labeling in the practice of “making up people” and Ewen’s discussion of the civilizing function of mass advertising, in these advertisements it is possible to glimpse how, through the medium of advertising, the stoutwear industry was able to propose new ways for

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19 Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers Advertisement, Vogue (November 1, 1917), 17.
20 Svethline System Advertisement, Pittsburgh Daily Post (October 2, 1923), 5.

Figure 59: Vogue (November 1, 1917), 11.
the stout woman to not only consume but also to be. In their overt focus on slenderness, for
instance, these advertisements present ideas about what it means to get dressed as a stout woman
and, perhaps more importantly, what it means to be stout. Stoutwear was not made to merely
fit the stout woman’s body; it was made to slendernize and thus help the woman inch closer to
prevailing beauty norms through the medium of dress. In turn, the notion that stout woman should
always strive to appear more slender in her dress practices—and thus never content to appear stout
—is repeatedly and forcefully underscored, and thereby normalized, throughout fashion media discourses and, importantly, across brands. Indeed, even as retailers and advertisers could not
arrive at a consensus about what to call the stout woman, one idea they shared was that stoutwear, in
addition to fitting the stout woman, should slendernize. Invoking Ewen’s notion that mass
advertising created “mass desire,” and as I would argue, mass aesthetics, within these spaces, it is
possible to see the mechanisms through which the stout woman’s body was effectively “civilized.”

At the same time, however, the idea that the stout body was in need of control and
refinement in the pursuit of appearing more slender competed with Lane Bryant’s assertion that
their ready-made garments “emancipated” the stout woman, as well as the Associated Stylish
Stout Wear Makers’ sentiment that they could “free” her from the “tyranny of endless dress
fittings,” as was claimed in one advertisement.23 Far from emancipating the stout woman, however, stoutwear as it is discussed in these advertisements actually functioned as a disciplinary medium, veiled in the liberationist discourses of the transformative power of mass
consumption. Even so, these remarks were not necessarily at odds with Edith Sampson’s

23 Associated Stylish Stout Wear advertisement for Swellline fashion show, Deseret Daily Review (October
18, 1917), 3.
contention, already discussed earlier in this chapter, that stoutwear advertisements should “[educate] the large sized woman in the art of good dressing.” Indeed, “good dressing,” as becomes clear in these examples, but also across the entire genre of stoutwear advertisements, involved dressing in a manner that made the stout body appear more slender, and thus, modern.

While a close reading of stoutwear advertisements reveals much about how advertisers dealt with the problems of labeling and signaling to the stout woman in practice as well as how advertisements played a crucial role in the process of “making up” the stout woman as a category of consumer, my narrow focus on discourse up to this point nevertheless risks obscuring the important role that images played in presenting acceptable modes of stout embodiment, too. Thus, in the following subsection, I will turn my attention to how the stout body was represented within stoutwear advertisements in order to discern not only how the discourses of ordering or “civilizing” the stout body were written on the page, but also how they were visualized.

5.2.2 The Slender Stout Body

If one were to survey historical fashion media in order to gain a clear understanding of what, exactly, a stout woman looked like, one would have little luck. Indeed, just as advertisers grappled with how to refer to the stout woman, and manufacturers had differing opinions about how to measure stoutness—that is, by a woman’s weight, dimensions or bust-waist-hip ratio—visual representations of stout women ran the proverbial gamut. This was in spite of the fact that “stout” was constructed within professional discourses as an identifiable and viable consumer category. A side-by-side-by-side comparison of three Lane Bryant advertisements published in the pages of *Vogue* within months of each other throughout the year 1915 illustrates this point well (Fig. 61). The first—an advertisement that appeared in the October 1, 1915 issue of *Vogue*—depicts perhaps what might have been considered the most typical “type” of stout woman: Visibly elderly with a subtle suggestion of a double chin, she bears some of the stereotypical physical attributes of stoutness. Even as she exudes neatness, both her ill-defined figure and the formality of her dress, with its subtle mono-bosom, harken back to a bygone era. The second advertisement, published two weeks earlier in the October 1 issue, differs from the first in that it is fully illustrated; beyond that obvious departure, however, the woman appears visibly more slender than her more elderly counterpart—her attenuated limbs and contoured face giving an impression of slenderness beneath her generously-cut, A-line suit, under which her body disappears. The third and final advertisement, which appeared months earlier in the June 15 issue

122 By 1909, the severe S-Curve silhouette, so popular at the turn of the century, had softened as the waist fell at a more natural position and skirts became straighter. This style would fall out of vogue, however, within a few years and by 1916, skirts had become straighter and fuller and the overall silhouette more relaxed. The style of the woman pictured would therefore have been deemed unfashionable for its time. See Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women’s Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health and Art* (Kent and London: Kent State University Press, 2003), 19-20.
of *Vogue*, depicts a notably younger woman—perhaps the embodiment of the “stylish stout” type previously identified by Albert Mabin—donning a fashionable bathing costume. Much as with the second advertisement, the woman appears if not slender, then perhaps average in size, and certainly not stout *per se*, at least compared to the older woman in the first advertisement—her bared arms and soft features perhaps only subtly suggesting excess weight.\(^{123}\) Indeed, when considered alongside another swimwear advertisement that ran in the same issue of *Vogue* depicting standard-size young women in similar bathing costumes (Fig. 62), it becomes clear that the youthful stout woman in the third advertisement looks only nominally larger than her slender counterparts. Thus, one thing that becomes evident through this latter comparison is that stoutness was not an infallible or objective category, but rather a condition that was measured in

\(^{123}\) My reading of these images, however, is of course always informed by my contemporary perception of what constitutes “overweight.” Indeed, as discussed earlier in this dissertation, overweight is a mutable and historically relative construct. As a consumer of media in the twenty-first century, I therefore view the fat, female body through the particularly extreme discourses of the global “obesity epidemic,” and thus what was considered a stout body in the early twentieth century would barely register today as overweight.
degrees from the “norm.” The threshold between a standard garment and a stout one was, in the end, only a matter of a few centimeters. What these images thus demonstrate is that it was possible for many women—and not just those proverbial four-hundred-pound stout women described by Susy Collins Miller in this chapter’s opening quote—to potentially see themselves as stout.

Although these varying representations of stout bodies fail to provide a singular portrait of stoutness, they nevertheless stand in stark contraposition to the hyperbolized images of stout women that appeared within the professional media, and namely in those early articles that described the profitable future of the stoutwear trade. In the Women’s Wear article, “How Many Fat Women in Your Town” (see Fig. 3), which was published the same year as these advertisements, for instance, each figure in the endless mass of stout women is rendered comically large. With their round faces, ill-defined waists and ample bosoms, they do not only bear all of the stereotypical corporeal hallmarks of stoutness, they are literally gigantic in number as well as in proportion—their bodies as large as buildings. This gross and reductive caricature was, in many ways, indicative of how the manufacturers, retailers and advertisers had come to imagine stout women: as a quantifiably large population, that, although flawed, was nevertheless eager to consume. In this illustration, there is a clear resonance between image and text: With the byline, “You Don’t Know, But Enough to Pay Well for Special Attention,” the illustration concretely visualizes the article’s claim that upwards of one-third of the female consuming public in the United States qualified as stout. However, even if this is how the stoutwear industry had come to envision their consumers, it is unlikely that this was how the stout woman liked to see herself.

Within popular fashion media and women’s periodicals, the images of stout women were therefore (and perhaps unsurprisingly) more evidently idealized, controlled and sanitized. Although each of the Lane Bryant advertisements presented a different vision of stoutness, they nevertheless sold the same thing according to their shared byline: “Smart Apparel for Stout Figures.” Here, the word “smart” suggests both the stylishness (or at least appropriateness) of
Lane Bryant's garments, but also perhaps the transformative, slenderizing capabilities of intelligent apparel designed on scientific lines. Possessing features that subtly suggest stoutness, such as their fair skin and refined features, the women in the Lane Bryant advertisements are exemplars of idealized, Western beauty, though slightly enlarged. Likewise, from the neck down, there is no matter out of place. Each body is shaped by the appropriate, if not fashionable, silhouettes of 1915, which contain and control their deviant flesh and errant curves into shapes more recognizably modern. As pictures of idealized stoutness, they are a visual manifestation of the ideals of stoutwear design discourse, and thus power, in practice. It could therefore be argued that rather than selling the slender ideal, stoutwear advertisements were instead promoting an alternative or acceptable model of stout embodiment—one in which the disorder of the stout body is visibly brought to order through the medium of specially-designed, slenderizing apparel.

Although it is possible to glimpse how discourse was put into practice through these advertisements, the practice of depicting idealized or aspirational versions of women's bodies in advertising was by no means unique to stoutwear during this period. Indeed, as Lears writes, the advent of national, mass advertising in the early twentieth century brought about a “bureaucratic rationality to the iconography of the body,” one in which the body “began to be sterilized and submitted to the ethos of rationalization.” Lears suggests that the period between 1910 and 1920—a decade largely defined by Progressive Era ideals and the tenets (and aesthetics) of Taylorism and Fordism—was the proverbial tipping point during which the “voluptuous woman and the portly, bearded man yielded to smoother, cleaner, more athletic, and more obviously youthful modes of beauty.” An archetype of youthful, Anglo-Saxon beauty thus came to pervade mass advertising. While this affected the manner in which both sexes were depicted, it was particularly evident in representations of women, who, along with their corsets, “shed their voluptuous and maternal connotations and began to look (as well as behave) more like girls.”

Entwistle points out how clothing is often discussed in “moral terms,” with the fashion media invoking terms like “good,” “faultless” and “correct.” Such terms, she argues point to the fact that the idea of being well dressed is a social construct, and that few are immune to the pressures of being properly attired. Entwistle, *Fashioned Body*, 9. See also Quentin Bell, *On Human Finery* (London: Hogarth Press, 1976), 19; Aileen Ribero, *Dress and Morality* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1986), 12-13. Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 162, 165.

Walker observes much the same in her own work on black beauty culture in the United States in the 1920s. She has suggested that while the Western beauty ideals of fair skin and smooth hair were pervasive, “considerations of race and color shaped the beauty standard promoted and the methods needed to achieve it.” Said differently, black beauty ideals were shaped and informed by those upheld within American culture at large. As with black beauty standards, the beauty standards promoted to stout women were similarly amended by the realities and constraints of the stout woman's too-generous flesh. To this end, the “stout ideal,” as we might call it, at once adhered to and broke with the Anglo-Saxon feminine ideal that otherwise excluded stout women. On the one hand, images of stout women in advertisements depicted women as well-coiffed, neat, healthy and, perhaps most importantly, *white*. The stout ideal, however, notably broke (albeit subtly) with the slender ideal in depicting the body, which bore many of the hallmarks of Western beauty ideals, as physically larger. For further discussion, see Walker, *Style and Status*, 8.

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This shift from the more mature, "maternal" body to a more youthful ideal is clearly discernible within stoutwear advertisements, which between 1915 and the mid-1920s gradually came to depict ever-slimmer and evermore girlish—and to that end, increasingly idealized—representations of stoutness. The previously-discussed Lane Bryant advertisements—which featured in the second instance a slender-looking woman in a suit and in the third, a youthful "stylish stout" in a bathing costume—are thus in some ways outliers within the grander visual schema of stoutwear advertising during this middle part of the decade. Indeed, some of the earliest stoutwear advertisements portray stout women as both generally older but also more perceptibly stout. For instance, in a series of advertisements published by the Associated Stylish...
Stout Wear Makers promoting their "Svolline" garments in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* from August to October 1917, the stout women portrayed look more similar to the elderly woman in the first Lane Bryant advertisement than the more evidently youthful women in the latter two (Fig. 63). In many ways, these depictions are in keeping with the commonly-held perception at this time that stoutness was a byproduct of the aging process. Likewise, other Lane Bryant advertisements published mid-decade mirrored both the stylistic conventions (black and white photographs overlaid with hand-drawn elements and figures depicted with little context) and subject matter (elder, more clearly matronly stout women) of the Svolline advertisements (Fig. 64).

As the teens bled into the twenties, however, advertisers made a stark stylistic departure from this manner of representing stout women. This was due in no small measure to the growing influence of art deco motifs within the fashion media at large during this period, which in turn resulted in the demise of photography, if only temporarily.\(^{27}\) Breward and others attribute this shift during the interwar years to "a growing interest in the symbolism of [fashion's] surfaces and its psychological potential as a communicator of particular moral and aesthetic values," rather than the material qualities of dress as a commodity.\(^{28}\) In many ways, illustrations were deemed a better illuminator of these ideas than were photographs, which were

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\(^{27}\) Cally Blackman notes that photography first appeared in fashion magazines around 1900; however, the stylistic influence of Paul Poiret, who commissioned illustrations by artists like Paul Iribe and Georges Lepape to publicize his collections, would have ramifications across the fashion media landscape. The *Couturier de Bon Ton*, with its lavish, full-color, stylized fashion plates, would also prove highly influential, with illustrations working for both European and American publications throughout the 1920s and 30s. See Cally Blackman, *100 Years of Fashion Illustration* (London: Laurence King, 2007). For further discussion, see also Cheryl Buckley and Hillary Fawcett, *Fashioning the Feminine: Representation and Women* (*Fashion from the Fin de Siècle to the Present*) (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 74-75.

perhaps viewed as too indexical. Although this stylistic shift is clearly evident across all American fashion media during this period, the tipping point from photography to illustration occurred in stoutwear advertising between 1917 and 1918, when both Lane Bryant and the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers, among others, began to abandon photography for more atmospheric, if less precise, illustrations. In two Lane Bryant advertisements, published in Vogue in 1917, for instance, the company eschewed the straight photography that so defined its advertisements in the years prior for more evocative modes of representation. In one (Fig. 65), a woman appears outdoors, donning a fur-trimmed walking suit—a breeze blowing her coat open to reveal its patterned lining—while in the other (Fig. 66), a woman attired in a stylized, plaid bathing costume is seated in the foreground of a lightly-sketched beach scene while resting what appears to be a sun umbrella on her shoulder. Neither illustration advertises a specific Lane Bryant

13 After this turning point, it is rare to encounter photography in stoutwear advertisements until the 1960s. The realism of these photos that were so prevalent in the middle part of the decade is, perhaps, a holdover from nineteenth century conventions of fashion illustration.
garment as in previous examples, which drew on codes of representation that were more characteristic of mail order catalogs (e.g. Figs. 60, 63 in which specific items are identified by their price and model number), while the realism of the photographs is traded for a two-dimensional but expressive flatness. Different from earlier examples, which utilized photographs solely for the purposes of illustration, these advertisements are patently more preoccupied with the symbolism of stoutwear and the particular moral and aesthetic values embedded within it. While in the earlier examples, the photographs depict stout women suspended in open space and without context—the focus being solely on the material features of their garments—here, the women are shown at ease and engaging in leisure activities. They are ostensibly emancipated from the tyrannies of their tailors and dressmakers as other advertisements more forcefully suggested. Even if the style of the illustrations—which, with their sinuous lines and flat expanses of pattern, were clearly (albeit reductively) inspired by those of Georges Lepape and Paul Iribe, popularized by Paul Poiret during this period—reveals little detailed knowledge about the “real” garments, the illustrations better exude what is described in both advertisements as the “smart,” “youthful” and “simple” style of Lane Bryant’s “specially designed” apparel.

Beyond the obvious stylistic departures these advertisements take from their predecessors, however, one of the most evident differences is the markedly more youthful and slender appearance of the women depicted. Gone are any of the subtle suggestions of stoutness such as double chins or undefined waists. The only cue that a reader would have had that the women depicted were stout would have come from the advertisements’ headlines, “Correct Bathing Apparel Designed by Lane Bryant for Stout Figures” in one and “Smart Clothes for Stout Women” in the other, thereby creating a palpable disconnect between text and image. The captions—but also the mere mention of Lane Bryant, which by this time had become essentially synonymous with stoutwear—however, play a vital role in connoting the significance of the advertisement and in signaling to stout consumers. Indeed, without such “parasitic” captions to help “illustrate” the image, to borrow the language of Roland Barthes, these advertisements would have blended in seamlessly with surrounding ones. The captions, in this way, are vital for differentiating these illustrations as not merely representations of slender women, but as representations of idealized stout women—a fine but important point in ensuring the “success” of a stoutwear advertisement.

This dissonance between what was represented and what was written in the pursuit of depicting evermore stylized and idealized representations of stoutness, however, became even more flagrant in the 1920s and into the 30s. In one Lane Bryant advertisement for a fur coat sale that appeared in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle in August 1930, for example, the figures—with their fashionable Eton crops, framed by exaggeratedly large collars—look scarcely different both in size and stylistically from a figure depicted in an adjacent advertisement for Martin’s fur coats in

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132 Blackman, 100 Years of Fashion Illustration, 9-10. See also Buckley and Fawcett, Fashioning the Feminine, 75-76.

133 As Barthes writes, in press (or fashion) photographs, “the text constitutes a parasitic message designed to connote the image, to ‘quicken’ it with one or more second order signifides. In other words… the image no longer illustrates the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasite on the image.” See Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” 204.
standard sizes (Fig. 67). Furthermore, notably absent in this example is any use of the word stout—the phrase “lager woman” being invoked only in the fine print in the bottommost register. On the one hand, the similarity of the two illustrations stands as a testament to the pervasiveness of the need-like slender ideal during this period (a point that is discussed at length in chapter six). On the other, however, if stoutwear was designed to create the appearance of slenderness (a fact forcefully underscored time and time again throughout the genre of stoutwear advertising), then these highly stylized illustrations also seem to depict the truly transformative, bordering on miraculous, slendernizing capacities of stoutwear. Although the illustrations are strikingly similar, they convey two distinct kinds of knowledge. In the Martin’s advertisement, the slender ideal is merely reinforced; in the Lane Bryant advertisement, however, a new possibility for stout embodiment is put forth—one in which the practice of slendernizing the body becomes the primary objective of dressing as a stout woman.

Unmoored both from the visual truths of stout embodiment, but also from the realities and stigmas of overweight in interwar America, the unbelievable transformations depicted in
these later stoutwear advertisements departed from a grander visual tendency within early twentieth century fashion illustration. As Cheryl Buckley and Hilary Fawcett point out, whereas fashion photography in the first decade of the twentieth century favored realism, fashion illustration during the interwar period became

patently "artificial," and unlike photography it had no purchase on what was "real," it was thus the ideal medium for the creation of a particular type of femininity which connected in important ways with the modernity of contemporary life.134

Continuing, the fashion historians further suggest that such "patently artificial" fashion illustrations are thus an arena for "mapping out" the competing standards and contradictions inherent in feminine identity construction during the First World War and after.135 Chief among them was the proliferation of what they call "girl-women" who bore youthful facial traits but whose dress and posture connote sexual maturity.136

Although they speak about fashion illustration writ-large, Buckley and Fawcett’s discussion of the contradictions inherent in modern forms of fashion illustration nevertheless apply as well to an analysis of stoutwear advertisements, but with the added tension of portraying stout bodies in an idealized manner and absent the stigmatizing gaze through which stout women were so often viewed. A Lane

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134 Buckley and Fawcett, Fashioning the Feminine, 74.
135 Ibid., 74.
136 Ibid., 75.
Bryant advertisement published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in the April 1924 reveals how some of the particular contradictions that were so central to stout embodiment were negotiated visually (Fig. 68). Donning "mannish tailleur" cut along the lines of the fashionable tubular silhouette of the mid-1920s, the bodies of the four figures are elongated to such an extent that they appear at once fashionably slender but Amazonian in proportion. While lacking any of the obvious visual hallmarks of stoutness, they nevertheless tower over a roughly-sketched city skyline in the far background. Perhaps the most obvious contradiction in the manner they are physically depicted, however, lies in the very fact that stoutness was rendered so slender by a company that dealt in stoutwear, and thus for whom it was in the best interests that stout women remain stout. A further contradiction lies in the way their cropped haircuts and youthful features stand somewhat at odds with the conservation of their dress, but their look, in totality, nevertheless reads as modern. Perhaps most notably, however, the women are shown at ease and at one with their surroundings—their modern posture and styling creating a harmony that belies the fact that stout women were regarded within American culture as being so totally out of sync with the architectures and rhythms of modern life. A similar advertisement, published a year later, invokes similar tropes, but trades the city scene for a more bucolic one and mannish tailoring for softer spring frocks (Fig. 69). Absent in both of these contexts is the harsh glare of fat stigma. Indeed, as Buckley and Fawcett suggest in the above quote, these illustrations "have no purchase on reality." The transformative capacities of stoutwear are thus both complete and total. Not only do Lane Bryant's garments designed along "scientific lines" slenderize the stout woman's body, they purport to alter her total world, permitting her to not only fit her garments, but to *also fit in.* In these images, the stout woman was able to *see herself slender.*

Although in many ways, the visual tropes of stoutwear advertising were merely in keeping with the visual conventions of fashion illustration in the 1920s, the evolution (or gradual whittling away) of the stout body within these spaces was also informed by the growing interest
in the psychology of modern advertising. One of the key thinkers in this growing field of inquiry was the applied psychologist Walter Dill Scott whose book *The Theory of Advertising* (1903) was one of the first to explore how psychological principles could be successfully applied to business. While the volume attempted to construct a “theory of advertising,” his second book, *The Psychology of Advertising* (1903) went further in putting forth a template for successful advertisements, based on the needs and desires of specific consumer groups. In a chapter focusing on advertisements directed toward fat people, Scott spoke about the importance of depicting figures in a manner that would inspire feelings of “sympathy” and “admiration” from the reader. Comparing two advertisements for fat reducing compounds, Scott argued that one depicting an unfashionable fat lady, “dress[ed] in plaids, which, as every corpulent person knows serve but to increase the apparent size,” is “ridiculous” and therefore garners feelings of pity and disgust from the reader. By comparison, an advertisement for a fat reducing ointment featuring a photograph of a stout woman possessing a more evidently fashionable S-curve silhouette—her hair piled high and her posture demure—is deemed more sympathetic. He writes,

> She is apparently making the best of a bad condition. If she is going to use the Howard Obesity Ointment, it certainly must be worth considering. I feel sorry for her and sympathize with her in her affliction. She certainly feels about the matter just as I should, and consequently it is easy for me to imagine myself in her stead and to feel the need for relief from obesity and to take the necessary steps to secure such relief.

According to Scott, advertisements are successful when consumers are able to relate to those who are pictured. As everyone aspires toward a more improved version of themselves, Scott argues that consumers feel most sympathetic “for those whom [they] might call [their] ideals,” or those who appear prosperous, well-dressed and happy.

Even so, it doesn't seem there was unanimity on how best to portray the stout woman. An article published in the June 1920 edition of *Printers' Ink* argued that one of the great successes of the Lane Bryant catalogue was its realistic, “truthful” depiction of stout women. Different from the advertisements, the article explains,

> The cuts in the stout's catalogue show women of various types, well frocked, hatted, gloved and shod, though they are really stout women. And while the faces pictured are plump and agreeable, there appear no triple chins. Lane Bryant gowns for stout bodies and pictures them truthfully, but chins are not in this company's ken.

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138 Ibid., 69.
139 Scott, *Psychology of Advertising*, 142-143.
140 Ibid., 138-139.
141 “Selling ‘Stouts,’” 38.
Figure 70: Fall/Winter 1924-1925 Lane Bryant catalog cover (above) and interior double-page spread (below).
An examination of extant Lane Bryant mail order catalogs dating back to 1924-1925—the earliest I was able to obtain—affirms these observations. Different from the exaggeratedly elongated and stylized illustrations that concurrently appeared in the mainstream fashion media, the women depicted in the catalogs are visibly and perhaps more “truthfully” larger, though not exaggeratedly so (Fig. 70). Indeed, as *Printers’ Ink* went on to explain elsewhere in the article, Lane Bryant shows “the prospective customer how she wishes to appear and can appear if she but makes those trips to the beauty doctor.” Thus, although the figures in the Lane Bryant catalogue are subtly more lifelike than their counterparts in the fashion press—perhaps attesting to the fact that catalogs, as proxies for the department store or boutique, necessarily had to represent clothing as realistically and straightforwardly as possible—both nevertheless portray the stout woman as viewed through an aspirational lens.

Working within a framework put forth by Walter Dill Scott but bolstered by larger trends (i.e. Art Deco and the influence of Georges Lepape and Paul Iribe, among other things) and tendencies (i.e. depicting women with girlish features) within fashion illustration at large, as the teens bled into the twenties, stoutwear advertisements became increasingly modern as they eschewed realism for idealism. Indeed, according to the prevailing logic of the theory of advertising at that time, consumers wanted to see better or, in some cases, completely transformed versions of themselves within the media; however, in some instances, this logic was taken to the extreme as may be glimpsed in some of the advertisements above. As representations of stout women grew even more slender, however, they also became increasingly removed from the realities of stout embodiment to the point that, in some examples, they looked scarcely different from slender women alongside whom they appeared in the fashion media. As exaggerated as they were, however, such advertisements provided a resounding affirmation of the transformative capacities of stoutwear, while at the same time revealing many of the contradictions inherent in stout embodiment.

Although these advertisements may have proven successful in inspiring stout women to shop, they do not, however, tell the story of what happened when they crossed the threshold of department stores and boutiques—or highly symbolic spaces from which they had for so long been excluded. In the final section of this chapter, I will therefore examine how the psychology of selling to the stout woman translated off the page and in the spaces and places of fashion consumption.

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142 Given that store catalogs are not commonly kept in museum archives and fashion collections, I had to bid obtain copies of the Lane Bryant catalog via auction websites and was thus limited by what was up for auction during the period of my primary research. Catalogs dating back to 1924-1925, of which I obtained three, were the earliest I was able to locate.

143 “Selling ‘Stouts,’” 38.
5.3 Stoutwear Departments: Safe Spaces of Desire?

Following the first articles to discuss the profitability of the stoutwear industry, a popular means of promoting stoutwear from about 1915 onward was via hybrid lecture-fashion shows that took place in newly-minted stoutwear shops in department stores all over the United States. Susy Collins Miller of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers, Edith M. Burtis, fashion editor of the Philadelphia Public Ledger, Margaret Blair, a health and advice writer, and Lady Evangeline Duff, the “best dressed stout woman in America,” were all well-known figures on the informal stoutwear lecture circuit. The great popularity of these events during the teens and twenties was a reflection of what Jenna Joselit has described as fashion’s growing appeal in the United States during the interwar years: “Manufacturers and department stores, women’s auxiliaries and church groups, even 4-H clubs, found [the fashion show’s] artful blend of consumerism and theatricality hard to resist.”

Different from elaborate early twentieth fashion shows put on by French and English couturiers, and which catered to a wealthy and leisured clientele, however, the typical and decidedly more humble American fashion show—staged in department stores and church basements alike—distilled and translated fashionable styles into terms that resonated with the average American woman. With their focus less on fashion per se than on the matter of how to build a “smart” wardrobe comprised of hard-wearing, ready-to-wear pieces, persistent themes across these presentations were the proverbial “dos and don’ts” of flattering, or, in period parlance, “suiting” the stout figure. Indeed, as Charles May told the American Cloak and Suit Review in 1922, stoutwear fashion shows “bring out unmistakably the fact that it is easily possible for a woman of generous dimensions to attain something approaching charm of dress.”

At these events, the related matters of style and design therefore preceded concerns of being “in fashion.” With their intense focus on the technical (and moral) implications of getting dressed as a stout woman, stoutwear presentations were, in many ways, more akin to design and product demonstrations that were mainstays of department store hospitality and selling in the early twentieth century, or what Leach describes as small-scale “industrial expositions” in which

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144 Women's Wear reported on this development in 1916, writing, “Readers of Women's Wear will remember the series of articles on the opportunity provided the retailer about stout women…. Now comes another development in the stout situation in the form of special lectures delivered in retail stores to all the stout patrons that can be gathered in the department where special provision is made for their wants.” See “Lectures to Stout Women,” Women’s Wear (October 6, 1916), 4.

145 “Great Many Sales Start Tomorrow,” Washington Post (May 6, 1917), 5. Duff was also the widower to the Duke of Fife of Great Britain. See Helen Dare, “What's This? Fat Royalty Coming to Advise the Fat?” San Francisco Chronicle (March 17, 1916), 9.


148 Joselit, A Perfect Fit, 29.

149 “Pushing Stoutwear Seen as Profitable Move,” American Cloak and Suit Review 24.2 (June 1922), 130.
consumers could learn about where goods came from and how they were manufactured. In her September 1916 lecture at the Jordan Marsh department store in Boston (Fig. 71), for instance, Edith Burtis presented the core tenets of dressing as a stout woman and discussed the relative merits of "specialized clothes." The lecture was transcribed in full in a later issue of Women's Wear:

Specialized clothes are more than enlarged garments for stout women. Stout women are simply enlarged editions of femininity, just as charming, beautiful and just as good to look upon as any other class of women, provided they are dressed properly—It is not the kind of clothes, but how they fit us and how we wear them, and you cannot wear clothes unless you are comfortable in them, and to be comfortable in your clothes they must fit you properly. You want style rather than fashion. Fashion is the thing which is common—which everybody wears, or wants to wear, but style is the thing that makes you smart and good to look upon, the thing that suits you.\footnote{Leach, Land of Desire, 135-136.}

In the above excerpt, Burtis explicitly juxtaposes fashion, or what she defines as "the thing which...everybody wears, or wants to wear," with style, or that which "suits" the wearer, fits, and is comfortable. She even went on to argue that, among the different "aspects about clothes," "function" and "economy" far outweighed fashionability, which she derides as fickle. Burtis later more forcefully promotes stoutwear as a singular means for stout women to achieve a "smart" appearance, stating that stoutwear was "the passport to business and social success."\footnote{"Lectures to Stout Women," Women's Wear (October 6, 1916), 11.}

\footnote{Ibid.}
Echoing these ideas, on her 1922 lecture tour, Margaret Blair urged women to “dress for beauty” rather than to go “wild over” trends in dress. In her own national lecture circuit, Lady Evangeline Duff (Fig. 72) made similar appeals, promoting garments that “suit” the figures of stout women over trends, noting that her own attempts “to wear the same styles as her slimmer sisters [had] too often been disastrous.” It was the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers, however, that most profited from the popularity of these demonstrations. With Suzy Collins Miller serving as its figurehead, the association staged promotional and educational fashion shows in department stores and vaudeville theaters all over the country (Fig. 73). Consisting of “a demonstration of stoutwear” followed by a lecture given by Miller, these events were staged in order to “develop the knowledge of the advantages of specially designed stoutwear,” both for consumers and for retailers. Miller’s lectures were so well-known amongst consumers, buyers and merchants alike that she remarked to the New York Times, that she didn’t “know whether [she was] getting famous or notorious” for her pragmatic advice about garment fit and the importance of quality foundation garments.

In the professional media, the great popularity of these events was attributed to the fact that Burris, Duff, Blair and Miller were, as stout women themselves, empathetic figureheads, or sartorial role models in whom fellow stout women were willing to place their trust within an exclusionary and perhaps unfamiliar retail environment. Indeed, half of their job lay in drumming up excitement for stoutwear in their promotion of the new departments, and in

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157 Ibid.

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OF GREAT INTEREST
TO STOUT WOMEN!

A One Week's
Demonstration Sale of
Sveltline Dresses
Beginning Tuesday, June 1st

Why Experiment With Materials and Dressmakers When These Dresses
Can Be Purchased at Prices Little Above the Cost of the Fabrics?

During This Sale Mrs. S. C. Miller, of New York, Recognized Author-
ity on These Styles Best Adapted to the Needs of Stout Women, Will
Be in Our Stunt Department to Give You Counsel on Correct Modes or
To Aid You In Your Selections. Mrs. Miller Represents the Makers of
Sveltline Apparel, and Her Own Personal Experience Particularly Ple
Her for This Special Service to Stout Women

A Style for
Every Taste
Sizes From 40½ to 54½

Sveltline Dresses
Are designed especially for wom-
ens who require larger than reg-
ular sizes. They are not "cut in
one piece" to any sense of the ter-
m, but every garment bearing this
label was specially designed for a
definite purpose — that purpose
is to fit correctly and beautifully
that particular woman who shall
wear it, with no alteration.
Every dress is made with a
fitting and a degree of strik-
ness found in no other merchan-
tise.

A Price for
Every Purse
Sizes From 40½ to 47½

Materials
Used in these garments consist
of the finest cotton fabrics
Effective patterns on light or
dark grounds as well as solid
colors.
If you are in need of suitable
dresses, do not fail to take advan-
tage of this sale, where several
selections may be made at the
lowest cost of sale. The garments
securely and fully the approval of
the wearer, giving them long
shelter lines as worn desired.

The Illustrations on This Page Are of Guarnos. Note
in Black. Make Your Selections Early so as to Avoid
Happpenings.

Figure 73: Philadelphia Inquirer (May 30, 1920), 66.
convincing stout women that they, too, could now buy garments off-the-rack. The task of enumerating the elements of style and the tenets of being well dressed was thus tantamount to teaching stout women how to shop. As one stoutwear consultant remarked, “being fitted readily in a department store or ready-to-wear specialty shop” was a “new idea” for many stout women.\(^{158}\) According to a report in a 1922 issue of *Women’s Wear*, crowds allegedly numbering in the thousands gathered outside of department stores in some cities to listen to speakers from the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers divulge style advice while underscoring the low prices, high quality and superior fit of scientifically-designed stoutwear—or what *Women’s Wear* deemed a type of “propaganda work” that was “widely effective in improving the attitude of the public toward the business [of stoutwear].”\(^{159}\) The other half of their job, however, lay in educating stout women “in the art of good dressing.”\(^{160}\) As trustworthy and relatable figures, it was believed that these women could tactfully and empathetically draw attention to the parts of stout women’s bodies that needed correcting while at the same time presenting them ready-to-wear solutions that were conveniently at hand.

In many ways, these demonstrations and fashion shows were perhaps some of the most vital points of contact—or what Entwistle and Rocamora have described as “ceremonies of consecration”—in which the ideologies that underpinned stoutwear design were reproduced and translated for the consumer, which in turn built up the ideology of stoutwear, and namely its ability to transform the body.\(^{161}\) Indeed, in the early twentieth century, department stores were not merely spaces of leisure: They were also important “educational centers,” as William Leach has argued—a point which is merely underscored by the fact that these fashion shows were oftentimes promoted as “lectures.”\(^{162}\) The fact that well-dressed authorities like Burtis, Miller and the others were, as stout women themselves, so relatable only served to further legitimate the edicts of stout dressing, which, by-and-large, had been decided by male manufacturers and

\(^{158}\) “Scientize your ‘Stouts’ Department By Card Indexing Your Customers,” *Women’s Wear* (May 22, 1917), 19.

\(^{159}\) “Sveltline Manufacturers Urging Public to Buy Now in Address at Fashion Shows,” *Women’s Wear* (March 27, 1922), 26. Another March 1922 *Women’s Wear* article reported similarly large crowds at a Danbury, Connecticut stoutwear fashion show, describing how the show “attracted such large crowds of stout women that they had to be regulated by the fire department.” See “Stout Wear Shows in Bridgeport and Danbury Attract Attention,” *Women’s Wear* (March 11, 1922), 27. An earlier show in Bridgeport was also said to have attracted “1,500 large women to the formal opening of a new stoutwear section there,” at which sales records were broken. See “Open More Sections for Stout Customers,” *Women’s Wear* (October 10, 1921), 3. Somewhat more modestly, it was reported that 500 stout women attended a show in Ithaca, New York in 1922. See “500 See Fashion Show Proving One May Be Stout, Yet Stylish,” *Ithaca Journal* (September 12, 1922). William Leach has also written about the size of the crowds at American fashion shows, noting that they were “so potentially disruptive to the ordinary conduct of city life that police in New York and elsewhere ordered merchants to take out licenses for all shows that employed live models. See Leach, *Land of Desire*, 103.


\(^{161}\) Entwistle and Rocamora also describe how fashion shows are a space in which actors within the field reproduce the system that ensures its very existence. In the case of stoutwear fashion shows, the authority of manufacturers as purveyors of “scientific design” and that of lecturers as style “experts” was reasserted. See Joanne Entwistle and Agnès Rocamora, “The Field of Fashion Materialized: A Study of London Fashion Week,” *Sociology* 40, no. 1 (2006), 735-751.

designers like Albert Malsin and Isidor Heller. Even so, these were merely one-off events. The more difficult work of selling the idea of stoutwear to consumers occurred after the fashion show on both sales floors and in dressing rooms—intimate spaces populated by women. In her own work, Walker has observed how the point of sale in fashion and beauty consumption can be both “personal and interactive,” necessitating at times intimate and revealing conversations between female sellers and consumers about beauty ideals and expectations. This fact, however, was not lost on stoutwear retailers who sought to not only attract stout women to their stores, but to also turn them into loyal consumers through positive and affirming in-store experiences.

With the stoutwear fashion shows and demonstrations serving as a fruitful starting point for establishing the particular matrix of ideals that underpinned stoutwear marketing strategies, which sat at the intersection of fit, affordability and style, the following two subsections will examine some of the issues stoutwear retailers dealt with after the advertisement, so to speak, such as the matter of whether or not to segregate stoutwear and that of how to engage with stout women on sales floors. In its entirety, this final section will therefore also interrogate the notion put forth by a number of fashion and consumer culture scholars that department stores were modern, “safe” and emancipatory spaces of desire for female consumers—a point which undermines the fact that retail spaces can also be sites of struggle in the constitution of identity. Indeed, as Breward has importantly pointed out, it is important to not only approach consumption as “a unified and necessarily feminized whole but as a more open forum in which social, sexual and cultural identities were formed and sometimes contested.” Piggybacking on Breward’s point, I would extend his logic to add that the department store and boutique may also be understood as spaces in which bodies and bodily norms, too, “were formed and contested” as a way to challenge the notion that department stores were safe spaces of desire.

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163 Walker, Style and Status, 6.

164 This idea has perhaps most notably furthered by Leach who has argued that cultures of consumerism afforded women the possibility to engage with modernity on their own terms, while department stores in particular offered “a new freedom from repression, a liberation that promised to expand the province of rewarding work and of individual expression.” See Leach, “Transformations in a Culture of Consumption,” 320. Similarly, Kathy L. Peiss has referred to shops and department stores as “safe” spaces for women to engage in consumption as a leisure activity. See Peiss, “American Women and the Making of Consumer Culture.” Mica Nava has also done important work in rewriting women into the history of modernity through the space of the department store; however, perhaps more critically than Leach, Nava argues that department stores permitted women to engage “with the maelstrom of modern life.” See Mica Nava “Modernity’s Disavowal: Women, The City and the Department Store” in Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity, eds. Mica Nava and Alan O’Shea (London: Routledge, 1996), 41. At the same time, however, such discussions—while challenging the notion that feminine consumption is frivolous—reinforce the idea that consumption is a distinctly feminine pursuit. For further discussion of the history of department stores and women's consumption, see also Rachel Bowlby, Just Looking Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola (New York: Methuen, 1985), 4; Rudi Laermans, “Learning to Consume: Early Department Stores and the Shaping of the Modern Consumer Culture (1860-1914),” Theory, Culture & Society 10, no. 4 (1993): 79-102; Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 150.

165 Breward, Hidden Consumer, 101.
5.3.1 To Segregate or Not to Segregate?

I went into _________’s department store and asked to see a coat. I take an extra size and find it hard to get fitted. The saleswoman stood off and looked me over. She began at my head and ran her eyes to my feet, then back to my head. She gave her head a doubtful twist as she said, “You’re pretty large, but I’ll see what I can do for you. There are so few really big women that it doesn’t pay to carry the extra sizes.”

Possibly I was a little quick, but I told her I didn’t come in to have anyone tell me how large I was, as we had a mirror at home, so I went out.

Then I went to another store and asked to be shown coats, and after the saleswoman looked me over from a safe distance, like one buying a good animal, she bit her lips and said that she would look through the cases and see if they had anything large enough.

I was not there when she came out from the cases. I didn’t go in to be insulted, so I left. 166

The above passage was printed in a 1916 *Women’s Wear* article titled “Stout Customers Are Grateful for Specialized Attention—They Get So Little of It.” Making a rare departure from its typical reportage, here, *Women’s Wear* foregrounds the experience of the consumer rather than that of the manufacturer or retailer. In this account, the customer first tries on the largest garment on the sales floor of a conventional women’s wear department only to have it not fit, requiring that the saleswoman go and check the storeroom for extra sizes. In a second encounter, however, she is not even afforded the opportunity to try anything on. In both cases, the point of contention lies in the fact that in order to try on garments, the woman had to interact with a less than sympathetic salesclerk, therein drawing gratuitous attention to her size. Regardless of whether or not this article is a genuine account, it nevertheless illustrates what, after the matter of terminology, was one of the most contested and controversial issues that plagued the stoutwear industry in its early years: whether or not to sell stoutwear alongside standard-size garments, or, conversely, in a department of its own. 167

In order to prevent negative interactions like that above, salespeople, as it was widely suggested in professional media, needed to be made aware of their prejudice so as not to, in the words of one critic, “make an enemy” of the stoutwear consumer. 168 However, this task was not without its own set of obstacles, for salespeople too seemed frustrated by the lack of options that department stores offered in stoutwear. In a reversal of the previous article, one saleswoman’s account of working with a stout woman was described in *Women’s Wear* in 1922 in an article titled “Tact Invaluable in Selling Goods”:

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166 “Stout Customers Are Grateful for Specialized Attention—They Get So Little of It,” *Women’s Wear*, (November 21, 1916), 22.

167 It should be noted that this issue was also debated within the emerging market for “petite” sizes as well. As of 1926, as was explained in *Women’s Wear*, “Most of the leading department and specialty stores do not segregate merchandise into special departments, but offer it in conjunction with other garments.” One petite manufacturer, however, advocated for creating segregated departments in order to make selling less cumbersome and to give petite consumers better customer service. See “Buying Firm Urges Segregation of Special Garments,” *Women’s Wear* (December 13, 1926), 31.

This woman wanted to buy one of the new long, draped dresses, and she was quite disturbed, after trying several on, when she failed to get the graceful, reedy effect she had so fondly pictured and desired so much. Voicing her disappointment to the clerk in a despairing tone, she got a reply that made her an enemy of the store in question for life. It was “You fat women can’t expect to have the styles made just for you, you know.”

In this instance, the blame is placed squarely at the feet of the consumer, rather than the store, for expecting that a store carry her size. Unable to wear the period’s fashionable draped style described above, however, the stout consumer’s disappointment is only compounded by the clerk’s unsympathetic rebuke.

As discussed earlier in this dissertation, the general disdain of the fat woman in early twentieth century America was so widespread that little explanation for or introspection about the greater structural inequities in ready-to-wear garment manufacturing seemed necessary. Indeed, fat stigma pervaded even the “safe spaces” of stoutwear consumption into which stout women were graciously welcomed in advertisements. The fact that, on the manufacturing side, there was a lack—of options, sizes and fits—seemed of little consequence to some retailers and salespeople; the stout woman was perceived as being so emotionally maladjusted that her frustration over not being able to find well-fitting and fashionable garments was, as above, deemed a byproduct of her own bodily and emotional inadequacies, rather than as a just reaction to not being able to exercise her consumer agency and to being treated discriminatorily by indifferent or outwardly hostile salespeople. Within this unsympathetic terrain there were, however, voices that advocated for the stout woman. As one representative from the Gimbel Brothers advertising agency explained in a 1922 issue of the American Cloak and Suit Review,

The idea is never to let the stout woman feel as though she were anything like a monstrosity, but to handle her humanly and tactfully. She must be made to feel that she is as easy to fit in stylish garments as the more slender woman…. She must be invited into the store with the implied assurance that she will be satisfied as readily as women of normal build.170

The fact that discussions of this nature—in which salespeople had to be so explicitly advised against treating stout women like “monstrosities”—were present, if not pervasive, within trade journals and newspapers stands as a testament to just how deeply entrenched fat stigma was in American society by this time. Speaking broadly on the matter, one 1917 Women’s Wear article explained how “the treatment [the stout woman] is given in the average store is not only indifferent but insulting. The first thing the average sales person is liable to say to the stout customer is ‘Well I’ll look and see. But I hardly think we’ll be able to fit you.”171 Further attesting to how enduring this issue was, a 1917 stoutwear fashion feature in the Philadelphia Inquirer spoke similarly about salespeople’s tendency to disregard the stout woman, writing optimistically about

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169 Ibid.
170 “Tact is the Chief Requisite in Advertising Stouts,” The American Cloak and Suit Review (July-December 1922), 121.
a future scenario in which stout women could “go into a department store and try on ready-made clothes without that sick and humiliated feeling before a mirror and that exasperating consciousness that the lithe and lissome saleslady is regarding her with pitying contempt.” Rather than training salespeople to be more sympathetic to the plight of stout women, and thereby eradicating the entrenched culture of fat stigma within these spaces, however, retailers devised a number of other compensatory strategies for winning her favor.

One solution to this problem was to employ a more ostensibly empathetic salesforce comprised solely of stout women within dedicated departments. Susy Collins Miller of the Associated Stylish Stout Wear makers was an advocate of this approach, which she described in a 1918 *Women's Wear* column:

Saleswomen in a stout department should be stout themselves, to win the confidence and reliance of the stout customer. A woman who has turned sour and pessimistic over the hopelessness of her figure is likely to regard with secret suspicion and hostility even the best efforts of a “perfect 36” to advise her and fit her. On the other hand, she will place faith in the sincerity of a woman of her own size, of perhaps even a larger size, and will be particularly impressed if the stout salesperson who is waiting upon her is tastefully and stylishly dressed.

Somewhat contradicting herself, according to Miller, the solution for how to “win the stout trade” was not simply a matter of having sufficient enough stock as she had suggested in the quote with which I opened this chapter. Rather, and as she suggests here, the very presence of a saleswoman with a “perfect 36” figure could risk exacerbating the stout woman’s feelings of exclusion. She therefore advised retailers to employ stout women who, much like Lady Duff Gordon, Edith M. Burtis and the other stoutwear style experts, could serve as well-dressed exemplars of stout embodiment. Similar advice was proffered in a feature on the state of stoutwear departments in a 1920 issue of the *Dry Goods Merchants Trade Journal* in which it was assertively stated that “it has long since been proved that a stout saleswoman can wait on a stout customer to perfection.” Elsewhere, it was suggested that stout women were themselves naturally gifted sellers since, “being inclined in the direction of stoutness, they are just naturally jolly.” As was reported in a 1919 issue of *Women’s Wear*, a Buffalo, New York department store called Hengerer’s had great success by taking this approach. As told to *Women’s Wear*, the store manager had realized his stout customers had “considerable difficulty in getting suited in departments where the clerks are slim and where little consideration is given to stout women,”

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173 One minority approach was to “scientize” stoutwear departments by creating a card indexing system for customers to ensure good service between different sales associates. See “Scientize Your ‘Stouts’ Department By Card Indexing Your Customers,” *Women’s Wear* (May 22, 1917), 19; and “Winning the Trade of Stout Women,” *Women’s Wear* (September 10, 1915), 5.
176 “Stouts Made to Feel at Home in Emporium’s Stylish Stout Department,” *Dry Goods Merchants Trade Journal* (February 1920), 40.
and therefore decided to hire only stout clerks for its new stoutwear division.\textsuperscript{177} The practice of creating separate stoutwear departments, staffed by stout women, was thus seen by some as a way to “level the playing field,” so to speak. Perhaps most importantly, however, well-dressed stout women were perceived to be one of the best forms of marketing.\textsuperscript{178} As one commentator remarked to \textit{Women's Wear}, “Very often, in my experience, I have seen dresses bought right off the back of the salespeople.”\textsuperscript{179}

This point of view, however, was not shared by all. A 1922 \textit{Women's Wear} article, for instance, recounted the experience of a “pleasantly plump” woman who resented being attended to by a stout saleswoman who reportedly “waddled up to her [and] puffed and groaned through the entire trying on of three dresses.”\textsuperscript{180} An equal number of retailers therefore thought that the better approach was to place stout sizes alongside standard-size ones in order to spare them the humiliation of shopping in a separate department. The practice of segregating department stores along class lines was already a common practice, with cheaper and less well-made merchandise often being relegated to store basements as a way to curb congestion of both products and people from the 1870s onward.\textsuperscript{181} Those retailers who had reservations about similarly segregating stoutwear were thus perhaps concerned about instating a similar hierarchy except according the criteria of body size, rather than socio-economic class. The issue of whether or not to segregate stoutwear was so contentious that the \textit{American Cloak and Suit Review} even dedicated an entire section of its special 1922 stoutwear feature, which was in effect an exhaustive review of the state of the field, to the issue.

In the sixteen-page insert, twenty-three stoutwear industry leaders—from department store managers to manufacturers—weighed the pros and cons of segregating stoutwear. The industry voices, however, were divided on the issue with fourteen advocating for a separate department, and nine for including stoutwear within regular size ranges.\textsuperscript{182} The rationales for whether or not to segregate stoutwear, however, varied widely, but a common concern bolstered both sides of the debate—that of the “sensitive” demeanor of stout consumers. For example, those in favor of segregating stoutwear argued, on the one hand, that it would make selling more efficient for salespeople, but on the other, that it would also put the stout consumer more at ease. Indeed, as a representative of the Spokane Dry Goods Company explained, “I believe a separate department should be maintained for the wearer of extra sizes, for this reason: once the

\textsuperscript{177} “Hengerer's Set Aside 4,000 Feet for Stouts,” \textit{Women's Wear} (December 30, 1919), 46.

\textsuperscript{178} This idea was furthered in one trade journal in which a buyer spoke at length about how stout women were “naturally inclined toward missionary work,” and, if given good customer service, would often return to the store with stout friends to be outfitted “as a way to show her gratitude.” See “Stouts Made to Feel at Home in Emporium's Stylish Stout Department,” \textit{Dry Goods Merchants Trade Journal} (February 1920), 40.

\textsuperscript{179} “Plan to Put Stout Dept's in Stores All Over Country,” \textit{Women's Wear} (May 15, 1918), 30.

\textsuperscript{180} “Uncalled for Advice is Usually Annoying to the Stout Customer,” \textit{Women's Wear} (January 19, 1922), 53.

\textsuperscript{181} Leach, \textit{Land of Desire}, 78-81. Susan Porter Benson also describes the value of thinking about how space was used within department stores, arguing that they were at once modern leisure spaces but also sites of class conflict. See Susan Porter Benson, “Palace of Consumption and Machine for Selling: The American Department Store, 1880-1940,” \textit{Radical History Review} 21, no. 1 (Fall 1979): 199-221.

\textsuperscript{182} “Separate Divisions for Stoutwear Liked by Retailers,” \textit{American Cloak and Suit Review} (June 1922), 115.
stout woman sees the misses garments she becomes dissatisfied with her size and also with the styles shown her.” Similarly, a representative from the A. Grube Company argued that stout women should be catered to in a separate department and a saleswoman of a similar stature “who, by the very fact of her being stout herself, is in sympathy with her prospective customers.”

Those who opposed separate stoutwear departments, advocating instead for displaying stoutwear as extensions of standard sizes on the main sales floor, also invoked the matter of the stout woman’s temperament, contending that a separate department would merely serve to exacerbate the stout woman’s feelings of difference. As one commentator argued, “Stoutwear should be offered in a regular department with other sizes for the reason that stout people are rather sensitive about their size and do not want to go into a special department fearing they will be termed ‘fats.’” This concern was echoed by Isaac Mass of the Mass Brothers Department store in Tampa, Florida who explained,

I do not believe…in a separate department as no matter how large a woman is and knowing that she requires a large dress, she will resent being told about it and would very likely dislike being put in a separate room having to gaze at unsightly gloomy looking figures.

As summarized by Mass, opinion about whether or not to segregate was split due largely to concerns about alienating the already “sensitive” stout consumer, either by, on the one hand, forcing her into uncomfortable interactions with unsympathetic standard-size sales associates and customers, or, on the other, segregating her to a “separate room” to gaze at “unsightly gloomy looking figures.” Just as with the debates about how to refer to this consumer group (i.e. as stout, fat, etc.), those regarding the segregating of stoutwear ultimately boiled down to the fact that the term stout carried with it a great deal of discursive baggage. Nevertheless, and led largely by the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers’ program to install separate stoutwear departments all over the country under the leadership of Susy Collins Miller, most retailers opted to segregate (Fig. 74). Indeed, as the trade journal *The Corset and Underwear Review* reported in 1919, retailing had entered “an age of specialization,” noting that department stores were increasingly becoming “a series of specialty shops,” the latest of which being stoutwear

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183 Ibid.
184 Ibid.
185 Ibid.
186 “Ibid., 117.
187 “Cater By Method to Stout Persons,” *New York Times*, (August 11, 1918), 28; “Makes Analysis of Sizes and Suggests Improvements for Merchandising Them,” *Women’s Wear* (March 2, 1926), 35; “Plan to Put Stout Dep’t’s In Stores All Over Country,” *Women’s Wear* (May 15, 1918), 27. A notable exception was a collective of Brooklyn-based stoutwear retailers who, in 1922, integrated their stoutwear departments, an “unconventional” decision which *Women’s Wear* noted with a degree of surprise was successful. See “Brooklyn Retailers, With Different Methods, Get Same Results in Stoutwear Merchandising,” *Women’s Wear* (June 1, 1922), 10.
departments, or spaces in which the stout woman could "obtain whatever she needs in the line of wearing apparel, be it a corset or a suit."\textsuperscript{188}

While the segregation debate was clearly one of great importance to retailers—and one which resonates even into the present moment during which it is standard practice to place plus-sizes in separate departments—the minutiae of the discussion nevertheless obscures an important point regarding the degree to which stoutwear departments were a space of conflict in which women's identities were actively constituted. Angela McRobbie has observed that too much writing on women and consumption has framed their participation in terms of "enjoyment," which, the scholar argues, "runs the risk of inducing a sense of political complacency."\textsuperscript{189} Rather, the practice of consumption, and more specifically, the space of consumption, should be regarded as productive sites in which identities are both constructed as well as contested. While in his own work, Berrazed applied this idea to examine how, through the practice of consumption, nineteenth century men negotiated "cultural stereotypes and moral positions,"\textsuperscript{190} similar negotiations, but specifically around the construction of the body, occurred within stoutwear departments.

\textsuperscript{188} "The Special Department for Stout Women," The Corset and Underwear Review (December 1919), 55.
\textsuperscript{189} McRobbie, "Bridging the Gap," 74.
\textsuperscript{190} Berrazed, Hidden Consumers, 101.
For instance, in a 1926 *Women’s Wear* article, a retail consultant named M.F. Reuben, after having conducted a large-scale study on stoutwear departments, rejected the practice of segregating stoutwear due to the fact that not all non-standard size women necessarily self-identified as such. His observations therefore also point to how, for the consumer, more was at stake than mere convenience in the debate about whether or not to segregate stoutwear:

I advise strongly against the segregated stout department as a rule, because the average woman of the medium stout class will frequently object to going to the stout department. She feels that a stout department is for very stout women, and if she has been shown so called “stylish stout” garments in the past, she is still more against it because “stylish stout” garments were, as a rule, only stylish in name and not in fact.\(^{191}\)

As the above quotation illustrates, through the act of merely shopping in a segregated stoutwear department, the consumer risked being conflated with a marginalized and perhaps more importantly, unfashionable identity construct. For the stout woman, department stores and boutiques were not sites of consumerist free play, but rather, were sites of conflict and conformity in which certain notions of appropriate or idealized stout embodiment were variously projected onto the bodies of unwitting and (at times) unwilling consumers. Indeed, McRobbie has aptly deemed women’s consumption an “aggravated activity” through which women were transformed into “ideal subjects of consumption.”\(^{192}\) The labeling and partitioning off of separate stoutwear departments was one way this process occurred; however, these power negotiations also occurred in less sensational but perhaps even more impactful ways—namely, through routine, ordinary interactions between saleswomen and stout consumers and specifically through the practice of talking about bodies and dress.

5.3.2 “An Adventure in Words”: Making the Sale

It is only natural that a chapter that has considered the matrix of norms and principles that undergirded the practice of selling stoutwear would end with the point of sale: the last and perhaps most crucial stage in the transfer of knowledge from stoutwear manufacturers, to advertisers, to retailers and, finally, to consumers. Indeed, and as is well illustrated in many of the quotations analyzed in the previous subsection, interactions between salespeople and stout consumers were seen as a crucial juncture at which the idea of stoutwear—as a modern, scientifically-engineered medium capable of slenderizing stout bodies—could be affirmed, or, conversely, at which longstanding and institutional prejudices against stout women could become more deeply entrenched. As Susan Porter Benson has written, in spite of all of the money and time that retailers invested in advertising and marketing, it was “only the salesperson [who] could accomplish these profit-boosting tasks,” for they were regarded by consumers as “the

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\(^{191}\) “Makes Analysis of Sizes and Suggests Improvements for Merchandising Them,” *Women’s Wear* (March 2, 1926), 35.

\(^{192}\) McRobbie, “Bridging the Gap,” 74.
preeminent influence on their shopping behavior.” Conversely, an indifferent, unskilled or, as in the case of some stout women, prejudiced salesforce could do irreparable harm by making the customer a lifelong enemy of the store through even a single contentious interaction. Thus, through the actions, and perhaps more importantly, the language of salespeople, it is possible to glimpse the discourses of selling stoutwear—and namely the overt preoccupation with the psychology of the stout consumer embedded within these discourses—reach their logical end point.

While many fashion historians have written romantically about the nineteenth century department store as a space in which women were free to browse unchaperoned, comparatively less attention has been paid to women’s work within department stores and to the vital importance of interactions between female sales associates and customers. Indeed, it is not insignificant that the vast majority of salespeople in department stores were women, especially with regard to stoutwear. A reflection of the gender disparity between well-paid manufacturers and advertisers, of whom most were men, and the largely female labor force upon whose backs the American clothing industry was built, saleswomen occupied a tenuous interstitial position between low-paid garment workers and the most well-paid and influential fashion buyers. While saleswomen enjoyed slightly better pay and greater social mobility than garment workers, in practice, the low-paid work of saleswomen was in many ways more similar to that of the women working in factories than to that of the buyers and managers alongside whom they worked in department stores. As Benson writes, employers obsessed with profits and with cultivating “an efficient and tractable” labor force often clashed with their underpaid and overworked salespeople. As early as the 1890s, department store and shop managers were no longer content to merely respond to their customers’ demands; rather, they “actively sought to influence the public’s notions of what was stylish and appropriate”—a practice that only

195 It is notable that in the American Cloak and Suit Review’s special issue dedicated to the stoutwear industry, the introduction is prefaced with a note describing the “men and stores” consulted for the issue—a list that included buyers, manufacturers and retailers, all of whom are men. See “Stoutwear’s Possibilities as Viewed by Leading Garment Buyers,” American Cloak and Suit Review (November 1922), 91.
196 Green, Ready-to-Wear, 163-164; Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 73-77.
197 Leach writes about how fashion buying was one of the few high salary jobs for women within the fashion industry in the early twentieth century. Although some men were made uncomfortable by women occupying such positions of power, furniture and rug buying remained the preserve of men. Leach, Land of Desire, 95-99.
199 Benson, Counter Cultures, 124-125. McBride notes that there were similar working conditions in les grands magasins of Paris in which employers invoked rigid work rules and dress codes on their female sales staff. See Theresa M. McBride, “A Woman’s World: Department Stores and the Evolution of Women’s Employment, 1870-1920,” French Historical Studies 10, no. 4 (Autumn 1978): 664-683. See also Benson, “Palace of Consumption,” 201.
intensified during the first two decades of the twentieth century and which imbued the practice of selling with new significance.\textsuperscript{200} Selling, in turn, therefore went from being a passive practice to an active one in which sellers increasingly manipulated consumer desire. Somewhat contradictorily, however, although the work of selling was historically regarded as being low-skilled labor,\textsuperscript{201} managers grew increasingly aware of the importance of the interactions between salespeople and customers. Thus, different from garment workers who were regarded as being merely cogs in the wheels of industry, salespeople were increasingly expected to be thoughtful and inventive in their interactions with customers—displaying a proficiency in "salesmanship," which, as Leach suggests, was different from the more mechanical and antiquated practice of "selling"\textsuperscript{202}—even if their salaries did not reflect the significance of their roles.

Within the realm of stoutwear specifically, saleswomen did not only assist stout women in cultivating a personal style becoming of their difficult-to-fit figures, and were thereby expected to possess expert knowledge about color harmony, fabrics and fashion trends, among other things\textsuperscript{203}; as "educators," they also introduced stout women to the practice of ready-to-wear consumption.\textsuperscript{204} Perhaps most importantly, however, saleswomen needed to be prepared to serve as impromptu therapists and counselors to potentially indignant, emotional and insecure stout women for whom the task of shopping was fraught, to say the least. Much as advertisers applied psychological insights to creating ever more emotionally resonant advertisements, so too were saleswomen expected to galvanize the stout woman's insecurities in selling her products that would fix any perceived shortcomings. Susy Collins Miller's account of successfully helping a four-hundred-pound stout woman find a dress and then serving as a shoulder upon which the woman could shed tears of joy, which appears at the beginning of this chapter, is but one illustration of the many hats that saleswomen had to wear; however, the professional media was rife with anecdotes about distraught customers and sympathetic saleswomen performing similar emotional labor.\textsuperscript{205} As was summarized by a saleswoman who was quoted in a 1917 \textit{Women's Wear} article that discussed how to "scientize" stoutwear departments, however, the general approach was that saleswomen "must look at the 'stout' problem with the eyes of the customer."\textsuperscript{206} Yet given that many saleswomen were stout themselves, it was not such a stretch to expect that they have genuine empathy for stout customers. Indeed, as Theresa M. McBride observes, "women..."
were both the clerks and the customers” in the twentieth century department store. Thus, although managers ultimately found it difficult to apply the principles of scientific management to the practice of garment selling, they nevertheless glimpsed in female sales associates certain inborn if (stereotypical) gender traits, such as “adaptness at manipulating people, sympathetic ways of responding to the needs of others and familiarity with things domestic” that dovetailed nicely with those traits that made an employee a good seller. Indeed, as Benson writes, “Twentieth-century selling centered on the salesperson as a lay psychoanalyst of the counter, the evangelist of the therapeutic ethic of the culture of consumption.”

The chief task of saleswomen was therefore to make the stout woman feel like a slender woman—both emotionally, in terms of promoting the stoutwear department as “safe” and equitable spaces of consumption not unlike conventional women’s wear departments (a task that essentially amounted to treating the stout woman with respect), but also physically by helping the stout woman achieve a more slender appearance through dress. For instance, as was explained in a 1929 Women’s Wear article penned by a stoutwear expert who went by the penname S.F.H., the encounter with the stout customer should be “free of friction.” Continuing, the writer explains how,

The logical way to avoid the friction in the minds of sartorial objectors is to bring out those points in their positive, not their negative form. Suppose the customer says: “That is a beautiful model—but think how I’d look in it!” The saleswoman could say: “If you like it and wish you could wear it, why not have the fitter see what she could suggest. Your dimensions differ in some ways from that size. It might be adapted by changing the length a little and leaving the waistline somewhat looser. Evident in the above quotation is the notion that the practice of selling stoutwear involved a delicate discursive balancing act in which saleswomen treated the customer like a legitimate patron, rather than as a “curiosity,” while also furthering the “slenderness imperative” of stoutwear (an idea that will be discussed at length in the following chapter). In the minds of retailers, much more was potentially at stake in the practice of selling stoutwear than making sure the customer went home happy. Indeed, later in the article, S.F.H. remarked that should the stout woman leave the store poorly dressed, she not only “discredits” her purchase, she “possibly influences many others…against the mode and against the store.”

A similar approach was advocated by a buyer named Sarah E. James who worked for the N. Snellenberg & Co. department store of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who trained her salesforce

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207 Benson, “A Woman’s World,” 666.
208 Benson, Counter Cultures, 130. With regard to stoutwear specifically, see Virginia M. Richards, “Selling Stoutwear is Science in Itself,” American Cloak and Suit Review (November 1922), 94-95.
209 Benson, Counter Cultures, 130.
210 S.F.H, “Retail Saleswomen Confront the Need of a New Type of Selling,” Women’s Wear (November 6, 1929), 18.
211 “Stouts made to Feel at Home in Emporium’s Stylish Stout Department,” Dry Goods Merchants Trade Journal, Volume 21, Issue 2 (February 1920), 40.
to balance the stout customer's satisfaction with making her "look better." As she told Women's Wear, the task of "educating" stout women on the matter of how specialized clothing could help them achieve "longer lines" took a great deal of work, and that she therefore needed to "employ saleswomen of more than ordinary tact." Continuing, she explained the department store's mission in working with stout patrons as such:

If we can't fit her to our satisfaction, we would rather not sell [to] her. That sounds like a very far fetched theory, but on that we have built up our business. We first of all let a woman understand that in this department she is getting honest service from people who will tell her the truth about her clothes....

There is a closer union between the saleswoman and the customer than is common elsewhere. The customer goes to her saleswoman as a friend who will advise her on her appearance. 213

The notion that stout women should be treated no differently than normatively-sized customers, and thus offered the same critical advice about how to choose becoming or flattering garments, was a common approach amongst stoutwear retailers, whether stoutwear was segregated into its own department or not. Saleswomen were not merely regarded as being naturally more adept at manipulating a customer's desire; they were also regarded as authorities on fashion trends, color harmony and garment construction and fit, and thus uniquely capable of helping a woman to "look better," as James suggests above. In turn, a well-dressed customer—much like a well-dressed saleswoman—was regarded as being a highly persuasive form of advertising in its own right, and hence why James preferred that her employees forego a sale rather than to permit a stout woman to leave the store poorly dressed.

Saleswomen, however, toed a very fine line between being helpful and being potentially bothersome when it came to offering "sensitive" stout customers advice. Women's Wear addressed this point in a 1922 column called "Store Life," advising saleswomen to avoid offering stout patrons uncalled for advice:

By offering such unsolicited suggestions and by continually harping on the point of stoutness, which the customer is trying to minimize, the saleswoman as a rule annoys the customer, and as a result the store loses much valuable trade. Confine your selling talk to the good points of the merchandise and stress the factors that will please the customer most. 214

Elsewhere, retailers advised saleswomen to avoid talking about stout women's bodies and the garments that would be most becoming on their individual frames altogether, instead focusing on the design merits of stoutwear. A 1924 Women's Wear article that recounted how one department store evaded offending or "annoying" their stout customers by focusing on the scientific construction of stoutwear:

213 “Building a Specialized 'Fashionable Stout' Department,” Women's Wear (May 3, 1924), 16.

214 “Uncalled for Advice is Usually Annoying to the Stout Customer,” Women's Wear (January 19, 1922), 53.
We try to bring before the public the fact that ‘stout’ apparel is scientifically constructed from thousands of patterns, and that with a properly fit corset as a foundation, the stout woman need not be an object of ridicule.  

This approach was, however, contentious in its own right. As an earlier article titled “Style and Price of First Importance in Stoutwear Models” advised, too much emphasis was being placed within retail spaces on the technical aspects of stoutwear. In reality, the article suggested, stout women, just like their slender counterparts, were more so interested in “snappy styles at a fair price,” rather than “theoretical” treatises on how certain bodily flaws could be ameliorated through sufficiently technological garments: “She wants the frock that is different or a little better than her neighbor’s, and the important thing, whether she is stout or slim, is to appeal to her eye for style.”

While the nebulous concept of “style” ultimately proved to be a common denominator amid the many different, local approaches to selling stoutwear, this did not stop retail and business managers from trying to systematize selling practices. Even as authorities increasingly recognized the necessarily intuitive and fluid qualities of effective selling, however, they still made efforts to, if not “scientize” the selling process, then to professionalize it. In this way, the trajectory of selling very much mirrored that of advertising during this period with the adoption of new standards and best practices emerging from the field of applied psychology, as well as new academic business programs that upgraded salesmanship to the level of “skilled labor.”

The professionalization of salesmanship specifically in the realm of stoutwear was evident within the professional media throughout the 1920s. In the February 1920 edition of the Dry Goods Merchants Trade Journal, for example, one buyer explained how her department “uses certain phrases in its advertising and sales talk [that] ‘set better’ with some patrons.” Urging her sellers to never reference the customer’s stoutness, she mandated the uses of phrases such as “full-formed” and “a woman of large proportions.” Likewise, another article published in a 1927 edition of Women’s Wear attempted to offer simple solutions to the “problem of selling stoutwear” by way of a list of simple axioms that encompassed what sellers should both say and, perhaps more importantly, what they should not say to stout customers. Chief among them, the piece advised saleswomen never to ask a stout woman her size. Rather, much as with the debates surrounding what to call the stout woman in advertising, it suggested the usage of euphemistic turns of phrase that skirted around the matter of size altogether such as, “Try on a larger rather

216 “Style and Price of First Importance in Stoutwear Models,” Women’s Wear (December 28, 1918), 12.
217 Leach speaks about the founding of the School of Retailing at New York University in 1919 as being a crucial step in the professionalization of “saleswork,” but also distribution, management, store organization and business ethics. In particular, however, the school stressed the importance of selling and the seller’s need to rely upon his “personal resources” in getting the “human touch” back into selling. See Leach, Land of Desire, 159.
218 “Stouts Made to Feel at Home in Emporium’s Stylish Stout Department,” Dry Goods Merchants Trade Journal (February 1920), 40.
than a smaller size,” or “The lines are the most important part of stoutwear.”

The practice of never asking a woman her size found its most outlandish expression, however, in a marginal practice adopted by one stoutwear buyer who purchased an ‘enormous [dress], far bigger than any woman I have ever seen could wear,” for the express purpose of making his stout customers feel small:

Whenever a very large customer comes in, no matter what she asks for, the salesperson always brings out this giantess dress first. She holds it up and says, “My goodness! This is far too big for you, madam! We must get you something much smaller.”

While this somewhat peculiar practice was not widely adopted by retailers, it nevertheless stands as a testament to the great (and at times, comical) lengths to which retailers went in order to evade the touchy subject of size.

While the importance of language in selling to stout women was discussed widely across professional media, nowhere was more forcefully or plainly discussed than in a 1932 book titled *Tested Selling Sentences: The Language of the Brain*, written by the sales expert Elmer Wheeler. In the book’s introduction, Wheeler stresses the vital importance of language in making sales, writing, “It is the words he uses to describe that merchandise, to convince people, to reason with them—that makes the sale.”

Noting that “salesmanship has become a science,” however, in writing the book, Wheeler set out to determine which specific selling sentences were most universally effective in moving merchandise. Working closely with business scholars and clinical psychologists from The Johns Hopkins University, Wheeler conducted laboratory trials to determine which phrases carried “a definite idea in a swifter way to the mind of the consumer, to that spot in the back of the customer’s head that controls the human mechanism that…prompts the hand to reach for the check book.” Although the two hundred page tome covers an expansive range of selling disciplines from automobiles to home appliances, Wheeler notably also included a dedicated section on tested selling sentences for stoutwear—or “those sentences that instinctively appear in sale after sale and always arouse the interest of customers.”

Among the twenty-five sentences Wheeler selects for stoutwear are phrases such as, “It is no problem today to fit the stout woman,” “We specialize in fitting large figures” and “Our dresses are full cut in bust, arms, and hips.” These sentences, according to an accompanying key that delimits the relative strengths of each phrase, are considered effective for their ability to appeal to the “Service” qualities (i.e. store policy, facilities, satisfaction, etc.) of the department store. The vast

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219 “Solving the Problem of Selling Stoutwear,” *Women's Wear* (January 7, 1927), 5. Similar sentiments were made by stoutwear expert, Virginia M. Richards, who, in her own list of “do's and don'ts” for selling stoutwear first and foremost advised “Never ask the customer her size.” See Virginia M. Richards, “Selling Stoutwear is a Science in Itself,” *American Chauk and Suit Review* (November 1922), 94.


222 Ibid., 18.

223 Ibid., 19.

224 Ibid., 125.
majority of the stoutwear sentences, however, fall into the categories of “Specific Use for an Item,” “Flattery” and “Fashion Rightness.” These include phrases such as, “Every detail of all our dresses are designed to give slenderizing effects,” “This dress is cut on the bias, to get even more slenderizing effects,” “This fine weave is very slenderizing,” “This neutral shade minimizes the figure” and “This style is rather concealing, and so very flattering,” among others.225

While Wheeler’s (but also other retailers’) notion that a single utterance or sufficiently euphemistic turn of phrase could make, or break, a sale undermines the great deal of emotional and intuitive labor that went into selling stoutwear, the tone and focus of the sentences nevertheless and quite straightforwardly distills the core tenets of what it meant to get dressed as a stout woman. Indeed, the fact that the lion’s share of the “trusted selling sentences” listed in Wheeler’s book—but also those reproduced within professional media—attest to the almost taken for granted fact that stoutwear was inherently designed with the idea of slenderizing the figure in mind, and point to the notion that the stout body was widely regarded as inherently flawed. Such utterances ultimately functioned to meaningfully put into practice the ideas put forth by Albert Malsin, I. Heller and others about the “function” of stoutwear. Indeed, through selling, the problem-oriented nature of stoutwear design discourse reached its logical conclusion; however, at the same time, it would be incorrect to suggest that the stoutwear industry was imposing slenderness onto the bodies of stout women. Such a perspective ignores the large culture in which stoutwear existed (and in which, as I have shown elsewhere, fat stigma was becoming increasingly pervasive), but also neglects the agency of stout women themselves. According to Wheeler, these were not merely the most “appropriate” sentences to say to stout women, they were also the most persuasive and resonant—a fact which speaks to just how deeply stoutwear’s slenderness edicts were entrenched and normalized within the public imaginary.

5.4 Conclusions

Throughout this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate how the discourses of stoutwear—and namely manufacturers’ overt preoccupation with solving the “problem” of the stout consumer through scientifically-designed dress discussed in the previous chapter—manifested in the practices of selling. Broadly defined, selling within this chapter encompassed the related practices of advertising, merchandising (i.e. segregating departments) and salesmanship. I have thus aimed to show how discourse was productive by examining how it manifested beyond the remit of the professional media, and beyond stoutwear design discourse in the industry’s attempt to curry the stout woman’s favor, or, as suggested in the above quotation to make her “a customer for life.” As I have demonstrated, however, the practice of selling stoutwear involved a delicate balancing act—one in which advertisers and retailers attempted to tap into the stout woman’s most deep-seated insecurities while selling her a “stout ideal.”

225 Ibid., 125.

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Beginning with a discussion of how the stout woman was situated within the emerging consumer culture of the early twentieth century and amid the professionalization of advertising as a discipline, I first explored how the stout woman was profiled within professional media as psychologically flawed and how stoutwear advertising might have functioned, to borrow the words of Stuart Ewen, as a “civilizing” medium. This notion was further pursued in the second section, which looked closely at the relationship between text and image in the production of the stout ideal—one that, as the teens bled into the twenties, grew increasingly detached from the lived and corporeal realities of stout embodiment. This analysis ultimately revealed how the industry’s furthering of the idea that scientifically-designed stoutwear “liberated” stout women from the “tyranny” of their dressmakers clashed with the nearly miraculous slenderizing, and thereby normativizing, transformations effected on the body through stoutwear. Following this discussion, the final section of this chapter revealed how discourse operated “off the page.” First examining the debates surrounding whether or not to segregate stoutwear, followed by an analysis of the promoted selling strategies for dealing with stout customers—from hiring stout sales associates to evading polarizing or “annoying” language—the last section revealed how efforts to create a more equitable shopping experience for the stout woman, in many ways, merely further entrenched her outsider status.

This chapter, however, only hinted to the wider culture and context in which these discourses circulated. Indeed, although a perennial topic of debate within the professional media, the overt concern with the physical, emotional and social faults of the stout woman were not, however, unique to the discourses and practices of the stoutwear industry. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, paralleling the rise of a consumer culture in the United States, the business of advertising became professionalized and with it, there emerged an overt concern with the inner life of the consumer. Rather than focusing on the relative merits of goods, advertisers became manifestly more interested in appealing to the consumer’s feelings and intellect, or specifically in how products could fill gaps in people’s lives and compensate for both real and imagined shortcomings. According to Jackson Lears it was during this time that advertisers became convinced of the fact “that human minds were not only malleable but manipulable. And the most potent manipulation was…the promise that the product would contribute to the buyer’s psychical, psychic, or social well-being [sic].” In the proceeding chapter, I will therefore examine the broader webs of discourse in which stoutwear advertisements appeared and circulated in order to illuminate how the stigma of stoutness, as well as the imperative to slenderize the stout body that was so deeply embedded in the discourses of stoutwear design and advertising were constructed both within and beyond the fashion media.


227 Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization”
Chapter Six — Constructing a Stigma: Looking Stout in a Slender World

Figures do not lie, but the stout figure tells some unpleasant truths.

*(Vogue, November 1924)*

Very few people who look into mirrors see themselves at all—let alone as others see them! If they did, how could barrel-like figures trick themselves out in tight, horizontal-striped coverings? How could round, fleshy faces surmount their circles with little knobs of turbaned hats? …What are all these addlepates thinking of?"

*(Vogue, October 1923)*

During the interwar years the United States witnessed the convergence of a number of circumstances—including the rise of a consumer culture, the expansion of women’s rights and the popularization of dieting and exercise regimens—that, taken together, engendered a heightened cultural awareness of the body, and which sharpened individual practices of bodily self-surveillance. Within this context—and with the growing visibility of the idealized, slender female body in fashion magazines, advertising and cinema—the stout woman became a marginal figure who gradually receded from social view. By the early 1900s, the (already tenuous) notion that extra weight signaled high social standing had begun to wane. By the 1920s, images of big-bellied industrial tycoons and ample society ladies had been replaced by hyperbolic cartoons that showed a body increasingly at odds with the architectures and rhythms of modern life. Within women's and fashion media—a space flooded by images of dynamic, exceedingly slender bodies in the 1920s—the stout body possessed a similarly marginal standing (Fig. 75). Even if the stinging caricatures of lumbering stout women that were so prevalent within professional media were largely absent from the pages of mainstream women's and fashion magazines, their very absence from these spaces attested to the fact that the stout body was itself inherently unfashionable. Tainted by the growing stigma of fat, the stout woman's excessive curves—made more acute by the culture industries' elevation of the slender ideal—were a visible stigma written on the body for all to see. Hers was a less than modern body that was always constructed in relation to the slender ideal—a body that, as *Vogue* claimed in a 1924 article, told some “unpleasant truths.” Indeed, as the above quotations attest, in a culture that so privileged the visual, the stout body resided in the visual periphery—a sight causing sore eyes, so to speak.

The title of this chapter is a triple entendre. The notion of “looking stout” encompasses the construction of the stout body through the societal gaze—or the normative standard against which bodies are measured—as well as the practices of self-surveillance enacted by stout women.

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1 “The Importance of Vanity,” *Vogue* (November 15, 1924), 57.
2 “How to Tell the Fashions from the Follies,” *Vogue* (October 1, 1923) 71.
4 Ibid.
in the recognition and management of body fat; however, it also suggests how stoutness was constructed through the relationship of the body to dress. In turning its attention to how the practices of both looking and being looked at are implicit in the fashion media's discursive construction of the stout body, this chapter asks the fundamental question, what did it mean to look stout? Rejecting the notion that stoutness was defined through seemingly objective measurements—such as weight or waist circumference, for example—I argue that the stout body that was one that was constructed through conventions of fashionable dress as well as in relation to the construct of the fashionably slender body.

Divided into two parts, this chapter explores the relationship between the constructs of the "slender" or "supple" body and its other, the "stout" body. In the first part, I examine how these bodily categories, once vaguely defined, came into sharper focus in and through fashion media discourse in the first decades of the twentieth century. I thus situate the slender body as a product of the emergent, image-laden consumer culture of the first decades of the twentieth century, which Featherstone has described as normalizing a narcissistic preoccupation with achieving "the look," or what may broadly be defined as the fashionable appearance of any given historical moment. Specifically, I explore how this culture of self-surveillance in pursuit of the slender look of the 1920s manifested in the fashion media via the discourse of the mirror—here framed as a tool that permitted everyday practices of looking at the body anew in order to closely monitor minute deviations from this norm, but which also functioned as a symbolic and literal tool for the practice of self-fashioning.

After having established the wider discursive framework in which female beauty norms were constructed, in the second part of this chapter, I turn my attention to the construct of the stout body, and in particular how both the discourse of the gaze—or of being looked at always in relation to this slender ideal—was materialized in media representations of stout women looking at themselves in mirrors in order to detect bodily flaws. As I will demonstrate, through looking—or what I define here as the practice of localizing deviations from the slender norm—what

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constituted a stout body was brought into stark relief as the deviant contours of the stout body were exposed by the critical gaze of the fashion media, itself a functioning microcosm of the societal gaze.

In doing so, the purpose of this chapter is to consider the dialectical relationship between seeing and becoming—between media representations of bodies and fleshy bodies—and how this process was conveyed through fashion media in the articulation of what it meant to look stout. This chapter therefore builds upon the foundations laid in the previous three chapters to explore the wider cultural and discursive contexts in which the discourses of stoutwear circulated by considering the construction of the stout body in relation to its normative counterpart, the slender body.

6.1 Electric Reflections: New Technologies and New Ways of Seeing the Body’s Flaws

From the second decade of the twentieth century onward, visual culture became increasingly inundated with representations of ever-slimmer bodies against which consumers could compare themselves. Indeed, as Featherstone writes, “Images invite comparisons: they are constant reminders of what we are and with effort yet become.” With this proliferation of images that touted a new bodily ideal, the body had indelibly become a malleable object of consumer culture. This ushered in new ways of not only seeing the body, but also of defining the self as a perpetual work-in-progress in a society that was itself experiencing dramatic social and cultural upheavals. Freer both in body and in mind, but always subject to the omnipresent, normalizing gaze of consumer culture, women contemplated their reflection in a relatively new technology, the full-length mirror, in order to localize imperfections. No part of the body was exempt from the critical gaze of the mirror, but bodily defects—once hidden behind the elaborate architectures of nineteenth century dress were now fully on display beneath increasingly unforgiving dresses and undergarments—had for stout women become a concern of the highest order. In the exacting reflection of the full-length mirror, stout women saw their stigma, or an embodied manifestation of both their corporeal and moral deficiencies whereas normatively-sized women saw mere imperfections. Indeed, as Schwartz has written, tolerances had irrevocably narrowed, while the body, “measured more obsessively, charted more precisely and fitted more closely was also being observed with greater clarity.”

Within this context, both literally and figuratively speaking, the slender (and seemingly liberated) body had become more visible than ever before. As has already been discussed, by the mid-1920s, imagery featuring supple, youthful bodies had become a pervasive presence within the fashion media. As a result, women began to view themselves differently, too. In particular, and as Ann Hollander has written, the emergence of increasingly stylized fashion illustrations during this decade encouraged women to increasingly view their bodies as two-dimensional

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7 Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 162.
shapes. However, the ascendance of fashion photography brought with it a new authority in determining the relationship between women and their clothing. Indeed, photography merely served to underscore the notion that the slender creations streaming in from Paris could not merely be written off as an artist’s stylized distortion of fashionable dress. Carrying with them an air of truthfulness, photographs, which arrested images of live, fleshy bodies in motion, affirmed the slender ideal as real. Notable advancements in this field during the 1920s included Leica and rival Contax’s 35mm film camera, introduced to the public in 1924, and the mechanical photo booth, which was patented and placed first in New York City’s Times Square beginning in 1928. A stark departure from the stiff formality of the daguerreotype and the carte de visite of the late nineteenth century, however, these informal, ordinary images increasingly mirrored photojournalistic styles as small camera users increasingly delighted in arresting candid moments on film. Beyond the still image, however, moviegoers were also encountering ever-slenderer actresses on the screen for whom “form and grace of movement were particularly important” for combating added camera weight.

This sheer preponderance of illustrations, photographs and moving pictures of idealized bodies facilitated a dialectical relay between seeing and being in which women were constantly measuring themselves against an illusory ideal. According to Hollander, people always “dress and observe other dressed people with a set of pictures in mind—pictures in a particular style.… Dressing is always picture making, with references to actual pictures that indicate how clothes are to be perceived.” In a similar vein, Christopher Lasch has described this proliferation of idealized images of youthful, slender and active bodies in advertisements, fashion magazines and the cinema in the early twentieth century both as a “hall of mirrors” and as an “echo chamber.” This proverbial “hall of mirrors,” Lasch explains, made women increasingly more aware of their appearances, as well as more highly attuned to their physical flaws than ever before. While Lasch invokes the mirror metaphor to describe the sheer quantity of images mediated modern life in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the seemingly mundane—and literal—intrusion of full-length mirrors into private homes should also be considered within this context as a technology that ushered in new ways of both seeing and scrutinizing the body.

Much like the scale, which was discussed in chapter three, the full-length mirror was an exceedingly mundane technology that had not only introduced dramatically new ways of seeing the body, but of measuring minute corporeal changes. While glass mirrors similar in clarity and

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8 Hollander, Seeing Through Clothes, 336.
12 Hollander, Seeing Through Clothes, 311.
appearance to the mirrors of today were in use as early as the sixteenth century, small vanity mirrors only began to enter bourgeois households from the end of the eighteenth century. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century, however, that the free-standing, full-length mirror, which allowed one to view the entirety of her body from head to toe, came into wide use. A number of technical as well as economic changes enabled this new technology from the mid-nineteenth century onward, including new processes for silvering glass and better manufacturing and transportation systems. By the 1870s, department stores and catalogues were advertising full-length mirrors both in Europe and abroad to order both as freestanding objects as well as installed on wardrobes, and by the final few years of the century, they had even entered the homes of individuals of modest means.

Although the mirror itself was not perhaps entirely new, this intrusion of the mirror into the middle class bedroom in the late nineteenth century facilitated new and highly intimate practices of viewing the nude body in its entirety. The image that was reflected back at the beholder was one that few had had the privilege of seeing before this point. This was the real body—a seemingly truthful depiction of the body, which, for perhaps the first time, could be seen in its unvarnished entirety, but also measured against a graspable, concrete norm. Much more so than the camera, the home mirror offered an immediate and habituated means of monitoring minor fluctuations in one’s appearance on a day-to-day-basis. Indeed, it was a medium that permitted the routine comparison of the body to culturally-sanctioned ideals and, as Evans argues, was a “place in which the script of the self [was] written.” However, this gaze did not exist in a vacuum; rather, these new practices of looking at the body and seeing all its flaws were replicated within the pages of the women’s and fashion press wherein images of mirrors effectively doubled the disciplinary gaze.

Indeed, from the 1920s onward, explicit directives about how to look at and compare the body to the slender ideal were omnipresent within the pages of the women’s and fashion press in the United States. Contemporary beauty regimens written by dietitians and beauty experts and transcribed within the pages of magazines underscored the importance of not just looking at the nude body, but closely scrutinizing its flaws with the aid of full length mirrors. Illuminating this point, a 1924 *Vogue* article on the importance of the “correct carriage” instructed readers on how to detect flaws in their posture and comportment:

> Upon stepping from your bath in the morning, step in front of your mirror. Stand in the position that comes most natural to you and look at your figure from the side. This requires courage. Unless you are one of the very few exceptionally fortunate women who have naturally perfect figures, what you see is apt to give you a distinct shock.

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15 Vigarello, *Metamorphoses of Fat*, 146.
16 The Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company further modernized manufacturing techniques so that by the late 1920s, sheet glass could be produced *en masse* and affordably. Evans, *The Mechanical Smile*, 155.
Much more likely than not, your line will not have the symmetrical arrangement that you had been led to believe most figures possess by the drawings you have seen here and there... Do not weaken, above all do not despair. The worst is really over. You have seen the naked truth.\footnote{The Importance of Being Beautiful, 58.}

Accompanied by an illustration (Fig. 76) depicting the silhouette of a slender woman standing before a full-length mirror, the article drives home the notion that, in order to achieve the slender beauty ideal of the 1920s, women had to both measure themselves against the ideal body while engaging in a compulsory and habitual practice of self-surveillance in order to both achieve and maintain that ideal—an act here that was described as "courageous," and therefore perhaps attesting to the newness (or at least the novelty) of this practice as a crucial step in one's daily beauty routine. A caption appearing to the right of the illustration further underscores this notion by putting forth the sentiment, "The naked truth imagined in the glass, may not, at first, appear beautiful, but a little time and attention can make it so." With the entry of the mirror into private residences, the reasons for looking at oneself as discussed within the women's and fashion press—as well as the ways to do so—had evolved in tandem with the cultural whitening away of the body. The mirror, according to Vogue, was a vital tool in the construction and maintenance of the fashionable body as much as it was an ever-present reminder of the disciplinary cultural gaze.

The advice offered in contemporary beauty and style guides was much the same. Indeed, in her book, The Secrets of Distinctive Dress (1918)—a widely-read early style guide that put forth the notion that correct dress was one of the surest paths to happiness and self-fulfillment\footnote{In the foreword to the text, Winterburn explains how, "to know happiness we must appreciate beauty, and to appreciate beauty we must develop it within us. A great degree of happiness may be had from a study of dress and its requisites, for, as we study, observe, and apply, our inner selves will awaken to the aesthetic side of dress, and once awakened will develop to such an extent as to give us understanding and appreciation." See Florence Hull Winterburn, The Secrets of Distinctive Dress (Scranton: International Textbook Press 1918), iii.}—home economist Florence Hull Winterburn explains to her readers in a section entitled "Truths Your Mirror Tells" that in order to find harmony in dress, one cannot rely upon her
friends to get the honest truth; only the mirror, she argues, can tell a woman about her “shortcomings in dress.” Rather than just looking at oneself, however, much like the *Vogue* article she advocates for a careful and methodical examination of the figure’s flaws:

Put your mirror in good light, away from any shadows. Then study your face and figure, your eyes, your hair, and your complexion, so that you will know the truth.... This at first may be as hard to practice as a diet for obesity, but it is worth the time and effort it takes if you expect to attain an individuality and personal attractiveness.20

Jane Warren Wells proffered similar advice in her 1924 style guide, *Dress and Look Slender*, in which she encouraged readers to always carefully inspect themselves in the mirror and “improve every detail as much as possible” before leaving the home.21 Indeed, throughout her text, Wells regards the mirror as a tool that may aid the reader in gauging “that which is appropriate, becoming, and wholly lovely,” while also animating the object as an unbiased companion that always delivered an “honest” assessment of one’s facial flaws and bodily shortcomings.22

When invoked as an essential part of the modern woman’s toilette within these contexts, the mirror was often framed as more revealing than the gaze alone. While the mirror is regarded as “honest” and “truthful” within both Wells’ and Winterburn’s texts, one *Vogue* article similarly described the mirror as “a woman’s truest friend; it tells the whole truth, even when it hurts.”23 If the mirror was a harbinger truth, the gaze—corrupted by the influx of images of ideal bodies and beauty—had become unreliable. This is exemplified by an article published in *Vogue* in May 1926 entitled “Delusions in Dress,” which explains how, in spite of being exposed to countless examples of ideal beauty on a daily basis,

> Few of us realize what we look like; that is the basic psychological fact that explains why so many of us are ill dressed. We have an ambition, a hope, a delusion about our personal appearance. We dress that ambition, hope, or delusion—and not ourselves.24

According to *Vogue*, the slender bodily ideal had become so powerful, so omnipresent, that women had grown accustomed to dressing for that ideal. This sentiment is echoed by illustrations accompanying the article depicting several women as it is revealed to them how others see them, demonstrating how one’s self-perception—or self-delusion—is oftentimes at odds with reality (Fig. 77).

Rendered as hyperbolic cartoons, one woman recoils at the sight of four portrait photographs that amplify her drooping under-eyes and soft profile while another gasps in horror as she looks upon her own ponderous physique reflected back at her in a full-length mirror. While the article describes how many women do not grasp how time can ravage one’s appearance, particular ire is reserved for the woman who gazes upon her excessive curves in the

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20 Ibid., 103.
22 Ibid., 13, 50.
23 “The Importance of Vanity,” *Vogue* (November 15, 1924), 57.
24 “Delusions in Dress,” *Vogue* (May 15, 1926), 70.
mirror, which are amplified by the straight cut of her modish, but ill-fitting, tubular dress. The piece goes on to note how the reader is surely familiar with the “countless pathetic women” who have gained weight but have evaded the mirror’s reflection. Rather than dressing to suit her figure, this woman, the article explains, dresses her “ambition, hope, or delusion” that she can embody the era’s svelte ideal.

Within these articles, the mirror stood as a powerful symbol of the twentieth century’s culture of self-surveillance; yet, it also permitted what Sabine Melchior-Bonnet has described as a “doubled gaze.” In her cultural history of the mirror, the historian explains how the mirror inspired new ways of seeing altogether. Through the image refracted back at the beholder from the glassy, silvery surface of the mirror, a woman could both see herself, but also see herself as others see her:

Through this doubled gaze... both introspective and mimetic, the individual could define herself as a subject. Examining the self in the mirror, allows the individual to understand herself through the mastering of her consciousness, whereas by creating her image in the mirror of others, she becomes a spectacle for herself under exterior gazes. To see oneself and to be seen, to know oneself and to be known—these are interdependent acts. 

Here, Melchior-Bonnet argues that the mirror creates a complex visual relay in which the viewer both comes to understand her body more intimately while, at the same time, also being alienated from it in experiencing the gaze of others—a “doubled gaze.” In his own work, Viggarelo notes that a product of this “doubled gaze” was a new and intensified attention to the body “that did not exist before—a worsening eye for discreet change or for clearly localized features.” Indeed, the mirror inevitably permitted more intelligent, more explorative and more incisive ways of monitoring the body’s deviations from the norm.


26 Viggarelo, *Metamorphoses of Fat*, 146.
6.1.2 Magic Mirrors: Seeing the Self Slender

In addition to reflecting a truthful image of the body in this “perpetual now,” however, Melchi-Bonnet also describes the mirror as transformative:

By consistently reengaging the subject in a dialectic of being and seeming, the mirror appeals to the imagination, introducing new perspectives and anticipating other truths…. To observe oneself, to measure oneself, to dream oneself and to transform oneself: these are the diverse functions brought into play by an encounter with the mirror beyond the cultural stigmas long attached to looking at one’s self.27

Perhaps quite ironically, then, by reflecting to the subject a “real” image of the body, Melchior-Bonnet argues that the mirror also provides a surface onto which the beholder may project fantasies of future bodies—a notion that recalls Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, in which through an encounter with a mirror, a subject quickly goes from mastering her own image to being taken toward a “transformation” of the self.28 In a literal sense the mirror was framed by the fashion media as an aid to help women localize their flaws in order to correct them—a point echoed in a 1925 beauty editorial which explained how one should “never be afraid to face your face in the mirror. Though it may reflect unpleasant truths, it is only by knowing these that you can correct them.”29 Through this juxtaposition, the mirror as it was discussed within the pages of the women’s and fashion press had become not just a tool for discovering the body’s flaws; it also poetically allowed women fleeting, ephemeral glimpses of future selves.

Beyond the bedroom and dressing room, however, Vigarello points out that the mirror was a potent symbol for the practice of looking at oneself within the wider media.30 Indeed, in the first decades of the twentieth century, mirrors appeared within advertisements for various body shaping garments, weight loss products and cosmetics—as well as within countless fashion editorials—thereby functioning as a potent reminder of the omnipresent, normalizing gaze. As Marchand explains, “Borrowing from a tradition well established in art, advertising illustrators generously supplied their female subjects with mirrors as surrogates and symbols of those judgmental gazes of the world outside the boudoir.”31 For these advertising creatives, the image of a woman sitting with a mirror distilled the essence of womanhood; for the consumers, the mirror “served as a reminder of an inescapable ‘duty’ beyond that of efficient homemaking.”32 These mirrors, however, refracted two divergent images of the body: the ideal body sufficiently transformed by whichever fashion or beauty product was being advertised or, conversely, the failed body. Through both reflections, the potential of the body as a sort of corporeal work-in-

27 Melchior-Bonnet, Mirror, 156-157.
29 “Vogue Points to Beauty,” Vogue (July 15, 1925), 16a.
30 Ibid.
31 Marchand, Advertising the American Dream, 175.
32 Ibid.
progress was made manifest. Fox has described advertising as a “mirror that…reflects society back on itself,” while Featherstone has similarly explained how early twentieth century advertising and visual culture “helped to create a world in which individuals…[were] constantly monitoring themselves for bodily imperfections which could no longer be regarded as natural.” From facial wrinkles to greying hair, these advertisements ingrained in consumers the idea that little was exempt from the unforgiving scrutiny of these literal and metaphorical mirrors. Perhaps even more so than the scale or camera, however, the mirror was framed as a particularly adept tool for monitoring and measuring even minor fluctuations in body weight.

A universal presence within advertisements for various diets and weight loss products—known cumulatively as “reducing cures”—mirrors flooded the pages of women’s and fashion magazines beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century. A Vogue article from 1923 charted this shift, noting that “thirty years ago, no one ever talked of reducing.” However, the twenties ushered in a multitude of new products and diets, which, as Vogue claimed, “sprang up like mushrooms” and promised “to melt the very flesh from the bones.” The Corrective Eating Society was one such club that promised to enable women to lose weight quickly and with little effort through a scientifically engineered diet of weight-loss triggering foods. By applying the dietary principles put forth in a booklet distributed by The Corrective Eating Society, women were given the false hope that they could quickly and effortlessly “eat off weight.” In an advertisement that ran in several issues of The Red Book Magazine, the advertising copy claimed that women could “regain the slim, lithe figure of [their] girlhood days…within a few days’ time” and without the hardship of “medicines, exercises, or baths.” Although the rhetoric was largely consistent across numerous advertisements, the imagery and headlines were more subject to change, and in several campaigns, the manner in which the company invoked the mirror functioned as both a discursive and visual allusion to the cultural gaze, as well as to the particular stigma of fat.

In one advertisement, a young woman with bobbed hair sits with her back to the readers as she gazes in a vanity mirror (Fig. 78). With the caption, “Must I Give Up—and Be Fat?” hovering over her head, her disconsolate expression reflected in the mirror divulges her shock and perhaps frustration over an apparent weight gain. The advertising copy further illuminates her plight:

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35 Although I arrived at this realization independently, Stuart Ewen made similar observations when conducting research for his book Captains of Consciousness, noting that, through an informal survey of Ladies’ Home Journal advertisements from the 1920s, upwards of ten advertisements per issue featured women gazing at themselves in mirrors. See Ewen, Captains of Consciousness, 177.
36 “As You Were, 1892,” Vogue (January 1923), 44, 172. Fangman et. al also describe how retailers began to pay a premium for advertising space within women’s and fashion magazines—thereby leading to a deluge of new advertisements for beauty and reducing products. See Tamara Fangman, Jennifer Paff Ogle, Marianne C. Bickle, Donna Rouner, “Promoting Female Weight Management,” Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal 32, no. 3 (March 2004), 222.
38 Ibid.

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Can I ever forget that moment, as I stared at myself in the mirror, and my mind grasped the miserable truth that I WAS ACTUALLY GETTING FAT? "Nothing makes a woman look so matronly, so middle-aged [as] and unattractive—nothing makes a man shun a woman so readily—nothing tends to relegate a woman so rapidly to the background—nothing..." My mind trailed off, I gazed vacantly, unhappily into space, as I recalled these words I had read somewhere; it seemed only yesterday. Then I was so beautifully, youthfully slim and the idea of my ever putting on weight had never even entered my mind.30

The mirror is here invoked as a tool reflecting the "doubled gaze" of the beholder and of society at large by engaging a dialectic of seeing and believing: the young woman encounters her compromised reflection in the mirror, regarding it within the context of advice she had heard—as well as in relation to the male gaze—and which links her perceived weight gain with social and

30 Ibid.
moral failure. Put simply, the young woman realizes that she looks fat—a condition put into stark relief when she compares her own reflection to the world of images she encounters on a daily basis. With the female reader positioned directly behind the woman, however, her reflection exists as our collective reflection, her failure is our failure.

As a corollary to images of “failed” bodies such as this, however, the discourse of consumer culture empowered female consumers to believe that appearances were mutable and that through the practice of body maintenance they could inch ever-closer to the slender ideal. Indeed, advertisers increasingly capitalized on the fact that if female consumers could be made to feel perpetually self-conscious and dissatisfied with their appearances, they would be
incentivized to buy any number of beauty products and weight reducing cures. With consumption framed as a cure-all for these feelings of dissatisfaction, mirrors within advertisements were therefore prescient looking glasses through which women could see healthier, happier and, perhaps most importantly, freer versions of themselves. This, however, was what Evans has described as a “complex form of liberation.” On the one hand, by embodying the new slender silhouette, women could project an idealized image of themselves as liberated and unconstrained. Yet this image could not be attained without constant vigilance and the careful management of one's appearance; nevertheless, advertisers sought to show how this ideal was always within reach. More often than not then, the images reflected by these advertising mirrors were therefore not of the failed body as above, but, quite appropriately, of the body utterly transformed by the objects of consumer culture.

In another advertisement for The Corrective Eating Society published the same year, the headlined proclaimed, “You Can Weigh Thirty Pounds Less One Month from Today.” Much like the previous advertisement, this one features a mirror; however, as if responding to the plight of the woman who stared in shock at her suddenly fatter appearance, this one instead refracts a fantastical image of a woman in an elegant, neoclassical dress (Fig. 79). Here, the reader is again positioned in a manner that suggests that the reflection is her own; however, rather than the failed body pictured in the previous advertisement, this one depicts a body tantalizingly transformed into the classical ideal of beauty. Indeed, a caption under the mirror’s frame offers the reader that her “Mirror Will Tell the Story.”

Mirrors depicting the body transformed were also frequently employed within advertisements for various brands of so-called “reducing” corsets and girdles designed specifically to aid in permanent weight loss. In one such advertisement for Gossard front lacing corsets that ran a 1922 issue of The Ladies' Home Journal, a woman is depicted wearing one of the models, which—with its laces and boning designed to offer extra support to older, more curvaceous women—was more cumbersome than the elastic girdles that were coming into fashion (Fig. 80). Encased by an illustrated frame that transforms the rectangular photograph into a mirror, the woman—much as in the previous example—stands as a proxy for the reader herself. In a curious doubling, however, the woman stares into her own hand mirror with a contented, soft gaze. This multiplication occurs again in a slightly earlier Gossard advertisement, which was also printed in The Ladies’ Home Journal. Depicting a woman a fitting room, she blithely gazes at the reflection of her body, doubled in a crude three-way mirror, that—with the reader

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40 Drawing upon Featherstone, Heather Addison also employs this term in her own work, defining the practice through those “activities that attempt to alter permanently the size or shape of the body, as opposed to modifying it temporarily through the uses of clothing or other cosmetic devices.” See Heather Addison, “Hollywood, Consumer Culture and the Rise of Body Shaping” in Hollywood Goes Shopping, eds. David Desser and Garth S. Jowett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 10. The particular practices of body maintenance—from weight loss to fat reducing cures—will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter.

41 Evans, Mechanical Smile, 215.
42 Roberts, Civilization Without Sexes, 84.
providing the final vantage point—permits a 360-degree view of her figure, effectively slenderized by the long line, front-lacing corset (Fig. 81).

On the one hand, the use of multiple mirrors served a practical purpose in showing corsets (and their slimming effects) from all sides—a strategy which may be glimpsed within advertisements from Dr. Walter’s Reducing Rubber corsets (Fig. 82) to NuLife Self-Lacing Corsets and Marcella Lingerie (Fig. 83). In her own work, however, Evans describes how the doubling permits a more nuanced, complicated interpretation for the reader. She writes, “to a female spectator accustomed to inspecting her own image in the mirror, an encounter with an image of a woman looking in a mirror creates a ‘slippage’ in which the reader becomes a participant and is therefore able to identify with the image as a self-image—a beguiling and confusing effect that eludes reality and reflection.” Through these advertisements, the reader is transposed into the scene itself and thereby undergoes a subtle mental transformation. Upon gazing in a mirror, Van Dyk Lewis poetically writes about how the fashionable woman “attempts to reconcile the imagined body with her actual body shape” by tensing and flexing her muscles in an attempt to embody her mental reflection of a perfect or ideal body. By doing so, she

Evans, *Modernist Smith*, 157. For further discussion of the mirror, albeit in a slightly later context, as a trope within fashion discourses, see Arnold, *American Lane*, 64.

responds to fashion's demands for "the constant activity of the transformative figure" by creating a fleeting image of a future body. In the advertising mirrors, however, she also encounters the transformative effects of the diet, corset or other body-modifying product being sold. In this vein, it could be said that these advertisements—and the mirrors embedded within them—operate as "magic" or "funhouse" mirrors that refract the fantasies of consumer culture.

However, the duality of the mirror and its ability to engage in the viewer a slippery "dialectic of being and seeming" also points to its potential untrustworthiness. Jean Delmeau writes of the mirror as an ambiguous object, "for in duplication, dissimilarities may creep in." Illuminating this point, a New York Times piece published in 1926 reported an instance in which a French couturière was brought before a judge after being accused of using a trick mirror to deceive stout consumers:

Before the mirror of a certain popular ladies' tailor patrons inclined to excessive embroilment were stationed that they might see how slender Madame's deft art made them appear. What they saw in the glass they were charmed, and great were the profits that flowed into the couturière's till.

The clients presently began to observe that arrayed in these costumes before the mirror at home they did not appear sylph-like as at the dressmaker's. Finally, the secret came out. Madame had been posing them before a convex mirror.

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With a great number of indignant stout women serving as witnesses, the judge ruled on the side of the customers, imposing a fine of 2,000 francs on the couturier; however, the *Times* reports that the judge ultimately “sympathized with the dressmaker who had successfully capitalized on vanity.” The problem was less the couturier’s use of a convex mirror than the fact that the customers’ home mirrors reflected an inconvenient truth. In the space of the couturier’s dressing room, the women encountered a fantasy image—their bodies magically transformed through dress and brought into alignment with the slender ideal. So desperate to attain the slender, sylph-like ideal, this story ultimately attests to how readily women were willing to suspend belief—and suggests the lengths to which they were willing to go—in pursuit of the norm. They had walked in as stout women and left as slender women; yet, upon returning home to their ordinary mirrors, they found that their own imperfect bodies awaited them in the glass.

6.2 Looking Fat: The Anatomy of the Stout Body

In a 1923 article titled “The Problem of the Straight Silhouette: Fitting the Flat Back to the Full Figure,” the complicated relationship between the stout body and fashionable, streamlined garments is put into stark relief. Illustrated by a drawing featuring six women, here identified as stout, gazing at their reflections before a large panel of plate glass mirrors, the article explains how “a study of the new clothes leads us to think that the misfortune of extra avoirdupois can hardly be overestimated” (Fig. 84). Continuing, the article speaks to the great lengths to which women were willing to go in order to achieve this bodily ideal:

> It is extraordinary what will-power can do for a woman’s figure if she wills hard enough. We all remember the era of the Gibson girl, when, by force of example only, young women grew suddenly to six-foot proportions and the straightest hair was made to blow into tendril ringlets on the slightest provocation. Still more remarkable is the influence of the mode for the slender, not to say diaphanous, figure, which has flourished since the war and which shows not the slightest decline in popularity. Every woman apparently can taper from the shoulders now if she tries hard enough.\(^{51}\)

While the article warns against the dangers of blindly following fleeting fashion trends, the illustration depicts the women’s bodies as thoroughly transformed through thoughtful and successful applications of the principles underpinning the fashionably slender silhouette. Noting the excessive tightness of some of the new dresses, “which is nine times out of ten at that spot which might be delicately referred to as ‘the back of the hips,’” the article goes on to explain that these styles are only becoming to “a figure five feet six inches in height, weighing one hundred and twenty pounds…provided that a plumb-line dropped from her seventh vertebra to her heels did not vary anywhere from the absolute perpendicular.”\(^{52}\) As this article attests, even the slightest suggestion of a womanly curve corrupted the straight lines of the prevailing mode. For

\(^{51}\) “The Problem of the Straight Silhouette: Fitting the Flat Back to the Full Figure,” *Vogue* (November 1923), 44-45.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
the stout woman, however, the new, slender styles were a particular anathema to their non-normative bodies. Possessing bodies defined by excess, they simply did not fit, both literally and figuratively, into the new, streamlined mode.

What this article therefore demonstrates is the fact that a stout body was not simply defined by concrete measurements—that is, by one’s weight or waist circumference alone, for example. Rather, stoutness was also constructed by the relationship of the body to dress, but namely through the body’s protrusions or deviations from the norm. As in the example above, one could look stout if a dress tugged too tightly at the lower back, both putting a strain on the straight lines of the dress and “unflatteringly” revealing womanly curves where there should have been straight lines. Although a women’s physique could demarcate her as stout, so too could a poor fitting garment; however, good fit is a historically and culturally contingent concept, just as figure flattery, or the notion of what looks “good” on the body, is a highly volatile one that is at the mercy of changing notions of ideal beauty and seasonal fashion trends. Much like the social construct of the ideal body—which, as I discussed above, is fashioned through a visual relay between mass-produced, idealized images of beauty and the individual’s consumption of those images—there exists a dialectic between dress and the body in which dress has the capacity to (re-)shape the body into something socially meaningful and, in the case of the stout body, socially acceptable. Indeed, as Entwistle has written, “the body is a highly restricted medium of expression... and expresses the social pressure brought to bear on it.”

53 Entwistle, Fashioned Body, 15.

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social codes are therefore “likely to cause offense and outrage and be met with scorn or incredulity.” In a similar vein, Ingun Grimstad Klepp has argued that while “the body is nature,” what we regard as “the figure”—which the author situates as a fashion-specific discourse—is, conversely, “the result of…cultivation and disciplining.” In this case, dress has the capacity to transform the unruly fat, female body into one that is more aligned with or strives toward the slender ideal—that is, a more socially desirable figure. When deployed incorrectly, however, the body is only made more conspicuous in its tacit rejection of the slender norm.

Yet, as the above example illustrates, the stoutwear industry sold to stout women the incongruous promise that one could be stout without necessarily looking stout. Rather than lingering on ideal bust-waist-hip ratios, for example, the problem of looking stout hinged more on how a garment fit on or around a woman’s curves than on the measurements of those very curves. Being well dressed in the 1920s was not solely dependent upon achieving the mythical eighteen-inch waist; rather, it involved a more complicated and ever-changing negotiation between “tightness” and “looseness” in order to achieve the appearance of a fashionably straight silhouette. This required stout women to essentially learn the cultural gaze and become inured to their flaws—or conditioned to localize them through Foucauldian practices of self-surveillance and self-discipline—so as to avoid the embarrassment of bad fit when getting dressed.

Through this notion, we may extend the notion of looking and being looked at from the previous section in order to elucidate and explore the specific practices of self-surveillance in which stout women were to engage—the idea being that if a woman could identify flaws, she could take measures to correct them. What were these flaws, however? And what, according to the ubiquitous gaze of the fashion media, specifically made the body look stout? In the ensuing subsections, I will build upon the last, placing the stout body in dialogue with the slender ideal, and identifying those “deviant dress practices”—such as fitting the flat back to the stout figure, as above—that had in them the capacity to render the body stout. In doing so, I will explore how stoutness may be regarded as a social construct—one that was always in a state of becoming in relation to the slender ideal, but one which was also very concretely defined by the relationship between the fleshy body and the garment. From age-related weight gain to the very particular matters of good and bad fit, in this last half of the chapter, I will explore the many ways one could look stout.

6.2.1 Age and Avoirdupois: From the Matron to the Domestic

As it was regarded within early twentieth century fashion media, stoutness was, most often, a condition that naturally accompanied advancing age—even something taken for granted in discussions about dress for the older woman. Indeed, in his 1915 stoutwear survey, Albert Malsin delineated the most canonical type of stout figure in his three-part taxonomy—the “stout all

54 Ibid., 8.
over type”—as being typical of older, more “matronly” women. In the fashion media more widely, the lion’s share of references to the stout figure appeared within the context of articles about fashion and age. Within this context, age-related weight gain was not always presented as a problem; according to some sources, a little extra weight at the hips was even deemed more desirable than a gaunt or emaciated appearance in older women, although this sentiment was not widespread. As one 1924 *Vogue* article titled “Odds Against Chic in Middle Age” explained, “the thirty-four inch hip and bust would be as ridiculous for the older figure to-day [sic] as the nineteen-inch waist would have been some years ago.” Another article published four years later in *Vogue* said much the same, explaining how women should expect “age to register with a certain slight increase of curve.” Some new styles that emerged in the mid 1920s—such as floating panels, peplums or tunic blouses that added a softness to the straight silhouette—were even seen as particularly flattering on the so-called “matronly” figure as they could counterbalance more “undesirable” curves while still having the benefit of creating an overall straight-line appearance.

Yet, even as women could grow old gracefully—or even perhaps a little “broad” at the hips and bust as above—the same, however, could not be said for growing stout or, worse, fat. An article published in *The Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1919 anticipated this condition, which only grew more marked later in the twenties:

> The English women have always marveled at the willingness of our slender girls to grow almost universally into fat, short-winded women. “Of course, she’s fat, but you have to expect it at her age,” we always used to hear…. Now I hear: “Isn’t it too bad that Mrs. Blank has let herself get so disgustingly fat? Why does she do it? She would be a beautiful woman if she’d take care of herself.”

For further discussion of Malsin’s survey, see chapter four. This observation comes from my own primary research and survey of fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, as well as women’s magazines like *The Red Book*, *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*. In her own work on this period, Carmen Keist also found that many references to women and weight within historical fashion media may be found within articles and editorials that are ostensibly about modifying the straight silhouette to the elderly body. See Keist, “The New Costumes of Odd Sizes,” 85.

*Odds Against Chic: Middle Age*, *Vogue* (February 15, 1924), 72. *Chic in the Years of Discretion*, *Vogue* (November 10, 1928), 77.

In the article, “The Problem of the Straight Silhouette,” although *Vogue* did not recommend that stout women embrace the new straight silhouette wholesale, the magazine did point to certain styles—including the tunic blouse, floating panels, loose capes and deep V-necks as being particularly advantageous and even flattering to the stout frame.

Stearns notes how “it was in the 1920s that the word ‘broad’ came into use as a derogatory term for women in American English,” first being used as a term to refer to prostitutes and women of loose morals, but also more generally as a derogatory term for women. “Gradually the latter meaning triumphed, and while not explicitly tied to the new sensitivity to female fat, the term certainly evoked some of the same critique: women’s shape, unless carefully disciplined, was now suspect.” See Stearns, *Fat History*, 81.

“Suppose You are 40-Odd!” *The Ladies’ Home Journal* (November 1919), 33.
As this sentiment suggests, the shift in the 1920s was swift as the thresholds for unacceptable fat in women had become both more minute and more concrete as aging women—once content to grow comfortably stout in later life—increasingly found themselves the targets of the self-preservationist discourses of consumer culture. Indeed, fatness, the article suggests, was no longer an “unfortunate degree of Providence,” but rather a result of “too much food and too little exercise,” or an overall lack of attention paid to preserving the body and, perhaps more importantly, to maintaining a youthfully slender figure. A woman grew fat because she did not “take care” of herself.

Certainly, by the 1920s, fatness was increasingly recognized as a health concern; however, within the women’s and fashion press, the preachments against fat had little rational basis beyond aesthetics, and even to a certain extent within the medical field, discussions of women and fat almost invariably focused on appearances. Within and beyond the field of medicine, the message was clear, if lacking introspection: there was no viable excuse for a woman to grow fat—not even in old age. As the matron increasingly became a relic of the nineteenth century—even provoking Vogue to sensationally claim in 1928 that “to-day [sic] there are no matrons”—the youth-centric twenties brought with them a decisive shift in how aging and weight gain were perceived. While “broadness” or “middle age spread” seemed to be regarded as age-related, if unwelcome, inevitabilities, fatness, on the other hand, was more problematically likened to a woman’s lack of self-control, or her inability to curb the impulse to consume. Indeed, as one 1926 Vogue article explained disparagingly, “The woman who lets go gets fat inevitably—and fat and forty might as well go and knit in the chimney corner”—a clear reference to the perceived worthlessness of a woman past her so-called prime. Tapping into the self-preservationist bent of consumer culture, Americans increasingly fed into the notion that one could no longer age or gain weight gracefully; rather, extra weight on a woman had above all come to be regarded as an outward manifestation of her moral laxity. Bodies that did not actively combat the visible signs of aging were therefore doomed not only to be failed bodies—rendered all but inert in a culture that so valued the spirit and forward momentum of youth—but to also be conspicuous bodies. Indeed, and perhaps somewhat ironically, the ubiquity of slender, youthful bodies within fashion, cinema and visual culture at large only made the stout, aging body all the more prominent, but also all the more problematic.

Within the fashion media however, stout women were assured that—in spite of the public vitriol against fat and the media and culture industries’ reinforcing of these values—they could be made to look decent, so long as they committed to monitoring themselves for and actively combating the telltale signs of age-related weight gain and avoided certain dress practices that made the body appear older and fatter. Indeed, as one Vogue article titled “A Guide

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63. Stearns pinpoints the medicalization of fat as occurring in approximately 1903, while by 1905, “doctors were discussing issues of weight and reducing with increasing confidence. See Fat History, 38. Schwartz also discusses the new genre of dieting books as reaching their apogee in the first decades of the twentieth century. See Never Satisfied, 174-183. See also Brumberg, Fasting Girls, 238-240.
64. Stearns, Fat History, 82.
65. “Odds Against Chic in Middle Age,” Vogue (November 10, 1928), 77.
to Chic for the Stout Older Woman” so aptly put it, the clever older woman “has no illusions about herself and is well aware that her weak points are her sagging chin, overdeveloped bust and hips, and fleshy upper arms.” Equipped with this knowledge, the article went on to explain how this woman possesses the ability to “bring out [her] advantages and, above all, conceal the defects.” At the same time, however, the older stout woman was simultaneously warned of too conspicuously trying to arrest the visible signs of aging. In short, for women, the aging process was mired in contradictions.

These contradictions were manifest within fashion media discourses about how to dress as an older (and stouter) woman. Indeed, as a 1924 Vogue article explained to its “matronly” readership:

As times change, our vocabularies change with them, and certain words, once popular, look strange to our eyes. The word “matron” is one of these—one such a favourite with those who sold their customers the richly fur-trimmed “matrons’ coats,” the important looking velvet “matrons’ hats,” and the dresses of exaggeratedly long line that were supposed to disguise the matronly figure, even though they succeeded only in proclaiming the extra pounds that the extra years had added to it.

In the above quotation, Vogue points out that the days in which a woman could hope to age gracefully and with dignity were long gone. “To-day [sic] there are no matrons,” the article also claims, evidenced by the fact that “older women are as slim as they were in their twenties, owing to a strenuous espousal of the gospel of diet and exercise.” Here, Vogue first and foremost correlates a “matronly” appearance with body weight—a “slight increase in curve,” for instance, being a telltale sign of one’s advancing age. However, the article also touches upon the fact that looking matronly also encompassed a particular manner of dressing that harkened back to a bygone era. Here, an oblique reference is made to the sophisticated S-curve of the Edwardian period—a silhouette that alluded to a mature, womanly body underneath, but which had been derogatorily rendered matronly by the extreme slenderness of the twenties silhouette. Women who still clung to this opulent manner of dressing therefore showed their age. In a youth-obsessed culture, the matronly appearance had become associated with a certain former conservatism in dress that, as Vogue claims, succeed “only in proclaiming the extra pounds that the extra years had added” to the figure. In a market flooded by pared-down silhouettes rendered in utilitarian and modern textiles such as jersey, the grandeur of the matron’s wardrobe—from the fabrication of garments to the volume and excess of past styles—had become outmoded, and worse, only functioned to make the body appear conspicuously larger. In short, aging itself had become unfashionable.

The notion that a woman’s manner of dressing could make her appear “matronly”—an appearance that met at the confluence of both extra curves and one’s age—was further

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68 “Chic in the Years of Discretion,” 77.
69 Entwistle, Fashioned Body, 171.
70 “Chic in the Years of Discretion,” 77.
emphasized in an editorial entitled “A Guide to Chic for the Older Woman,” in which *Vogue* assured the reader that it was not a woman's age *per se* that made her unfashionable, but rather “the fact that her figure is different, and that the whole thought of the mode has changed since she first began considering clothes.” Continuing, *Vogue* argued that by clinging to the sartorial logic of her youth, the older, stout woman will only “be—at best—[a] well-preserved and tightly corseted matron, dressed in good taste, but far from smart!”  

This notion of being “well-preserved” is one that *Vogue* returned to time and again in articles and editorials commenting on dress and age. A 1926 article entitled “A Guide to Chic for the Woman of Forty or More” describes the so-called “well-preserved look” in the following manner:

> The woman who starts out to convey the fatal well-preserved impression has her clothes fitted too tightly, uses too much make-up and never sits down without giving her audience the idea that she finds the operation complicated on account of her corsets.

A far cry from being fashionable or, as above, “smart,” the idea of being well-preserved conjures for the reader images of outmoded dress suspended in embalming fluid—a manner of dressing perhaps more fit for the shelves of a reliquary than for wearing on bustling urban streets. Further, the picture of the body that this article discursively paints—stiff and burdened by its coverings—stands in stark contrast with the dynamic, slender and, above all, youthful body. An instructive article titled “Shopping for the Older Woman,” which appeared in the December 1927 issue of *Vogue* echoes this notion, describing the “unalluringly termed ‘matron’s models’” as having lines and colors that make the wearer appear far older, and which transform her into a “tightly corseted, ‘well-preserved’ matron without any real chic in her appearance.”

Where modern garments floated weightlessly over the body, their matronly counterparts were both too covering and fit too tightly in all the wrong places. Where the straight line style found charm in shrewd editing, matronly dresses were excessive in their ornamentation. And finally, whereas the youthful silhouettes allowed for freedom of body and movement, the matron—encumbered by her antiquated corseting and heavy drapery—had only a limited range of movement, aging her not only in her dress styles but also in her posture and carriage. In sum, rather than a fashionable appearance, the function of matronly dress was to offer its wearer comfort and security—effects that were achieved largely by obfuscating any visible signs of aging, and by covering up the decaying body underneath.

In her work on fashion and age, Julia Twigg explains how, in a culture that so profoundly values youth and within a fashion system that hinges on its own constant regeneration, there occurs “a growing discordance between the processes of fashion renewal and the physical basis for them in the form of the aging body.” Fashion, consequently, has a tendency to leave the older woman behind, so to speak, in order to capitalize on the fickle and ever-changing tastes of youth. Historically, the dress of older women has therefore tended to be conservative or “old-

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72 “A Guide to Chic for the Woman of Forty or More,” 94.
73 “Shopping for the Older Woman,” *Vogue* (December 15, 1927), 75.
74 Twigg, *Fashion and Age*, 14.
fashioned,” a fact that aligns well with Twigg’s assertion that old age is regarded in Western culture as “a passage in life marked less by preoccupation with surface and display, and more with inner essence.”⁷⁵ Yet, while the fashion industry has tended to ignore the older woman, the realities of coping with aging and the expectations of older women to act upon or arrest the corporeal manifestations of the aging process, however, are much different. In the increasingly youth-oriented culture of the early twentieth century, the various trappings of the aging body did not coincide well with the prevailing self-preservationist tendencies of consumer culture, nor did the dowdy, conservative dress of the matron. Instead, as one article suggested, women who possessed matronly bodies had to spend “even more time in fitting the figure to the frock than in fitting the frock to the figure”⁷⁶ in a somewhat hapless pursuit of the youthful silhouette.

In avoiding the “well-preserved” look while simultaneously trying to stay in step with the ever-evolving mode, however, the older woman had to tread carefully so as not to commit another cardinal sartorial sin: appearing too youthful both in body and in dress. As mentioned previously, while the fashion media disavowed weight gain in older women in the 1920s—with one article even stating, “Youth will be served—but youth can’t be curved, if it’s to retain even the semblance of youth these days” —it also paradoxically counseled women against striving for “the thirty-four inch hip and bust,” which was “as ridiculous for the older figure to-day [sic] as the nineteen-inch waist would have been some years ago.”⁷⁷ By too obviously attempting to reverse the clock, the older woman could only come across as stubborn, foolhardy and lacking in self-awareness in repudiating the inevitability of old age. Indeed, as Twigg has written, “One of the most powerful discursive formations for older women is the traditional cultural trope of ‘mutton dressed as lamb’”—an aphorism that castigates futile attempts to arrest the aging process, as well as the practice of dressing in a manner that is deemed inappropriately youthful.

The older woman could therefore also inadvertently age herself, perhaps somewhat ironically, by wearing clothing that was modeled too closely after that of young women—attesting to the subtle differences in what was elevated as “chic” or “smart” versus that which was snubbed as too “youthful” by the fashion media. Chicness in dressing, as Wilson has written, is a byproduct of the industrial period and the age of “mass man.”⁷⁸ To this end, chicness is depersonalized, rigid and elevates uniformity over individuality in a conspicuous (albeit subtle) display of good taste. In the 1920s, an appearance of youthfulness, perhaps even more so than slenderness, had become a compulsory facet of fashionable femininity. According to a 1924 *Vogue* article titled “A Guide to Chic for the Stout Older Woman”—one within a series of “Guides to Chic” published that year directed toward women for whom chicness did not come easily for one reason or another—the older woman had to possess a discerning and critical eye,

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⁷⁵ Ibid., 1.
⁷⁶ “Chic in the Years of Discretion,” 180.
⁷⁷ “In the Balance,” *Vogue* (November 15, 1925), 64.
⁷⁸ “Odds Against Chic: Middle Age,” *Vogue* (February 15, 1924), 72.
⁷⁹ Twigg, *Fashion and Age*, 16.
⁸⁰ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 12.
as well as a deep knowledge of the discrete elements that, taken together, created the fashionably slender look:

Every season, in planning new gowns, she pursues the same idea, taking only what is becoming and sternly rejecting the smartest novelties if they are unsuitable to her figure. She does not desire to lead the mode, but she does desire to suggest it.81

Here, Vogue ensures that the older woman does not necessarily have to turn her back on fashion altogether or, conversely, to physically reduce; rather, through careful study and a thoughtful application of various elements of the mode, she may be in fashion while avoiding what we would today regard as “fashion victimization.”82 Similarly warning against blindly following fashion’s mandates, another article entitled “Smart Modes for Older Women” described the dress practices of the smartly dressed older women in a parallel manner, explaining that while older women must leave behind “reedy lines and rose-leaf lipsticks,” they do not need to stop being “charming.” To retain her charm, the article continues, the older woman “must exercise self-repression in many ways.”83

However, whereas American women were oftentimes positioned in American Vogue as eager to adopt fashion trends but lacking taste or “self-repression” as above, their French counterparts were lauded for their shrewd fashion sense and critical eye. Indeed, a Vogue piece published in 1922 hailed the Parisienne’s “brave” approach to aging “chicly” and with grace:

It is, it must be admitted, difficult to pass from one age to another…. That is the difficult point, for very few women are willing to take exact account of the period of declining beauty and youth, and their struggle against it gives a most painful impression to those who watch them. On the other hand, there are women who courageously advance to meet the moment when they shall become veritably old ladies.…. It is, of course, very difficult for the woman who has been an acknowledged beauty or a woman greatly admired and sought after, to renounce willingly the prestige given her by distinction and even eccentricity of costume, to which she has been accustomed from her early youth. It is no less hard to give up wearing everything that strikes her fancy…. …there comes a period when it suffices to take care that one’s costumes are not too young; while still following current modes. These modes must be modified, adapted to one’s figure, to the needs of one’s life, but they may still remain entirely in the mode.84

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82 Limited consideration has been given to this concept within fashion studies; however, in one of the few discussions of fashion victimization, Kaiser, Heckman and Kastrinakis describe the fashion victim as being “susceptible to fashion change, without devoting ‘serious’ thought (as might a connoisseur) to the meaning of that change.” Although it is a term that only came into wide use in the late twentieth century, this basic definition aligns well with my own discussion of chicness as it was discussed in Vogue, or a discerning, critical approach to dressing. See Susan Kaiser, Joyce Heckman and Denise Kastrinakis, “Fads” in Valerie Steele (ed.) The Berg Companion to Fashion (London: Berg, 2010), 268-270.
83 “Smart Modes for Older Women,” Vogue (July 1, 1922), 57.
As the above excerpt demonstrates so well, the most elegant way for the older woman to reconcile the side effects of aging with the expectations of fashion, according to *Vogue*, was to be vigilant about both her own bodily shortcomings as well as the limitations of fashionable dress—or, simultaneously aware of both the cultural gaze as well as her own appearance. Indeed, according to *Vogue*, perhaps the worst offense older women could commit was to dress “their ever-youthful souls, perhaps, but not their mature bodies.” An article entitled “A Guide to Chic for the Closed Minded” therefore implored older women to “open up their minds, as well as their eyes when they look in the mirror,” adding, “Mr. Freud...might see them differently, but what appears in the glass is what is seen by the world at large.” Here again, the mirror—but also the subtler, habituated act of looking at the self—are invoked as crucial tools in the monitoring and maintenance of body weight amid the omnipresent cultural gaze.

In the 1920s, however, more and more women under the age of forty—the critical threshold between young and old according to *Vogue* as well as *The Ladies’ Home Journal*—were finding themselves resigned to stoutwear departments. Indeed, it was not only so-called matrons who were doomed to have unfeasible curves, but also an increasingly younger demographic whose curves could not be written off as an inevitable byproduct of the aging process. The reasons for this are numerous, if not somewhat illusive, however. Certainly, advancements in private and public transportation as well as consumer technologies such as the vacuum cleaner created what was widely perceived as an increasingly inert population newly susceptible to weight gains caused by the creature comforts of modern life. Indeed, as was reported in the *New York Times* in January 1917, “Higher standards of living, less worry and less household drudgery have done their part in increasing feminine avoirdupois as have the more general introduction of motor cars and the growth of club life with its gastronomic and other pleasures.” However, as was discussed in chapter three, more mundane cultural and technological interventions—like the advent of standard sizing and the bathroom scale—constructed more concrete and seemingly scientific thresholds between slender and stout, as well as new notions of “normal” and

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84 Ibid.
85 A September 15, 1926 article perhaps most clearly underscores this point. Entitled “A Guide to Chic for the Woman of Forty or More,” the article demarcates the age of forty as being a crucial age at which a woman must “readjust” her appearance or “hang up the receiver for good.” “At forty,” the article continues, “one has the choice of striving desperately to keep on being an old young woman, or of shifting, with great distinction, to becoming a young, perhaps even a very young, middle-aged woman.” See “A Guide to Chic for the Woman of Forty or More,” 94.
86 Peter Stearns explains how beginning in the late nineteenth century, simple changes in American living and working patterns had the effect of amplifying fat stigma. In the 1920s in particular, the middle class was increasingly finding itself bound to desk jobs and the automobile had become a viable consumer product—circumstances that would certainly have contributed to weight gain—although by this point fat stigma had become firmly entrenched in the American psyche. See Stearns, *Fat History*, 52-54. For women specifically, however, technologies such as the vacuum cleaner, which lessened the physical burden of housework, were seen as a contributing factor to women’s weight gain. Indeed, as one article about how to avoid age-related weight gain explained, “the modern vacuum cleaners will make more modern Dianas [shorthand for a voluptuous woman] than ever the broom and dustpan made.” See “Suppose You are 40-Odd!” *Ladies’ Home Journal* (November 1919), 33.
“deviant” bodies. For these reasons, the young stout woman—lacking the ability to buy standard-size fashions off-the-rack—found herself oftentimes uncomfortably subject to the moralizing preachments and conventions of matronly dressing.

Indeed, as Jane Warren Wells affirms in *Dress and Look Slender*, stoutwear garments designed with the intent of making the wearer appear more slender oftentimes had the opposite effect on the wearer:

How you select clothes that are certain to make you look slender is the most important knowledge a modern woman can have…. And yet, many designers of clothes for stout women do not understand its very cardinal principals. Of course, they do design so-called “slenderizing stouts”—but you know, perhaps all too well, what they look like. Their long, surplice effects and drab colors say as plainly as words, “I am designed for a stout” and nine times out of ten they simply call attention to your stoutness. Besides they are for matronly women—not for those who want to look young and smart.

Likewise, as Wells explains elsewhere in the volume, fashion magazines had the tendency to assume that all stout women were more elderly, matronly types, and thus offered them fashion advice accordingly. Although some media outlets estimated that over one-third of all stout women were under the age of forty, young stout women were nevertheless resigned to wearing more matronly styles due to the fact that—even into the 1920s and despite acknowledging that there was a market for so-called “stylish stouts” designed for younger women—the stoutwear industry still by-and-large clung to the antiquated and moralizing dress conventions assigned to matrons.

The dress conventions of older women reflect the manner in which aging in consumer culture is regarded as a gradual move away from the ideals of normative beauty—a notion that underscores the injunctions and expectations of age-appropriate dressing. Indeed, as Twigg has written, certain social expectations about what is and is not “age-appropriate” for older women are “written into garments.” While trendy, frivolous styles are earmarked for youthful bodies, on the bodies of older women, there exists a discord between the garment—and the meanings written into it—and the old body, therein rendering the dressed body age-inappropriate. Similarly, we may extend this logic when considering how matronly dress was read on the bodies of young, stout women upon whom the conservative, matronly design and fabrication of stoutwear merely served to amplify their bodily deviations from the slender norm, as well as their outsider status to the fashion industry. As Wells suggests above, for the younger stout woman this meant that her dress had the undue effect of making her appear stouter even as fashion discourse mandated slenderizing styles. The body notwithstanding, stoutwear—with what Wells describes above as its “long surplice effects and drab colors” designed to cover up and hide the body in making it appear less conspicuously large—forcefully placed the younger stout woman

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90 See Chapter 3, “The Stoutwear Industry: Creating Consumers.”
92 Ibid., 6.
94 See Chapter Three, “The Stoutwear Industry: Creating Consumers.”
outside of the cycle of fashion change, her body subject to the moralizing discourses of “age-appropriate” fashion.

If the fashion media is any indication, the young stout woman in the 1920s had a deeply ambivalent relationship with mass-produced fashion and the particular matrix of ideals it extolled. On the one hand, she had been physically marginalized by the producers of mainstream, standard-size fashions who did not make garments in her size. On the other, however, she was too young to be resigned to wearing drab, covering stoutwear designed for the bodies of older women. Although the physical size of the young stout woman’s body—and the sartorial limitations placed upon it by ready-made dress—certainly bolstered her precarious relationship with fashion, the root cause of this discord lie in the discourses and expectations fashionable femininity, but also of female sexuality. As has been discussed earlier in this dissertation, the feminine ideal of the 1920s was an inherently youthful ideal. The unappealing, conservative design of stoutwear, however, reflected the fact that, increasingly, the aging process for a woman was experienced as her sexual demise and therefore as a form of feminine exile. In terms of how this manifested in and through dress practices, whereas youthful modes of dressing underscored a woman’s sexual allure, the dress conventions of the matron, on the other hand, signaled the fact that the wearer was past her sexual prime and therefore less feminine. The sartorial disconnect for the young, stout woman in the 1920s therefore emerged from the contradiction that while she was in her sexual, reproductive prime, both her non-normative body and manner of dressing suggested otherwise. In brief, she was a young woman dressed in an old woman’s clothes.

Although the young stout woman was an ambiguous figure who did not fit neatly into any prescribed archetypes of contemporary femininity (e.g. “the flapper” or “the matron”), a 1924 *Vogue* article attempted to account for her in an article delineating a blunt, tongue-in-cheek taxonomy of the various female “figgers” (Fig. 85). While it is an isolated instance, the young stout woman is evocatively described here as the “Domestic,” or a figure to which “Nature has been inexplicably unkind…depriving it of most of the attributes which femininity covets.”

With the fashionably slender body standing as an implicit point of comparison throughout the article, the stout woman is repeatedly disparaged for her abundance of womanly curves. In underscoring the importance of the slender silhouette, this article places the Domestic type at the top of a hierarchy resembling an upside-down pyramid, with the others diminishing “gradually in size almost exactly as the individuals involved diminish in bulk…[constituting] a mysterious unkindness on the part of nature.” Bodily curves are here associated with home and the domestic realm, or a form of femininity at odds with the expectations of modern womanhood.

*Vogue* regarded the Domestic as being a “soft solace in a world of sharp curves.” Hers was regarded as a body that simply did not adhere to the rationalized architectures of modernity,

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95 “The Human Female Figger,” *Vogue* (July 15, 1924), 48.
96 Underneath the domestic, in order of diminishing body mass, are: The Athletic, the Romantic and the Anemic. Within this hierarchy, the Romantic, or who with her youthfulness and slendermess, is “the universal ideal of femininity.” Ibid., 76.

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but which instead existed to ensure the smooth functioning of home and house. By contrast, the stereotype of the liberated, modern woman was an embodied critique of the comforts of Victorian bourgeois culture and, more generally, of domestic life. While this figure could not be boxed-in by the traditional expectations of appropriate femininity, the Domestic, on the other hand, was the too-fleshy manifestation of these ideals. Continuing, the article describes (or perhaps debases) the Domestic in more concrete terms:

Its chief characteristic is a sort of obviousness—it’s all there, so to speak. You can see exactly where it begins and where it ends, it is a solid convexity not admitting of dispute. The word “stout” was invented to describe it with all its solidity and comparative shortness of breath. It was known to our grandmothers as a “matronly figure,” and the matronly women of that time endured it, apparently, without resentment. Times have changed, but the matronly figure, young and old, is still with us, though somewhat under a cloud. Enlightened women have realized that it isn’t an act of God, inevitable to the proper bringing up of children and the virtuous administration of a home, but

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97 Beyond her activities outside of the home, Roberts argues that the body of the femme moderne (and her flapper corollary in the United States) itself was a target for attack. Critics saw her body as a tacit rejection of “the set of norms, values, and social practices that had structured female identity in terms of a maternal, domestic role throughout the nineteenth century.” Continuing, she explains how French moralists and physicians believed the scanty dresses of the femme moderne left the female body vulnerable to winds and drafts, so that women were bound to harm their reproductive organs. Postwar fashions, by transforming women into sexless eunuchs, non-mothers, and non-women, were believed to have had an effect on the declining birthrate. In short, hers was a body that was simply unsuited to motherhood. See Roberts, *Civilization without Women*, 72-73.
something that holds for them an abrogation of youth—a defeat of their desire to attract. 98

Vogue’s final point, about how the Domestic’s appearance signals a “defeat of their desire to attract” parallels Banner’s assertion that while the archetypal flapper—whose essence was distilled in filmic representations of modern femininity and through screen icons such as Clara Bow—was a living embodiment of the new freedoms women were enjoying after the war, she nevertheless reinstated the conventions of normative Victorian femininity; bent on attracting the male gaze, the modern woman was, more than anything, “intent on securing a husband, and that goal was the ultimate message.”99 Yet, while the end goals of the modern woman were the same, the means had undergone a drastic transformation. Exacerbated by the shattering cultural reorganization that occurred in Europe and the United States in the aftermath of World War I, the new and dramatically different discourse of fashionable femininity was no longer defined by a woman’s proficiency as a wife, homemaker and caregiver, but rather was expressed by what she did outside of the home.100

Permitting freedom of both life and limb, the styles were functional in their austerity and well suited to the new woman’s active lifestyle and rejection of traditional female roles—a visual expression of the cultural reorganization of normative femininity in the aftermath of the war. As many have written a youthful, androgynous appearance was the pinnacle of fashionable femininity in the 1920s—one which was underscored by the parallel slenderness of the mode. Indeed, in describing the essence of 1920s femininity in France via the figure of the femme moderne—but which had its corollary in the flapper archetype in the United States—Roberts has remarked upon the “starkness and sterility” both of the new woman and the slim silhouette, the womanly curves of her breasts and hips “relativized…as neither more nor less important than any other part of [her] body.”101 She was “a being without breasts, without a waist, without hips.”102 Likewise, Lois Banner has argued that the low slung waists and lack of bust lines in 1920s fashions actually functioned to draw attention away from women’s bodies. Indeed, the new woman’s sexuality was not expressed through the sensuality of her womanly curves “but through constant, vibrant movement.”103 By comparison, the stout body was regarded as an inert body—a body burdened by the visible signs of lethargy and of complacency; a body both “solid” and “short of breath.”104 However, with the ideal body being defined more by its corporeal lacks than any salient features—such as the nipped waist or the monobosom which so defined ideal

99 Banner, American Beauty, 412.
100 Here, I am careful not to correlate “fashionable” femininity with “appropriate” femininity. Doing so would undermine the very real cultural anxieties that surrounded the femme moderne or flapper archetype in Europe and the United States, respectively. For an in depth discussion about the relationship between the war and the cultural construct of the modern woman as a product of postwar disillusion, see “Chapter 1: This Being without Breasts, Hips” in Roberts, Civilization without Sexes, 19-46.
101 Ibid., 68.
102 Ibid., 71.
103 Banner, American Beauty, 406.
104 “The Human Female Figger,” 48.
femininity only a decade prior—the stout woman was condemned for the overall obviousness of her body. Simply put, there was too much of her. Forced to don retrograde fashions, the young stout woman was made even more conspicuous, however, by the analogous dattedness of her clothing.

In describing the dress of Domestics, the *Vogue* article explains how they are “curiously enough, the most serious decorators of the female form,” and in them, one may observe “a courageous enthusiasm in adoring [the stout body’s] well established protuberances with all manner of elaborate garniture.” Illustrated by the famous English cartoonist Ann Fish (see Fig. 85), the Domestic is pictured gazing at her cartoonishly excessive appearance in a full-length mirror on one half of the double-page spread, and, on the other half, pointing at the Venus de Milo as if to underscore for the reader the Domestic’s deviations from the Venus’ “enviable” figure—here elevated as the historical zenith of feminine beauty, but nevertheless out of step with the slender ideal. Indeed, in the illustration, the Venus herself appears to stare on in shock, her mouth agape, at the diminutive bodies of the “Anemics” who stand beside her. In this latter rendering, the “determinedness” of the Domestic’s self-fashioning is hyperbolized. Wearing a mismatched ensemble of a black and white checkerboard pattern skirt with a top featuring a stylized floral motif, her hair fashionably piled in fussy ringlets, the garishness of the Domestic’s ensemble stands in stark contraposition to the exaggeratedly sylph-like “Anemics” who surround her. Further underscoring her overall dowdiness and domesticity, a knitting project dangles from her right hand. Captioned by the sentiment that “the stout lady is our most determined dresser—determined, among other things, that her clothes be heard, as well as seen,” the article underscores the notion that, beyond the body itself, looking like a Domestic encompassed dress practices as well.

However, while the Domestic’s appearance signaled her maternity and complacency as a servant of the domestic realm—again, her body “a soft solace in a world of sharp curves”—her body was also, somewhat paradoxically, a symbol of her ineptitude as a partner and as an object of the male gaze. Elaborating on this point, *Vogue* explains how any man, given the choice, would choose a slender woman over “a wife or lady-love tangibly fat.” Why else, *Vogue* asks, “do husbands of plump wives linger by the drug-store windows where ladies of ephemeral slenderness and more ephemeral drapery are depicted advertising cures for the too fat?” Here, *Vogue* taps into growing consensus about the root causes of marital dissatisfaction during this period, while obliquely referencing broader shifts in marriage in the United States in the 1920s, including rising divorce rates, as well as the expectation that couples should “gain their major life satisfactions from love and marriage,” and that marriage be grounded by intimate, passionate love. Moreover, a widely-held gender bias had emerged, which held that “men disdained intercourse with overweight wives.” A popular diet book author of the period perhaps best...

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105 Ibid.
106 Ibid., 49.
109 Stearns, *Fat History*, 83.
articulated the basic precept of 1920s femininity when she wrote, “To get and hold a man, women need to preserve their youth and their physical attractiveness.” However, looking youthful and slender far surpassed simply reducing. From garments that fit too tightly, were too outmoded with their drab colors and dowdy cuts or were simply too “obvious” in their ornamentation, the appearance of stoutness was also sewn into the seams of stoutwear itself.

6.2.2 A Matter of Fit: From Tightness to Excess

There is hope for the woman whose clothes are wrong, but whose mind is open, but there is no hope for the woman whose clothes are wrong and who is not only perfectly satisfied with them, but even proud of the points of difference! For every gown has its weakest spot, the place where mistreatment shows most clearly, and it is the woman wise in chic who recognizes these points and is ever wary of them.

The above quotation comes from a piece that ran in the September 1927 issue of *Vogue* titled “A Guide to Chic for the Complacent” in which *Vogue* explains how a woman should not be content to just wear the latest modes off-the-rack. Rather than just duplicating a fashionable silhouette, the article suggests that the chicest woman will instead work with her seamstress to re-construct off-the-rack fashions to compliment her own body proportions. Notably, this article invokes the mirror as a crucial device for obtaining knowledge about one’s silhouette, recounting how a chic woman stood “before a triple mirror, [and] demonstrated to [a] style-blind woman…exactly which lines must be respected.” Looking through or past her deviations in her figure, the “style-blind” woman instead demanded “that a gown must follow some prejudiced idea that was in her mind.” In doing so, the article explains, she achieves little more than an “unfashionable tightness above or below the hips” or the “disastrous effect of emphasizing the wrong line.” This point is underscored by the illustration that accompanies the piece (Fig. 86). Looming above a group of ten women who stand with their backs toward the reader—most of whom display what the article describes as an “unfashionable tightness” at the shoulder seams—a visibly chic woman with a fashionably fluid comportment inspects them with a magnifying glass, visually attesting to the fact that a woman was expected to have a minute, almost scientific knowledge of her bodily flaws. Equipped with this knowledge, *Vogue* explains how the chic woman does not fit her body to the slender silhouette—and in the process showing a garment’s so-called “weakest spot”—but rather concerns herself with the garment’s fit in achieving the illusion of slenderness. “To achieve the right lines,” the article goes on to explain, a woman had to know her body and also the “right

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110 This quote comes from fitness guru Anette Kellerman's massively popular diet book *Physical Beauty: How to Keep It* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1918). In this book, Kellerman foregrounded the importance of staying slender and youthful in order to for a woman to retain her husband's admiration. For an extended discussion of Kellerman and other early diet book authors' about the relationship between marital satisfaction and weight, see Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, 242-246.

lines, graceful in themselves, correct as pointers of the mode. There are so many ways of being wrong for every one way of being right.\footnote{[12]}

While the advice proffered in this article was directed toward any woman who, as Vogue claimed, did not possess “the exact proportions of a mannequin,” for stout women—whose bodies had what Vogue described as “points of decision,” or deviations from the straight up-and-down ideal—the problem of attaining a “good fit” was certainly more acute since only a small proportion of off-the-rack garments were cut for her figure. Not only was it therefore difficult for stout women to obtain fashionable garments cheaply and off-the-rack, the matter of looking fat was a mark to one’s fashionability as it was understood that clothing when properly fit to the body could actually transform the silhouette. Poorly made and ill-fitting garments, on the other hand,
would merely serve to make the stout woman appear larger. Indeed, as Schwartz has written, looking fat in the early twentieth century ultimately had “more to do with questions of fit than of physique.” With this, the cultural historian suggests that it was not the fat body per se that was inherently problematic, but rather the fact that this increasingly non-normative body was not suited to the rationalized architectures and technologies of modern life. Ready-made clothing, as discussed in chapter four, was created to fit the proportions of the perfect woman—the so-called “perfect 36.” However, because the stout woman’s curves exceeded these normative proportions, standard-cut garments merely put any and all deviations from this norm on full display.

Much like the ideal body, the notion of “good fit” is a historically contingent concept that evolves over time and in tandem with the rising and falling of hemlines, as well as with the fickle tastes for artificially-nipped or natural waists. As discussed at length in chapter four, in the mid-1920s, a well-fitting, fashionable dress was one that fell in a straight perpendicular from the shoulders, skimming the flesh, but also obfuscating any signs of the body’s natural curves. This look, however, was difficult for all but the slenderest of women to achieve. What was therefore regarded as “bad fit” was further exacerbated by the still somewhat crude state of mass manufacturing and standard sizing at this time, paralleled with the fact that consumers were increasingly expecting to be able to purchase garments off-the-rack that “would keep to a minimum all signs of deviation from the physical standard—no bulges, no unnecessary material, no obviously forced stitching, no awkward flapping or goring.” Indeed, according to Vogue, by the mid-1920s it was “hardly possible to fit too closely to the hips, that is, where the fabric is drawn from the precise point of one hip-bone to the other.” For the stout woman, however, tightness in a garment merely made her so-called “points of decision” all the more obvious. Yet paradoxically, by simply covering up the body in overly conservative dress, the stout woman only made her large, non-normative body even more conspicuous. Indeed, the practice of dressing the stout body was a deeply ambivalent one, couched in normativizing preachments. Within this context, “good” or “flattering” garment fit was ultimately achieved when the body approximated the slender ideal as much as the recalcitrant flesh would permit. “Poor” or “bad fit,” on the other hand, only exacerbated the body’s deviations from the slender norm and made the body appear larger. That being said, good fit was not entirely out of reach for the stout woman.

One of the most basic, if mundane, instruments employed by women of all sizes to achieve a slender appearance (and therefore a good fit between body and garment) in the 1920s was the reshaping undergarment—first the lightly-boned corslette and, later in the decade, the elasticized girdle, both of which were foundations created to give the wearer a “supple” appearance and to allow maximum freedom of movement. In order for stout women to achieve the fashionably slender silhouette, however, they oftentimes had to rely upon more forceful or drastic means in order to reshape superfluous flesh.

113 Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 160.
114 See chapter 3, “The Stoutwear Industry: Creating Consumers.”
115 Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 160.
A July 1927 *Vogue* article paints a picture of the problems that older women with more "matronly" figures faced in attaining this foundation:

The average older woman fails to realize the value of suppleness, and, from this failure, all of her failures begin. All too often, she still wears a modified version of the old ironside corset! It makes her feel more slender, but it makes her look larger, and it puts her outside of the fashion picture.…

A great many older women make serious mistakes in the matter of fitting. They believe that tight fitting makes them look smaller, when, as a matter of fact, it merely reveals their inches. They are afraid of material, and they fail to see the advantage of leaving the world in doubt as to which is flesh and which is fabric.  

Here, *Vogue* establishes a crucial disconnect between the fashionable appearance of "suppleness," or an agile comportment, and an unfashionably "tight" or "stiff," albeit slender, appearance. Many older women, the article points out, had resorted to stiff corsetry that by compressing the flesh achieved the all-important slenderizing effect, but which, paradoxically, only made the body appear larger. What this article therefore illustrates is the fact that mere slenderness alone was not synonymous with fashionability; rather, the ideal body expressed what Schwartz has deemed a kinesthetic of torque (a concept already discussed in chapter four).  

Said differently, the fashionably modern or "supple" body was not a stiff, encumbered body—burdened by its own mass and the weight of conservative garments—nor was it a cold, hard and exceedingly slender body. Rather it was a weightless, animated body, always in motion, upon which garments floated.

In numerous articles appearing within the pages of the fashion media, but, as I have found, especially in *Vogue*, stout women were therefore advised to avoid tight or ill-fitting garments that made the body appear overly rigid or stiff, and which exacerbated its difference. For instance, a 1928 article titled "Shopping for the Older Woman" explained how, when shopping for new clothes, the "first thing to avoid is the over-fitted look—tightness under the arms, across the bust, or a too tight sleeve." Similarly, a 1927 article titled "A Guide to Chic for the Older Woman" said that "never, under any circumstances, should [the stout older woman] allow her dressmaker to fit her sleeves too tightly, for nothing gives a more definitely 'matronly' appearance." In this same article, however, concerns over tightness were also substituted for more redolent descriptions; recounting the struggles of a stout older woman winkingly named "Lydia Bulkley" who struggled to fit her too-fat arms to the season's unforgiving sleeves and skirts, *Vogue* colorfully animates the struggles of achieving good fit:

Sleeves, this season, are often short or very long and tight, neither of which are good for Lydia's unfortunately fleshy arm. The first reveals all, and the second gives an unpleasing, stuffed effect. Happily, however, sleeves can usually be changed without spoiling the design of the gown. Lydia finds that the straight, moderately wide model, with a fairly large

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118 Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 79, 94.
119 "Shopping for the Older Woman," 75.
armhole, beloved of Vionnet and Chéruit, is the best…. Lydia does not wear long skirts, but moderately short skirts with long lines obtained by panels, apron effects, and pleats. She avoids the *sausage-like effect* of a long, tight skirt over a full figure [emphasis added].

Lingering on the too-tight sleeve and the body-skimming long skirt, this article suggestively describes the “unpleasing, stuffed effect” that the appearance a large arm fitted to a narrow sleeve created, while remarking upon the “sausage-like effect” of a too-tight skirt on a too-large body. In an uncomfortable image that manifests for the reader the discomfort of the wearer herself, *Vogue* likens the poorly-outfitted stout body to a “sausage”—the flesh forcibly stuffed into a fabric casing—evocatively demonstrating how ill-fitting garments limited the wearer’s mobility and rendered the body all but inert.

Even as the body was increasingly regarded as plastic, fat flesh, however, seemed to remain stubbornly resistant to change. As in the above examples, even as the stout woman could use corseting to achieve a slender appearance, or even physically “stuff” her liquid flesh into modern garments—therein technically fitting the garment to the body but falling short of achieving a “good fit”—her body, literally too large for its coverings, belied her vain attempts to appear unencumbered. It was a body fit to the garment but which burst at the seams, so to speak. In other excerpts culled from the pages of *Vogue*, the intractability of fat flesh is discussed in even more explicit terms. In one 1929 article titled “The Older Woman and the New Mode,” the three sartorial offenses stout woman should avoid in fitting her body to the new fashions were outlined. While the low waistline was identified for its tendency to widen the already-stout frame and ever-rising hemlines were castigated for revealing less-than-youthful legs, it was the third and final “effect of extreme tightness across the hips in back, giving what might be called a spanked look [emphasis added]” that was the most distasteful. Here, the stout woman’s physical struggle with her own excess is put into stark relief—the onomatopoeia of a “spank” viscerally evoking the tension of fat flesh pressing and pushing on fabric. In another instance from the aforementioned article, “A Guide to Chic for the Stout Older woman,” *Vogue* explained how for the chic older woman,

her waist-line no longer bothers her, for has not the clever Parisienne, who is the most successful dressmaker in the world, told her that to confine it is unnecessary for the present mode and would, moreover, press the superfluous flesh towards the bust and hips?

Here again, the flesh itself is framed as a burden with *Vogue* describing how, by confining flesh through constricting undergarments, the stout woman only displaces “superfluous flesh,” pressing it upward and outward toward the already ample bust and hips. In short, while undergarments bore in them the capacity to move or reshape the flesh, they were incapable of eliminating fat entirely. This so-called “pushed up” look, another article confirms, had fallen by

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the wayside, departing “with the hourglass waist of twenty years ago, but which one still sees on women of misguided judgement.” Perhaps even more devastatingly, an article that appeared in Women's Wear described the stout woman's feeble attempts to attain the slender silhouette through cumbersome corseting as creating an appearance “as nearly comparable as possible to an obese pillow tightly tied in the center.”

The discourses of the displeasing and uncomfortable tightness of the stout woman’s dress that were so prevalent in Vogue and other fashion media stand in stark contraposition to the manner in which the tight-lacer was fetishized only a few decades prior. Indeed, as David Kunzle has pointed out, the marginal practice of tight-lacing was the product of Victorian perspectives on sex and sexuality, wherein the dialectic between the tightness of the corset on the body and the sensual act of unlacing it ran counter to the era’s notions of feminine propriety. As Valerie Steele further elaborates, the appearance of tightness created by the corset was highly erotic for the manner in which the tightly-fitted garment outlined the contours of the body while artificially constraining and reshaping its natural margins, often through aggressive means. While Kunzle and Steele disagree on the matter of how widespread the practice of tight-lacing actually was in the late nineteenth century, both scholars agree upon the fact that the subversiveness, and therefore the appeal, of the discourse of tight-lacing resides in the extent to which women could “enforce the sexual taboo by objectively oppressing the body, and simultaneously to break that taboo by subjectively enhancing the body.” While by the mid-1920s, the artificially constricted waist had fallen completely out of vogue, the discourse of tight-lacing is nevertheless a useful lens through which to consider the reasons why the eroticism of tightness breaks down on the body of the stout woman. While the sexual allure of the tight-lacer resided in the practice itself—thereby attesting to the agency of the tight-lacer—the stout woman, conversely, had very little control over how her body appeared in fashionable garments. The stout woman did not choose tightness; rather, as in the above examples, when shopping off-the-rack, she had few options but to forcibly “stuff” herself into modish garments, making her a casualty of her too-tight fabric encasing.

The discourse of tightness—or the tension between flesh and fabric—embedded within the advice that Vogue proffered to its stout and matronly readership throughout the 1920s recalls Schwartz’s contention that the first decades of the twentieth century ushered in a shift in how the body was idealized: as the static body was replaced by the body-in-motion, “fatness became literally upsetting, unnecessary weight and an intolerable burden.” Schwartz attributes this crucial shift to how technology, both big and small, from the camera to the airplane, changed

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124 “Smart Aids to Slenderness,” Vogue (May 1, 1921), 118.
125 “Business Notes: New York—A Revolution in Fitting Stylish Stout Women, Says Mr. Ellis of Steinberg, Ellis & Schofield—The ‘Pillow Tied in the Middle’ Shape is Passé,” Women’s Wear (November 17, 1915), 9.
128 Kunzle, Fashion and Fetishism, 196.
129 Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 80.
“the experience of movement,” creating a modern kinesthetic of “energy without volume.” Hollander has observed how, in the years after the war and with the growing ubiquity of the portable camera, feminine gestures that had been limited to the head, neck and hands throughout most of history had been replaced by spontaneous, expansive gestures and the “movement of the whole female body itself”—even to the point of affecting the design of women’s clothing. Fashionable garments, she argues, were increasingly “designed to be seen at their best either in an instant of walking or dancing, conversing or gesturing, or posed as if pausing.” While the flimsy, diaphanous skirts of the 1910s were replaced by the rising hemlines of the 1920s, these increasingly liberating styles, as Evans points out, placed a visual emphasis on locomotion and upon women’s legs, which was apparent in both fashion and street photography from the time.

Perhaps less obvious, however, was the manner in which these garments stressed or permitted a more general freedom of the whole body and, specifically, of the breath. A Vogue article entitled, “Figures that Do and Do Not Lie” from 1923 attests to this rather seismic, if less visible, shift:

Comparatively few years ago, steel, whalebone, and buckram controlled any disposition of the female shape to swerve from that of the hour-glass. Corsets of this kind were not so absolutely restricting as the iron ones of the Middle Ages, but they were restricting enough to keep the occupants of them from undue activity. A discreet breath of interest might be drawn from the croquet lawn, but not the deep, dangerous inhalations following such rough and rapid movements as those on the tennis ground…. Now, every woman can breathe to the full depth of the lung power she has developed; the far stride of the mountaineer is within her scope; no sport indulged in by man is denied her.

As this excerpt suggests, the new garments and undergarments did not only permit a greater range of motion; they also freed the breath so that women could draw “deep, dangerous inhalations.” Indeed, whereas both Hollander and Evans linger on how the new fashions emphasized the legs, it may be argued that they equally, if more subtly, permitted the freedom of the breath. Suppleness, it seemed, ultimately emanated from the diaphragm.

The discourse of slenderness and how to achieve it, certainly, was a pervasive concern within fashion advice throughout much of the 1920s. Achieving the slender look, however, did not begin and end with putting on a slim-cut garment. Indeed, perhaps more complicated was the matter of how to make the body appear liberated as well. Key to this was achieving good fit—a fit cut close to the body but not too tight—for garments that fit too tightly or made the body appear too rigid not only restricted the easy movement of the limbs, but also of the body’s core. To this end, suppleness ultimately triumphed over mere slenderness alone—so much so
that one *Vogue* article titled “Odds Against Chic in Middle Age” from February 1924 suggested that a stout woman must never be “too tightly corseted or brassièred [sic]. She must look and feel comfortable or she will not be to advantage. It is better to be a little broad than completely breathless.” 135 Even so, and as I will discuss in the following chapter, as the corset fell by the wayside as a viable means to reshape the body, it was ultimately replaced, as both Steele and Wollen have observed, by a disciplining of the body from the inside out.136

In addition to its overall free or unencumbered comportment, another visible dimension of the supple body was its pared-down simplicity—a simplicity that was inseparable from the minimalist oftentimes sporty appearance of fashionable garments themselves. This body, however, was markedly different from the ideal body at the century’s turn. As Peter Wollen has written, the female body in 1900 was one that was “encased and upholstered,” and which, as an object of “vicarious male display,” ultimately looked better in stasis.137 Defined by its rigidity and sartorial excess, the Victorian body had much in common with the stout body. Indeed, the stout body—which grew fatter as a result of the aging process—did not merely signal old age (as in the case of the matron); rather, it was literally a historical body, not made for the modern world, which both in its ornamentation and comportment, harkened back to a bygone era:

In a world of bicycles and then of self-starting automobiles, of snapshots and then of motion pictures…those who felt over weight could no longer rely on presence, drapery and posture to compensate for mass…. With shorter hair, fewer layers of clothing and higher skirts, the body was forced to be honest or, at least, subtler in its own disguise.138

Here, Schwartz suggests how, as bodies became freer, garments alone had to achieve what before had been done by stiff corsetry, crinolines, petticoats and other figure-enhancing undergarments. With the emergence of this new body, the art and artifice of nineteenth century dress gave way to a discourse of simplicity that fashioned both a more seemingly “authentic” but also more functional and youthful-looking body.

With supple simplicity reigning supreme, reaching its apogee in the mid-1920s, stout women, however, were admonished within the fashion media as notorious over-dressers. In the aforementioned article, “The Human Female Figger,” for example, the Domestic was decried as one of the “most serious decorators of the female form.”139 Likewise, in his analysis of the slender silhouette, Leon Bakst claimed that “the majority of [stout women] find it very hard to abandon a type of costume which outlines all to plainly their robust silhouettes. Exaggerated efforts to confine an abundant figure are, to put it plainly, in very bad taste.”140 In both these instances, the matter of excessiveness in the stout woman’s appearance did not simply amount to garments fitting too largely on the body; rather, the excessiveness they speak of refers to the

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135 “Odds Against Chic in Middle Age,” *Vogue* (February 15, 1924), 72.
139 “The Human Female Figger,” 48.
140 “A Famous Artist Analyses the Slim Silhouette,” 60.
matter ornamentation, and is therefore a matter of taste. The notion that the stout woman lacked taste was a persistent one that appeared within the fashion media as early as 1912 when Anne Rittenhouse of the *New York Times* remarked, “It looks as though all the fat women in the world were running a race to see who could wear the greatest number of colors and attach themselves to the greatest number of pendants.”

An article titled “Odds Against Chic—Too Many Furbelows” from 1924 pondered the motivations behind the stout woman’s penchant for excess, arguing that in her quest for a supple silhouette, the stout woman had a tendency to mistake the clean lines of youth for the fripperies of childhood in her attempt to distance herself from the aging effects of matronly dress:

> It is difficult to get away from the youngish type if one has a round face, round features, and a certain heaviness of figure, but by rejecting rose color and sky-blue, except in the slighest touches of trimming or glimpses of lining (and these restrained almost to the vanishing-point), one may take a long step in the right direction.

Thereafter, the stout woman—whose features recall not the supple elegance of a young woman, but rather the rounded innocence of an infant—is advised against “frills…anything too sweetly suggestive of a former-day coquetry: too many curls in the hair; too many flowers on the hat or in the pattern of the gown; too much narrow Valenciennes lace on anything but undergarments.” Instead, she was instructed to stick to a neutral palette, plain fabrics and restrained trimmings. Another article simply titled “Right Wrong” from the April 15, 1927 issue of *Vogue* argued much the same, claiming that the woman who was pretty in her youth but who in middle age struggles with her less than youthful silhouette tends to feel “that like Peter Pan, she never grows up” and dresses like it, too.

Likewise, the aforementioned article “Delusions in Dress” surmised that the woman who has grown stout in middle age “is dressing not herself, but the woman who ceased to exist ten of fifteen years ago.”

Beyond “dressing her delusion,” or a younger, slenderer self in the excessive, bordering on infantile trappings of youth, the stout woman was also diminished for her lack of basic fashion sense, which in the 1920s boiled down to possessing an eye for simplicity and to practicing restraint while shopping. The question of how to dress well—one that *Vogue* argued should be “ever present” on the stout woman’s mind—was made even more difficult by the “glittering temptations” in department store windows, “ostentatiously filled with red hats and scarlet shoes” and in which “Chinese and Egyptian designs are gaudily displayed and the myriad pleats and ruffles lie ready to trick the unwary into crossing the border of dignity and appropriateness.”

Similarly baroque descriptions of colors and textiles appeared in another article that, while noting that the stout woman needn’t abandon color and pattern altogether,

143 Ibid., 66.
144 “Right Wrong,” *Vogue* (April 15, 1927), 96-97.
145 “Delusions in Dress,” 69.
146 “For the Woman with Grown Daughters,” *Vogue* (July 1, 1923), 64.
should nevertheless “beware of conspicuous gowns…[and] derive genuine consolation from the fact that, only in rare cases, are extremely vivid colors both becoming and smart.” Such advice stemmed from the notion, held by some, that “large designs in brilliant colorings will make one look smaller,” but which, more often than not, according to *Vogue*, “often leads to most unhappy results. Zigzag lines and bright dots may tend to reduce the visibility of a battleship, but it is quite otherwise with human beings.” So prevalent was the stereotype of the over-dressed stout woman that one fashion writer even commented that, “with the suggestion of her…there comes into mind gay, brilliant flowers, downy creatures feathered and furled, that nestle and chatter and are gathered to one’s arms as pets…. It is the dearest of missions, this of being the bright bird of home.” Beyond satire or sheer mean-spiritedness, however, the stereotype of the stout woman as a variously “determined” or “excessive” dresser, which ran counter to the discourse of simplicity that was so prevalent within the fashion media, pointed, perhaps, to a more complex stigma concerning the very competence of stout women as consumers.

With anxieties mounting about the dual consequences of Americans’ increasing spending power and unfettered leisure time, the consumption of food and the consumption of goods went hand-in-hand. As Stearns has argued, it was increasingly believed that individuals “could indulge their taste for fashion and other products with a realization that, if they disciplined their bodies through an attack on fat, they could preserve or even enhance their health and also establish their moral credentials.” Thus, in order to maintain moral balance, one form of consumption had to be curbed. With the ideology in place that the ills of the new consumer culture could be countered through regimes of bodily discipline, a fat body therefore came to be a symbol not merely of a poor diet, but also of a lack of moral self-restraint. Or, to borrow the words of Turner, the skin became a “window on the soul” as the regulation of the body became a “necessary practice for the management of the life of the spirit.”

As the above examples demonstrate, the task of achieving an appropriately supple, streamlined appearance was far from easy; the “pencil silhouette” dresses themselves were framed as an artistic feat, while chic women were situated as disciplined, unerring consumers. A slim silhouette and an overall simple, streamlined appearance were not just fashionable; they symbolized moral and bodily self-discipline in the face of conspicuous consumption. Stout women, however, were discursively constructed as voracious, reactive consumers who lacked basic self-awareness. Indeed, one *Vogue* article referenced “the familiar caricature of the weighty lady at the dressmaker’s rapturously choosing for herself a slinking leopardess of a gown, because its lines are so enchanting on the slim model undulating before her ravished vision.” This, to borrow the words of Joy and Venkatesh was a body that was “loathed” because it did

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147 Ibid., 64-65.
148 “Smart Aids to Slenderness,” *Vogue* (May 1, 1921), 118.
150 Stearns, *Fat History*, 59.
151 Turner, “Recent Developments,” 5.
“not meet the aesthetic norms of commodity culture,” but, as I argue, it was also a body that did not satisfy the expectations of “appropriate” consumption. With the slender, supple body entrenched as the feminine ideal within American culture, and as anxieties about the ills of consumerism penetrated the American psyche, fat had indelibly become synonymous with ignorance, laziness and, perhaps most importantly, an insatiable appetite to consume. Excessive appearances—both in body and in dress—were therefore not merely unfashionable; taken together (a sort of sartorial “double-strike”), they were patent symbols of the stout woman’s inability to exercise self-restraint.

6.3 Conclusions

In her book *Civilization Without Sexes*, Mary Louise Roberts draws a corollary between the modern woman and the automobile, explaining how “The visual alignment of *la femme moderne* with an ethos of mobility (embodied in the automobile) created a cultural landscape in which a vivid new kind of woman—powerful, active, and adventuresome—could be represented.” Compare this mental picture with the image with which I opened this chapter, which featured a woman of so-called “generous proportions” overflowing from the cabin of a tiny cabriolet coupé (Fig. 75). Whereas the picture Roberts paints is of a body humming along with the rhythms of modern life, the image of the stout woman uncomfortably wedged into the cabin of a comically small automobile couldn’t be more out of scale with the architectures of modernity. Her body is too big and her manner of dressing is too excessive. Her inability to curb her appetite for consumption is written all over her body and positions her as a figure of ridicule, pity and disgust. Standing at a distance from the stout woman is a fashionably chic couple—the woman, wrapped in a white fur stole, possesses but a fluid, sylph-like wisp of a physique—who partake in the divertissement of the sight in front of them. Here, the dialectic of looking and being looked at is brought into sharp focus: While the woman in the coupe bears all of the aesthetic hallmarks of looking stout (from looking matronly to appearing too excessive), she is also being looked at by an archetypally chic couple that is the physical embodiment of the critical societal gaze. Her otherness couldn’t be more pronounced.

Throughout this chapter, I have explored how this dialectic of looking and being looked at was expressed within the fashion media at large. However, this chapter also set out to answer the basic question, “What does it mean to look stout and how does this differ, if at all, from being stout?” Basic as it is, a straightforward answer to this question is nevertheless somewhat elusive since it is so difficult to dissociate the body as a discursive construct from the fleshy body. On the one hand, discourses of looking at the body were constructed by and within a fashion media landscape that elevated an increasingly slender ideal—an ideal that became a litmus against which women were compared and compared themselves. The mirror as both a visual and discursive construct, here situated as a proxy for the critical, normativizing gaze, for instance, not only

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153 Joy and Venkatesh, “Postmodernism, Feminism and the Body,” 337.
ushered in new ways of seeing the body, but also of defining the self as a perpetual work-in-progress. Within the fashion media, stout women were therefore subtly inured to new practices of monitoring their own bodily deviations from the supple norm. Indeed, as Efrat Tseelon has argued, there exists a “dialectical dialogue between cultural categories and the people who embody them: the act of representation modifies the nature of the represented object.” To that end, I similarly subscribe to the notion that the fashion media discourse does not merely provide a language for talking about the constructs of normative and deviant femininities, but rather, actively constructs, or better, fashions them.

More concretely, however, it is possible to stretch this notion of looking to a consideration of what it meant, in a very basic sense, to look stout. In exploring this idea, I implicitly rejected the idea that stoutness could be defined through concrete or seemingly objective measurements, such as body weight or bust-waist-hip ratios. For example, although the industry delimited the so-called “perfect 36,” which I discussed at length in chapter three, looking stout could also encompass the much more imprecise relationship between dress and the body. With regard to fit, for example, the discourse of “tightness” became synonymous with “bad fit” and therefore with an overall vulgar or unfashionably encumbered appearance; more concretely, however, the tightness created by the tension between fabric and flesh was very real in the manner it inhibited the free movement of the body.

Where this chapter fell somewhat short, however, was in considering the embodied dress practices of stout women. In the final chapter, I will therefore look to the advice discourses proffered to stout women in the 1920s within fashion literature, but also within dieting manuals and an emergent genre of self-help literature for women: the fashion and style guide.

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Chapter Seven — Ordering Disorder: Self-Fashioning the Stout Body

Make your figure fit your clothes—not your clothes fit your figure.

(Marjorie Dorks, Fitness Advisor, 1929)\textsuperscript{1}

Dress, treated as an art should create illusions, if not of beauty, certainly of attractiveness, instead of bringing out ugliness and exposing unpleasant facts. Clothes exist in part to make such efforts possible, and the principles of design are guides to this end.

(Vogue, December 1922).\textsuperscript{2}

The title of this chapter emerges from Mary Douglas' insight that “ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose a system on an inherently untidy experience.” With fatness deeply embedded in the cultural imaginary as a deviant form of female embodiment by the early twentieth century, the discourses of fashion and consumer culture put forth the notion that, with physical effort, the fat, female body could be physically improved, if not radically transformed. Drawing upon this notion, this chapter will consider the fashion media discourses of “self-fashioning.” Central to this discussion are the polar tensions of being versus appearing slender in the construction of the stout body through disciplinary regimes enacted upon the self through dress and other forms of “body maintenance,” or actions taken upon the body to alter or improve its appearance in response to prevailing norms.\textsuperscript{4}

On one end of this spectrum, and perhaps most obviously, was the physical transformation of the body through the practice of losing weight either through dieting or exercise. This approach is aptly summed up in the above quotation from the New York-based fitness advisor Marjorie Dorks who explained to the readers of Harper's Bazaar in 1929 how one of the surest ways to attain the supple silhouette was to “make your figure fit your clothes—not your clothes fit your figure.” On the other end of the spectrum was the practice of dressing in a manner that merely gave the appearance of slenderness—one that elided the physical transformation of the flesh, and which is a counter to the previous chapter's discussion of looking stout. As Vogue claimed in a 1922 article titled “Modern Complexes in Art and Fashion,” if treated as an art, dress could “create illusions, if not of beauty, certainly of attractiveness, instead of bringing out ugliness.” From weight loss to dressing to look slender, these were practices that could visually bring the stout body more in line with the slender ideal, but which also, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, gave shape to the stout body—a body that in its

\textsuperscript{1} Rebecca Stickney, “Make Yourself Over for Spring,” Harper's Bazaar (April 1929), 130.
\textsuperscript{2} “Modern Complexes in Art and Fashion,” Vogue (December 1, 1922), 132.
\textsuperscript{3} Douglas, Purity and Danger, 5.
\textsuperscript{4} Mike Featherstone, “The Body in Consumer Culture,” 18.
corporeal striving toward the slender ideal stood in contraposition to the “failed” fat body. Indeed, this chapter explores how the discourses of self-fashioning furthered the notion that, through the artifice of dress, unruly flesh could be transformed into something more culturally and aesthetically palatable—a body which, even if it was still physically fat according to prevailing norms, was, to borrow the words of Alison Adam, “tight, contained, under control [and] with firm margins.” From diet and exercise, to cosmetic and mechanical interventions, to dressing to look slender, this chapter will consider how these actions brought order to disorder, so to speak, in the self-fashioning of the stout body.

The practice of self-fashioning as I define it throughout this chapter may be understood as a process that occurs both upon the surface of the body and from the inside out, and which functions to render the disorderly fat body socially intelligible by helping it inch ever-closer to a normative beauty ideal. In chapter two, I invoked Woodward’s and Jenß’ definitions to delimit “fashioning” as a process that ultimately produces what is fashionable. Here, however, I draw upon Entwistle’s definition of self-fashioning as a Foucauldian “technology of the self,” or a process through which one acts upon the physical body in the pursuit of self-improvement. This practice, however, does not occur independently from discourse or from the practice of fashioning; rather, they are parallel processes with self-fashioning occurring as a self-reflexive practice undergone in response to and in dialogue with fashion media discourses.

In considering the practice of self-fashioning, this chapter looks specifically to advice literature. Defined broadly, “advice” within this chapter transcends any single media form, encompassing any overt directives to stout women about how to manage fat flesh in the pursuit of the slender ideal, as well as more general advice about weight management and “figure flattery.” From instructions for how to locate the body’s flaws to explicit “rules” for how to dress the stout body, advice for dealing with the “problem” of stoutness traversed a broad range of sources, from fashion and style guides and women’s and fashion magazines, to advertisements and diet books.

In order to better understand the particular pressures that were brought to bear on the stout body through advice discourses, this chapter first discusses how the body came to be the locus of female beauty in the early twentieth century, as well as how fashion was employed as a motivator within weight loss discourses. After laying this foundation, the chapter moves on to the transformational forms of body maintenance—including diet and exercise, but also wearable weight-reducing devices—which promised to aid stout women in forming the foundations of an “appropriately” stout body. Finally, the chapter explores the more “hands off” or non-invasive practices of dressing to look slender—practices that gave the appearance of slenderness but which did not require a physical transformation of the flesh. Taken together, these three sections evidence the many forms of embodied knowledge stout women had to possess in order to self-fashion if not a suitable body, then a suitable appearance.

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5 Adam, “Big Girls’ Blouses,” 40.
7.1 From Face to Fat to Fit

This is the time to dress for the figure, not the face, and the figure will demand careful attention.\(^8\)

The above quotation comes from a 1924 *Vogue* article that offered dress advice to the stout older woman who had a tendency to “overdress.” The article, which offers a great deal of guidance about how the stout older woman can appear chicer by practicing restraint, also touches on a seismic shift in how beauty came to be regarded during the 1920s. By telling readers that “this is the time to dress for the figure, not the face,” *Vogue* evidences the fact that, during this period, the body, rather than the face, had become the principal litmus through which female beauty was assessed. Indeed, in the 1920s, the once-peripheral practice of weight loss through dieting and exercise became a fulcrum around which women’s lives and culture revolved.\(^9\) With the slender ideal becoming both more omnipresent and concrete in American culture, a growing number of women from all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds strove to reduce their body weight. As a result, the lines that had demarcated fitness culture, fashion and beauty culture grew increasingly indistinct as articles and advertisements for various weight loss regimens and products became a staple within the women’s and fashion press. While in the 1920s fashionable women increasingly had to dress for their figures and not their faces, what the article glosses over is the fact that the physically fit and not merely slender physique formed the foundation of the fashionable silhouette.

While what may be regarded as a “fitness culture” did not officially take hold in the United States until the 1970s with the widespread popularity of jogging, the foundations for fitness as a lifestyle were laid during the early twentieth century through the formalization of the basic institutions of the American beauty industry,\(^10\) as well as through the normalization of body maintenance as an accepted means of controlling and improving the appearance of the outer body.\(^11\) The reasons for the intrusion of diet and exercise into the modern woman’s toilette from the 1920s onward are complex; however, they reflect a gendered shift that crucially coincided with women’s growing freedoms during the interwar period. While men and women were targeted for weight loss products in equal measure throughout much of the nineteenth century and even into the first decade of the twentieth, in the years following World War I, women had increasingly become the primary targets for “reducing,” as the practice was widely known.\(^12\) A number of scholars have argued that the history and intensification of body maintenance in the twentieth century should be understood within the context of a rapidly modernizing society that nevertheless still clung—if only by a thread—to lingering temperance.

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11 The original reference may be located in Featherstone, “The Body in Consumer Culture,” 22.
12 Stearns, *Fat History*, 71.
ideals. Within this context, weight loss was regarded as a compensatory strategy for other temptations of the flesh. Bantingism and Fletcherism were two of the earliest dieting crazes to sweep the United States in the mid-nineteenth century and reflected growing concerns about self-discipline and self-sacrifice amid dramatic social upheavals. Under such conditions, dieting and exercise became forms of control for disciplining unruly bodies that were “couched in a series of instructions and commandments” that were implemented by the individual.

Yet, the crucial difference between antiquated notions of temperance as a route to moral salvation, and modern dieting and exercise as practices that compensated for anxieties about overconsumption may be located in the fact that the body itself had increasingly come to function as a vehicle of self-expression. No longer were weight loss regimens pursued in order to attain spiritual catharsis; rather, they were undertaken in order to alter the surface presentation of the body in the management of the ever-important first impression. Within this context, outer appearances were managed in order to give the mere impression of strong character, actual moral solidarity notwithstanding. Indeed, in the 1920s, bodily discipline and hedonism were no longer mutually exclusive. Rather, as Featherstone suggests, “Within consumer culture, the inner and the outer body [became] conjoined: the prime purpose of the maintenance of the inner body [was] the enhancement of the appearance of the outer body.”

To this end, because women were enjoying newfound liberties—from the vote to increased sexual freedom—dieting and exercise as forms of bodily control were deemed necessary tradeoffs for disintegrating social and cultural mores. However, for stout women who wore their stigma on the surface of their flesh for all to see—their moral shortcomings materialized through their fleshy excess—these concerns were especially acute.

13 While the temperance movement, which reached its peak in the United States in the mid-19th century, took as its main charge the consumption of alcohol, the movement also attacked overconsumption more generally—transforming a movement into a general set of ideals. In particular, early movement leaders such as Sylvester Graham spoke widely about the evils of tea, coffee, tobacco and opium, and promoted a diet of whole foods such as grains, vegetables and pure water. Gluttony, Graham held, was a universal sin (not merely attributed to men, as alcohol was) that could be read on the bodies of individuals. See Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 23-28.

14 Bantingism was invented by a London undertaker who by his mid-thirties weighed over two hundred pounds. Desperate to lose weight, Banting devised a highly effective diet of lean meats, eggs and green vegetables, and which he compiled into a wildly popular pamphlet that had sold more than 58,000 copies both in the United States and England by 1878. Although the diet predated the health craze of the early twentieth century, the term “Banting” was synonymous with the practice of dieting more generally, both at home and abroad, long into the twentieth century. See Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 100-101.

15 Founded by the temperance leader Horace Fletcher in 1895, Fletcherism was deemed a natural route to weight loss, which mobilized the dieter’s willpower. With the goal of the diet being “complete mastication to the point where an automatic swallowing reflex (nature’s food filter) intervened,” food was to be chewed into a liquid so that it could be more easily digested, which would help the individual avoid “auto-intoxication”—the root cause of overweight according to Fletcher. Much like the term Banting, which preceded it, Fletcherism soon became a household phrase, while “Fletcher Clubs” were founded in many American cities and “munching parties” became widespread in England. See Tim Armstrong, “Disciplining the Corpus: Henry James and Fletcherism” in Tim Armstrong (ed.) American Bodies: Cultural Histories of the Physique (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 101-102.


To the Editor of *The New York Times*:

I wish to submit to you the measurements of a woman, aged 46, the two sets of figures being taken sixteen months apart, with some queries appended:

- **Height**: 5.1.
- **Weight**: 127½: 125½.
- **Bust**: 32: 33.
- **Waist**: 22: 24¼.
- **Hips**: 35; 35½.
- **Thigh**: 22: 22.
- **Calf**: 14½.
- **Ankle**: 8¼: 8½.
- **Length of foot**: 8¼.

Are these measurements...more nearly indicative of what we call physical perfection?

The above is not one of the vanities of women, but the proposition of one who would like to know. Also, do women really have, intrinsically, a physical perfection in their make-up, or is it not the idea of one sex and what follows in its train? I would like the opinion of painters, sculptors and anatomists. The fashions of the last few years have certainly revealed to us that the figures of most women are not beautiful, but, on the contrary, show some hideous defects. PHIDAS, New York, Jan. 16, 1913.

The above letter to the editor was published in the January 18, 1913 issue of the *New York Times*. The author—having taken the pseudonym Phidas, after the Greek sculptor who is regarded as having ushered in the classical style in the fifth century BCE—presents to the editor the measurements of an older woman in a pointed commentary on the construct of female beauty. Seeking the input of various experts on the subject, including painters, sculptors and anatomists, “Phidas” seemingly rejects the notion that there is an intrinsic ideal of feminine beauty due to the fact that the era’s increasingly streamlined fashions rendered even the most classically “beautiful” bodies inadequate. The implication here is that, in spite of the rather diminutive proportions of the unidentified woman who possessed a small (even for this era) twenty-two-inch waist, contemporary fashions called her beauty into question.

In addition to serving as an early testament to the gradual whittling away of the fashionable figure in the first decades of the twentieth century, this letter—which went unanswered by the *Times* editors—also casts light on a subtler shift that would have serious implications for women whose bodies deviated from the slender ideal: that of the move from the face to the figure as the focus of beauty and body work in the early twentieth century. Indeed, it is important to note how “Phidas” limits his/her description of the unnamed woman to her physical measurements, conspicuously neglecting to elaborate on her hair color or facial features, for example. Rather, the woman’s relative beauty is assessed through the quantitative measures of pounds and inches. In her book *Fasting Girls*, Brumberg charts how, in the early twentieth century, a woman’s beauty came to be defined almost exclusively by her dress size as

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aesthetics increasingly came to play a central role in the growth and spread of modern weight loss culture amongst women. As she explains, even with a growing body of knowledge about the mechanics of weight loss amongst physicians, dieters in the early twentieth century initiated “efforts to reduce in response to reigning aesthetic standards and private emotional needs even more than the dictates of scientific medicine.” As discussed at length in the previous chapter, increasingly streamlined fashions, the ascendance of fashion photography and the growing ubiquity of cinema-going, plate glass mirrors and personal photography, among other things, all had a hand to play in cementing the slender ideal in American culture; however, the popularity of reducing cures made it easier for women to take matters into their own hands, so to speak, in the pursuit of physical perfection.

With slenderness having become synonymous with beauty in the 1920s, dieting and exercise had, by consequence, become natural as well as increasingly indispensable parts of the modern woman’s beauty regimen. Although a far cry from Victorian beauty culture, which privileged natural products and light-handed remedies that would assist rather than alter a woman’s natural facial features, beauty culture in the 1920s furthered the powerful notion that ascribed or permanent bodily features—and namely body shape—could be altered at an individual’s whim. Alongside articles and editorial features discussing fashion and topical beauty remedies, advice regarding dieting and exercise gradually found a welcome home within the pages of the women’s and fashion press. With this growing emphasis on the body, however, there occurred a measured but perceptible shift as the boundaries between beauty, fashion and fitness culture grew increasingly blurry.

The intrusion of dieting and exercise advice into the pages of fashion magazines occurred first in the early 1900s through a surge in weight loss advertisements, which were relegated to the rear portions of fashion magazines amid classified advertisements and listings for cheap consumer goods of all kinds. Evidencing this shift, in a nostalgic, backward-glancing article published in 1923, Vogue dated the confluence of the weight loss and fashion industries as occurring in 1908: the year in which Paris issued the edict, “You must be slender, Madame.” Immediately after this proclamation, Vogue claimed that “the back pages of the magazines filled with a new kind of advertisement,” ones which promoted products like “‘The Human Mould [sic],’ a marvelous fat-reducing apparatus,” and miraculous fat-melting rubber garments. Beyond the remit of Vogue, advertisements for reducing and weight loss commodities came to be staples across women’s media and were found within the pages of America’s top fashion magazines, in women’s journals like Good Housekeeping and Ladies’ Home Journal, as well as within the pages of film fan magazines like Photoplay, which had a majority female readership.

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19 Brumburg, Fasting Girls, 230.
20 Peiss, Hope in a Jar, 11-12.
22 For further discussion regarding this shift, see Marchand, Advertising the American Dream, 175; Fangman et. al “Promoting Female Weight Management,” 221.
23 “As You Were, 1892,” Vogue (January 1923) 172.
Beyond the classifieds section, however, one space in which this confluence was exceptionally obvious was in a recurring column titled “On Her Dressing-Table,” which ran in *Vogue* from 1900 to 1935. Discussing everything from the newest perfumes, creams and elixirs, to how to organize the dressing table itself, the feature’s aim was to help fashionable women keep abreast of the latest beauty trends and innovations from both the United States and abroad.25 In the earliest column, which was published in 1903, *Vogue* tellingly explained to its readers how “the sanctum of the dainty woman of the day must be well stored with creamy unguents, delicate balms and fragrant perfumes, if she would be her very best and most fascinating self.”26 The piece then goes on to recommend products such as “Megyp…a specialty for brightening and beautifying the eye” and a nourishing moisturizing cream called “Toilet Cerate”—both of which were described as indispensable, natural products for preserving youthful facial beauty. This almost exclusive focus on the face in these early installments reflected the broader thrust of late nineteenth and early twentieth century beauty culture. A rejection of the notion that beauty products were the domain of what Kathy Peiss refers to as the “painted prostitute” of the mid-nineteenth century,27 these columns along with other advice literature taught women how to navigate the expanding beauty market, as well as how to attain a youthful, natural appearance without appearing excessively artificial or “painted.”28 As such, these early “Dressing-Table” columns carefully toed the line between vice and vanity as women cautiously embraced new cosmetically-enhanced beauty regimens—the main focus of which in these early days was the whitening of the complexion.29

Appropriately, however, weight loss discourses intensified and became more ubiquitous—prevailing over concerns about skin whitening—from approximately 1908 onward, or the year in which *Vogue* claimed in the aforementioned article that Paris had issued the slenderness edict. In one column from the March 26, 1908 issue, for instance, *Vogue* explained,

“No problem in the history of medical science has appeared more difficult of solution that that which pertains to the cure of obesity…. It is safe to say that more persons are at present interested in this subject than any other connected with the care of the person.”

Similarly, in the July 16, 1908 issue, *Vogue* followed up on its claims made only a few months prior, explaining that “the burning question of the day as regards feminine physiology is the acquiring of sylph-like proportions.” Continuing, the column argues that while fashion had much

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25 Likewise, as a bimonthly feature, this column therefore stands an invaluable litmus for helping scholars to understand the incremental evolution of American beauty culture over a thirty-year period.
26 “On Her Dressing-Table,” *Vogue* (October 4, 1900), xiv.
28 Banner also speaks to this point, explaining how early twentieth century beauty culture responded to the mentalities of the Progressive era and its concerns with naturalness. During this period, health reformers also actively sought to combat the influx of dangerous beauty products onto the market with the ratification of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Excess and artificiality in beauty culture during this period were not merely a matter of fashion, but also of safety. See *American Beauty*, 290-291.
30 “On Her Dressing-Table,” *Vogue* (March 26, 1908), 452.
to do with women’s desires to be slender, it had also become common knowledge that “excessive fat is unquestionably as bad for the general health of the mind and body as it is undesirable in the clumsiness it gives to the figure”—a sentiment that reflected the rapidly evolving science of overweight during this period.\(^{31}\) Most of these early columns, however, focused on topical remedies to the problem of overweight rather than upon diet and exercise—two weight loss methods that were often derided in these early columns as dangerous or as more trouble than they were worth.\(^{32}\) Through a fantastic range of products that claimed to stimulate reducing, as one argued, “without having recourse to the frightfully strenuous dieting which was, until the past few years, almost universally considered the only sure road to slenderess,”\(^{33}\) these early “Dressing-Table” columns promised easy, almost unbelievable, routes to weight loss. Indeed, another column that ran in the January 22, 1910 issue discussed superficial methods of reducing that would “promise great things for those who suffer from the burden of excessive fat and yet find it almost impossible to adhere to the rigid diet and exercise generally prescribed.”\(^{34}\) Such products, another claimed, would “appeal to those who are burdened with too heavy a load of flesh, since it needs no especial effort of any kind other than the mere application of…cream.”\(^{35}\)

As the teens bled into the twenties, however, a survey of the advice and suggestions put forth in the “Dressing-Table” features demonstrate how the column became both more problem-oriented and, notably more concerned with behaviors over products—echoing the broader shifts that were occurring within beauty and fitness culture at large during this period. With the growing popularity of exercise and sporting activities amongst women in the 1920s,\(^{36}\) the columns reflect the fact that old beauty knowhow had been superseded by a mounting interest in fitness and overall physical wellbeing; however, even as fitness, health and a concern with attaining beauty from the inside out were held in high esteem by beauty writers and fashion commentators, the underlying message remained the same: Health notwithstanding, to possess anything less than a slender (and now \(\text{fit}\)\(^{37}\)) physique was to be rendered unfashionable.

Perhaps nowhere was this sentiment more pronounced than in the September 15, 1928 installment of “On Her Dressing-Table” in which \(\text{Vogue}\) proclaimed,

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\(^{31}\) “On Her Dressing-Table,” \(\text{Vogue}\) (July 16, 1908), 61.

\(^{32}\) This notion persisted until at least 1919 as one “On Her Dressing-Table” column, for instance, described the dangers of dieting and exercise, explaining that these activities, when subsumed into the woman’s lifestyle with too much vigor, could have the opposite effect in creating a drawn out or hollow appearance of being emaciated. This article also notes that women were experiencing growing pressures to reduce amid new height and weight charts that were being circulated by the insurance industries. See “On Her Dressing-Table” (January 15, 1919), 66.

\(^{33}\) “On Her Dressing-Table,” \(\text{Vogue}\) (July 16, 1908), 61.

\(^{34}\) “On Her Dressing-Table,” \(\text{Vogue}\) (January 22, 1910), 60.

\(^{35}\) “On Her Dressing-Table,” \(\text{Vogue}\) (March 26, 1908), 452.

\(^{36}\) This ascendency of women in sports actually began slightly earlier, in the 1910s, but only to a limited extent as magazines celebrated the so-called “modern athletic girl.” By the 1920s, however, female tennis players and swimmers would rival movie stars as celebrities within the popular press. See Jean O’Reilly, “Introduction” in Jean O’Reilly (ed.) \textit{Women and Sports in the United States: A Documentary Reader} (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2007), xiv.
It is chic to be healthy! Paris says it; New York says it; and every observant woman is beginning to realize the truth of the matter. Of course, this doesn’t refer to the sort of health that is evidenced in overdeveloped muscles or mean that the ‘athletic girl’ has at last come striding into the mode…. This vogue is for normal health, the natural health of the woman who lives sanely and keeps herself fit.37

Here, “chicness” is concretely equated with health and, perhaps more importantly, carefully-controlled slenderness. In columns published throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, the specifics of how to achieve such “natural health”—which was shorthand for a strong, but not overdeveloped, and slender appearance—were enumerated and expanded upon as the health club came to replace the beauty parlor as the epicenter of American beauty culture.38 Yet, even as health and wellbeing were terms that were liberally bandied about within the fashion media during the 1920s, the fact remains that one of the principal motivators—or at least a perceived motivator—for women to visit the health club was for the improvement of their appearances.39

In particular, discussions of rhythmic and aesthetic dance as effective but also pleasurable routes to total beauty cropped up more than a handful of times within the pages of Vogue during this period. Rather than a quick fix to the problem of overweight, these methods were elevated as having the ability to beautify the body from the inside out. As one article entitled “The Importance of Being Beautiful,” which appeared in the June 1924 issue of Vogue explained, “The beautiful figure is more than the mere outline of a woman’s body. It is the silhouette of her soul, which tells whether she is the captain of it or only a deck-hand.” 40 Illustrated by line drawings of women engaging in floor exercises inspired by the teachings of the English dancer Margaret Morris—as well as with a photograph of students practicing Morris’ technique—Vogue promised that, through daily practice, the diligent woman could attain a “graceful carriage…the fundamental principle of beauty” 41 (Fig. 87). Likewise, another Vogue article published in the November 15, 1926 issue of Vogue adapted floor stretches devised by the New York-based rhythmic dancer Marguerite Agniel, which were intended to help women reduce, but to also “stimulate interest and give ambition” to the assiduous student (Fig. 88). 42 Photos of Agniel demonstrating the exercises figured prominently in the double-page spread and depicted a woman whose beauty is manifested through the litheness of her body.

In spite of the elevation of dance as a means to attain corporeal beauty in these articles, however, the bodily ideal pictured in the spreads shared strikingly little in common with the stick-thin caricature that appeared elsewhere in the fashion media during this period; rather, the body pictured in these articles was a visibly strong and disciplined body—a body that was the product of diligent body maintenance and acute self-awareness. Indeed, as one “Dressing-Table” column dedicated to the discussion of a so-called “rhythmic road to beauty” explained,

37 “On Her Dressing-Table,” Vogue (September 15, 1928), 122.
38 For a discussion of the beauty parlor as the central institution of American beauty culture, see Banner, American Beauty, 298-313.
40 “The Importance of Being Beautiful,” Vogue (June 1, 1924), 52-53.
41 Ibid., 53.
42 “Exercise for Beauty’s Sake,” Vogue (November 15, 1926), 62.
practicing the movements on a semi-regular basis would yield both internal benefits—such as a quickened circulation and the flushing of invisible “toxins”—as well as external ones, such as perfect rhythm and balance and marvelous grace.\footnote{\footnotemark} These routines, however, were not framed as cure-alls to the problem of overweight; discussions of rhythmic and aesthetic dance within these spaces were always qualified by the fact that women had to incorporate dance practice into their daily lives. This took diligence, certainly, but women were promised an aesthetic payoff for their hard work. Indeed, as one article explained, “Aesthetic dancing may not be the ultimate aim of many of us, but ease of motion, poise and grace of body and carriage are surely sufficient aim to stir our ambitions—and our muscles.”\footnote{\footnotemark}

It is no coincidence that early discussions of health and fitness in \textit{Vogue} appeared within a dedicated beauty column, nor is it surprising that many of the “Dressing-Table” columns foregrounded more sweeping discussions of health and fitness with an explicit motivation for pursuing such routines: 	extit{fashion}. The September 15, 1921 installment of the column speaks to this point:

The present-day fashions undeniably demand a youthful figure, which, of course, means a slim one, but they also demand a perfection of shoulders, back and arms.

\footnote{\textit{On Her Dressing-Table,” Vogue (July 15, 1928), 77.}}
\footnote{\textit{Exercise for Beauty’s Sake,” 63.}}
Corrective exercises, massage and a simple diet will produce results in an amazingly short time.\textsuperscript{40}

Echoing the quote with which I opened this chapter in which a fitness expert advised women that they should make their figures fit their clothes, not their clothes fit their figures,\textsuperscript{41} here, \textit{Vogue} explicitly states that the new fashions “demand” body maintenance. Extending the notion of bodily self-surveillance from the simple act of looking at the self and measuring it against a bodily ideal—a dialectic which was discussed at length in the previous chapter—fitness, too, was increasingly becoming a compulsory and consuming facet of women’s lives in their collective pursuit of the slender ideal. Beyond the imminent problem of stoutness, most women, \textit{Vogue} told its readers in the October 15, 1924 “Dressing-Table” column, had so-called “problem areas,” and that while few “women are seldom physically perfect...almost all have the power to become so...assuming that [they are] strong willed”\textsuperscript{42}

While it would be incorrect to claim that diet and exercise had entirely replaced weight loss remedies and slenderizing unguents in the 1920s, the emphasis on lifestyle manifest within the “Dressing-Table” columns pointed to a paradigmatic shift in the reasons why this particular behavioral approach to weight loss had become so fashionable. As discussed in the introduction

\textsuperscript{40} “On Her Dressing-Table,” \textit{Vogue} (September 13, 1921), 92.
\textsuperscript{41} Stackney, “Make Yourself Over for Spring,” 130.
\textsuperscript{42} “On Her Dressing-Table,” \textit{Vogue} (October 15, 1924), 96.
to this section, dieting and exercise became a facet of the modern woman’s beauty regimen at a moment in which she had to compensate for other real and imaginary indulgences and freedoms, both sexually and socially. The end goal of body maintenance was therefore not necessarily to achieve an ideal figure; rather, more important were the practices and discourses of body maintenance that were crucial to the process of the modern woman’s self-fashioning and self-discipline. Within a culture in which the give-and-take of hedonism and bodily control were such mainstays of contemporary femininity, the stout woman was therefore rendered a deeply ambivalent figure—a habitual “rule breaker” who indulged too much and too frequently, and who wore the consequences of her over-consumption on her too-fleshy frame. Indeed, the very popularity of dieting and exercise in the first decades of the twentieth century functioned to push the stout woman ever farther to the margins of aesthetic acceptability, while her weight itself signaled more deeply embedded character flaws and social shortcomings. The dual concerns of looking slender and losing weight loomed large over the stout woman’s stocky frame, and were intrinsic to her identity as much as to her self-fashioning practices.

7.1.2 The Thin Woman Within: Fashion as a Weight Loss Motivator

The discussions regarding the relationship between the body, fitness and beauty were so prevalent within the pages of *Vogue* that they eventually breached the boundaries of the “On Her Dressing-Table” columns and flooded into the magazine’s main editorial content as well as into increasingly effusive advertising copy. Within these spaces, writers and ad men could further ruminate on the moral implications of weight loss beyond mere fashion alone. Indeed, just as dieting and exercise advice had become more pervasive within fashion media discourse, so too had these practices become both more omnipresent and urgent within the lives of American women who, as Roberts points out, had become “locked into a relentless and time-consuming set of physical and financial restraints.” Similarly, Brumberg writes about the guilt of the modern woman who “faced a complicated problem in how to relate to the beauty imperatives of a modern capitalist society,” and who, as a result, felt “increasingly at odds with [her] appetite.” From the mid-nineteenth century onward, overall bodily slenderness had been a compulsory facet of modern femininity, but, in the 1920s, so too had become a more general outlook on life in which the body was regarded as a perpetual work-in-progress.

The recurrent trope of the “five-pound weight gain” after a period of relaxation or inactivity, for instance, was a discursive manifestation of the notion that women had to always be actively fending off fat. A 1929 article that ran in *Harper’s Bazaar* explicitly addressed this point, telling the reader that she needn’t worry about the “few extra pounds you gained this summer. You can get them off easily.” An aforementioned “Dressing-Table” article published on February 15, 1920 said much the same:

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50 “Face and Figure,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (November 1929), 114.
Summer, in spite of its sports, is a lazy vacation time, and the temptation to ignore the rules usually proves too much for the woman with a tendency towards overweight. Returning to town, she realizes with a start that she must lose five pounds here, another five there, if she is to look smart in the straight-line fashions for winter.51

Within the pages of *Vogue*, the summer season was described as a time of relaxation, but also a time during which women tended to neglect the perpetual project of weight loss through “rule breaking,” although these rules are nowhere elaborated upon within the article. A *Harper's Bazaar* article published in 1929, however, offered a more illuminating discussion of these “rules.”

Recounting a summer cruise to Italy in a fictional letter, the piece described the personal failings of a woman who indulged too heartily on pastas and wine only to return home, “with all this stored-up sunshine in my system...[to] the little demon FAT.... How it changed me! Just fifteen extra pounds and a few odd ounces.”52 Cancelling out the relative benefits of rest, relaxation and sun, “FAT,” as these excerpts attest, had been rendered as an ever-present threat—a threat over which even the slenderest women had to practice hyper-vigilance through perpetual dieting and an active lifestyle. It was not just an active lifestyle that had become fashionable, however; it was also a more habituated state of being in which women were to fear imminent weight gain that had become the rule. Recalling Foucault’s work on the evolution of the modern penal system, and the transition from corporeal punishment to forms of punishment that forced self-surveillance and the “automatic functioning of power,”53 the omnipresent fear of fat and the broader complex of ideologies that underpinned the weight loss imperative catalyzed women to integrate weight loss regimens into their daily lives.

For the stout woman, however, the discourses of reducing and specifically, of dieting, assumed a different urgency. It was not so much that the stout woman had to be anxious about gaining five pounds here and there according to fashion media discourses, but rather the notion that, within every stout woman, there was a slender woman inside who was just waiting to break free. This trope was a pervasive if subtle one that has long been invoked within dieting discourse since the early twentieth century, and specifically within “before and after” photos.54 This idea is well illustrated in a series of Corrective Eating Society advertisements that ran *The Red Book Magazine* in the early 1920s, and which featured illustrations of women with silhouettes of their “former selves” encasing their newly thinner figures (Figs. 89, 90). In these side-by-sides, stoutness was rendered a temporary affliction in the sense that the stout woman was frequently constructed by the media as either preparing to embark upon a reducing regimen after a

51 “On Her Dressing Table,” *Vogue* (October 15, 1924), 96.
53 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.
54 A more sustained discussion of this trope is beyond the scope of the present discussion. However, it should be noted that the trope that within every fat person there is a thin person has yet to be given much scholarly attention, especially from a historical vantage point. For very brief discussions of this idea, however, see Katharina R. Mendoza, “Seeing Through the Layers: Fat Suits and Thin Bodies in *The Nutty Professor* and Shallow Hal” in Esther Rothblum and Sondra Soloway (eds.) *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 280; and Cat Pausé, “Causing a Commotion: Queering Fat in Cyberspace” in Cat Pausé and Jackie Wykes (eds.) *Queering Fat Embodiment* (London: Routledge, 2016), 77.
substantial gain, or was actively engaging in the project of finding her “normal” weight. Visualizing the notion that fatness is an impermanent and inauthentic state of being, extra weight within these representations was rendered as something that an individual can and should be able to proverbially “take off,” not unlike a garment. Indeed, as one of the advertisements explained, “You can take off as much or as little fat as you please—and whenever you please. When you reach your normal, perfect weight you can retain it without gaining or losing another ounce.” As these advertisements suggest, the ideal body was one that had achieved equilibrium—neither too fat nor too thin. The imminent threat of weight gain was therefore not just an aesthetic and moral failing for the stout woman, but also a source of enormous guilt, or a symbol of her corporeal failures as a woman due to her incapacity to “release” the slender woman within through the simple act of “taking off” her fat.

While the fashion media routinely invoked this guilt complex in its more general advice discourses that were proffered to women of all sizes, the particular plight of the stout woman and her inability to remove excess fat was perhaps best articulated within early dieting advice. In

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her bestselling 1918 dieting book *Diet and Health: With a Key to Calories*, for instance, Lulu Hunt Peters—a former stout woman herself—foregrounded dieting advice with a damning assertion:

Now fat individuals have always been considered a joke, but you are a joke no longer. Instead of being looked upon with friendly tolerance and amusement, you are now viewed with distrust, suspicion and even aversion.

Unlike earlier dieting advice, which provided as much guidance about how to lose weight as it did to gain weight in the pursuit of bodily perfection, the hard line Peters took against fat people in her 1918 book signaled a tide shift in opinion that only became more deeply entrenched in the American imaginary in the 1920s. As one of the “best known and best loved woman physicians in America,” the former fat woman had little interest in assisting people with gaining weight as, by her estimation, three out of four Americans were “disgracefully overweight.” “Food hoarding” as manifested in excessive body fat was, as far as Peters was concerned, nearly akin to treason. Invoking the patriotic discourses of the interwar period, Peters questioned how, if during war time hoarding food is a criminal act, can “thousands of individuals all over America…have vast amounts of this valuable commodity stored away in their own anatomy”? Elsewhere in the volume, Peters more directly admonished her fat readership, asking, “How dare you hoard fat when our nation needs it?”

Although *Diet and Health* was marketed to men and women alike, throughout the volume, Peters unambiguously spoke to the plight of a largely female readership, perhaps most notably by offering advice to wives about how to embark on a reducing regimen in spite of their husbands’ protestations. Indeed, any weight loss journey, according to Peters, was a lonely one that was full of self-sacrifice and self-discipline—one which Peters experienced herself as she yo-yoed between her highest weight of two-hundred pounds and her lowest weight of one-hundred-fifty pounds. Peters’ guide was therefore an early articulation of the notion that women had to suffer in order to be slender. Indeed, as she demonstrated through often-witty anecdotes, there was no quick fix to overweight, for she had tried and failed at them all. From the outset, she therefore urged her reader to accept the fact that they “might as well recognize now, and accept it as a fact, that neither you nor anybody else will be able to eat beyond your needs without accumulating fat.” Although this meant that women had to engage in near-constant exercises in self-denial, small rewards Peters explained, would come through the visible transformation of the flesh:

56 The book was immediately popular—becoming one of the first dieting manuals to become a bestseller in the United States, selling over 800,000 copies—and was in its sixteenth edition by 1922. See Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 175.
58 Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 175.
60 Peters roundly rejected the popular or at least prevalent notion that men actually love big women; rather, she argued that such logic was merely conceived by husbands to ensure that other men would not encroach on their partners. See Peters, *Diet and Health*, 19.
61 Ibid., 18.
If there is anything comparable to the joy of taking in your clothes, I have not experienced it. And when you find your corset coming closer and closer together (I advise a front lace, so this can be watched), and then the day you realize you will have to stitch in a tuck or get a new corse!

But don’t be in a hurry to make your clothes smaller now. If they are loose they will show to the world that you are reducing.⁶

In spite of the bombastic rhetoric about food hoarding with which she began her text, at the end of the day, weight loss, for Peters, was ultimately driven by vanity and specifically by fashion. According to Peters, the ultimate reward for self-sacrifice came in the form of witnessing clothes that once fit too tightly hang loosely from the frame.

⁶ Ibid., 20.
Fashion as an explicit and potent motivator for weight loss crossed over into advertising, too. As one remarkable, verbose advertisement for the Corrective Eating Society—one which, at least visually, blurs the lines between editorial and advertising content with its headline “Why Stout People Can’t Wear New Styles”—explained, while the society’s weight loss method could yield internal benefits, such as the alleviation of bothersome digestion problems, the aesthetic payoffs are perhaps somewhat more gratifying:

…when you reduce to normal weight in this new simple fascinating, natural way, you look even younger than most slender people of the same age. You can then dress stylishly and yet be in perfect taste. This season's designs are made for thin people. In a very short time after using this marvelous new method, you can wear…most extreme styles; and look well in them.63

Illustrating these points were two pairs of patently fabricated before and after photographs, depicting in one a woman in a black maillot, and, in the other, the same woman pictured in a dress resembling the fashionable robe de style popularized by Jeanne Lanvin and trimmed in feather plumage—the point being to demonstrate how the same woman in each before and after photo looks more suited to the prevailing mode post-weight loss (Fig. 91). In these instances, even the as the stout woman's guilt complex provided the necessary motivation for pursuing weight loss regimens, the guilt was driven less by any nationalist or moral obligations than by the social and sartorial ramifications of not “fitting in”—not only into a garment, but also socially. For many stout women, however, the lifestyle changes demanded by the fashion media and espoused within dieting advice—two seemingly disparate discursive genres united by an aesthetic imperative—were deemed too difficult to maintain, and thus the discursive trope of failure was invoked in advertisements as a common and disheartening experience. Advertisements for miraculous “obesity cures” of all kinds seized upon this idea, frequently introducing their products with preambles that made claims similar to that which appeared in a 1921 advertisement for the Corrective Eating Society's calorie restriction diet:

Thousands of men and women who have tried strenuous diets, special reducing baths, salts, medicine and violent exercising without results have just found this new scientific way a revelation. A pound or more a day from the very start can be counted on and with each pound you lose you will note a remarkable increase in energy and general health. Women so stout they could never wear light colors or attractive styles without being conspicuous, marvel at the sudden change that has enabled them to wear the most vividly colored and fluffily-styled clothes.64

Within these spaces, vice and virtue could happily coexist as stout women were promised too-good-to-be-true weight loss cures that permitted them to reduce with little effort, while creating the appearance of living a disciplined and virtuous life. Indeed, while more normatively-sized women could rely upon subtler lifestyle amendments in order to keep their figures fit and their

consciences clear, stout women had to suspend disbelief by resorting to progressively extreme and fantastical measures.

7.2 Beyond Reducing: Forming the Foundation of the Stout Body

The stout woman is hopelessly classified. She is “pretty but stout.” Or clever or interesting or young or vivacious or attractive—but stout. Well she knows it is not those qualities we lack that make our lives miserable, but those we possess.65

The above quotation comes from an Eleanor Adair advertisement that appeared in the April 1, 1919 issue of *Vogue*. While offering a wide range of beauty products and services to a largely New York-based, female clientele—not unlike her more famous contemporary, Elizabeth Arden—Adair also explicitly marketed her beauty expertise to stout women who were desperate to lose weight. Indeed, as in the above excerpt, Adair explains how the affliction of excess adipose tissue obscures any other positive attributes: A woman could be pretty, vivacious, interesting or attractive, but at the end of the day she was, first and foremost, stout. Speaking more universally, women, she goes on to explain, were defined not by qualities that they lack but by those that they possessed. Adair thereafter went on to market a slew of products to the stout reader, including a “scientific formula” called Retardine and her patented Ganesh Chin Strip, which, when worn at night, promised to “restore the original contour” of the neck and chin easily, painlessly and, perhaps most importantly, quickly.

This advertisement was for one among many increasingly outrageous last resort products widely marketed to stout women who had tried, and failed at, more modest albeit time-consuming and difficult reducing methods such as dieting and exercise. These products tapped into the fact that American women’s will to thinness was growing definitively more intense as fashion exposed more and more of the body; as a result, the tone in fashion magazines, as Vigarello writes, grew “markedly more serious, even to the extent of sounding alarms and inciting fears.”66 Indeed, it may be said that the outlandish claims made within these advertisements to variously melt, soak off or vibrate away extra pounds were only matched by the growing threat and problem of stoutness itself. This kind of results-oriented copy, however, also reflected a broader shift within advertising strategy during this period. As Addison writes, prior to World War I, advertisements tended to exalt the individual assets of products; beginning in the 1910s, however, “instead of talking about products, ads began to talk about consumers” (emphasis in original), in particular by preying upon consumer insecurity—a strategy that was particularly marked in the promotion of beauty and weight loss products.67 Through fanciful claims, sincere testimonials and dubious scientific research, stout women’s already fevered concerns about fat were further exploited, as were their wallets.

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65 Eleanor Adair advertisement, *Vogue* (April 1, 1919), 137.
66 Vigarello, *Metamorphoses of Fat*, 144.
As suspect as the claims made by these companies were, however, cure-all products were cross-promoted within the regular beauty columns as reliable weight loss remedies—a fact that lent them a degree of credibility. During this period, exuberant advertising copy for fat-melting creams, bath salts, vibrators and rubber wearables, among other things, populated Vogue's main editorial content alongside more mundane dieting and exercise advice. In spite of their vastly different rhetoric, it is not surprising, however, that these approaches peacefully coexisted alongside one another. As Schwartz has written, individuals desperate to lose weight did not discriminate: "People set out to lose weight [any way] they could…and they mixed everything up. They dieted one way, exercised another [and] dosed themselves with this and that."  

As I will go on to show in the following subsections, the efficacy of these products was articulated through pseudoscientific jargon and flimsy medicinal claims, tapping into the heady optimism of a period marked by great technological and scientific innovation and progress. Indeed, it is through these ephemeral and untested quick-fixes that the discourses of beauty, science and fashion overlapped and materialized. Within this context, the body became a site of experimentation, or a perpetual work-in-progress that was formed and informed by the logic of the machine age, but which was also literally constructed by various technological interventions that reshaped the fleshy body. In the United States—the home of Taylorism and Fordism—the body, as Seltzer has written, was regarded as something that could be effectively "made," but also one which, as I will go on to demonstrate below, could also be "remade."

While the machine metaphor encompasses how the principals of scientific management and organization impacted how individuals came to perceive and to care for the body in the early twentieth century, perhaps more literally, however, Julie Wosk argues that, in a century of vast technological innovation, what she has deemed the "mechanized woman" defined both herself and her image through the discourses and objects of the machine age. As she observes in her book Women and the Machine (2001), throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, femininity was increasingly constructed by and through machines of various kinds. As has already been discussed, while the invention of the sewing machine in the mid-nineteenth century changed the nature of women's work, the film camera likewise altered ways of seeing the body. Even everyday machines such as the scale introduced radically new ways of thinking about the relationship between the body, beauty and health. Wosk's conceptualization of the "mechanized woman" is therefore a useful framework for understanding how, by incorporating both spectacular and ordinary machine technologies into her daily life, the modern woman did not just change the way she worked and commuted; rather, she was also "a figure that intelligently made use of the latest techniques, however artificial, to improve on nature and achieve a fashionable

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68 Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 109.
69 Seltzer, Bodies and Machines, 49.
70 Julie Wosk, Women and the Machine: Representations from the Spinning Wheel to the Electronic Age (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), x.
look.” Amid this technological progress, Wosk argues, the corset was an inevitable casualty as women “turned to other technologies and machines to help reshape their identity anew.”

While Wosk focuses mainly on “hard” machinery, from the bicycle to the automobile, in this reshaping of women’s lives and identities, it is useful, however, to extend the concept of the mechanized woman to include “soft” technologies, such as weight loss products and fashion more generally, in considering how the body was itself given shape by these innovations. In the following section, I will therefore examine how these “products of last resort” were marketed to stout women as more effective, scientifically-grounded means of reducing.

While the first subsection will focus on the prevalence of outlandish gimmicks within the fashion media, the second will specifically focus on wearable weight reducing garments, such as chin straps and rubber corsets and girdles. Because they have gone largely neglected within previous studies of early twentieth century dieting and weight loss culture, rubber reducing corsets in particular are important to single out here due to the manner in which they depart from mainstream corseting practices by promising to alter the shape of the body permanently. Uneasily straddling the categories of weight loss products, medical devices and garments, these were intermediate and indeterminate technologies that were said to promote weight loss through the practice of wearing. Taken together, the aim of the following two subsections is therefore to examine the pressures—both discursive and physical—brought to bear on the body of the stout woman through an analysis of increasingly effusive, consumer-oriented advertising copy, as well as to reframe weight loss products as modern interventions that, when all else failed, aided in forming the fleshy foundation of the stout body in lieu of more conventional foundation garments.

7.2.1 Fat Women, Fat Profits: “Scientific” Routes to Reducing

In these enlightened times, one may mold one’s form, as well as one’s own character. Science has devoted itself to finding ways of doing both and has been remarkably successful in the modelling of human flesh. There is no need for a woman to have a heavy figure, overdeveloped where it should be beautifully curved. There is a French surgeon and chemist who has devoted much of his time to discovering lotions for reducing excess flesh or for building up tissues. The lotion for reducing purposes is a delightfully fragrant fluid, and persistent applications, in poultice form, upon the parts one wishes to reduce will produce satisfying results. The process is one of dissolving fat and of stimulating the skin to carry it off in a normal way. It is perfectly harmless and very effective.

Attesting to the subtle erosion of the boundaries that had once demarcated advertising and editorial content in Vogue through the first decade of the twentieth century, the above account

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71 Wosk, Women and the Machine, 67.
72 Ibid.
73 “On Her-Dressing Table,” Vogue (June 1, 1920), 114.
74 Best, History of Fashion Journalism, 90.
—with its fulsome description of the French reducing fluid—perhaps somewhat surprisingly, comes not from an advertisement, but rather from *Vogue’s* “On Her Dressing-Table” column. As discussed above, in the 1920s, this column shifted from discussing topical beauty products to focusing on health, and in particular, on exercise as a means of both attaining and of keeping a beautiful appearance. For those who, in spite of everything, still struggled with stoutness, however, a commercial surge in “scientific” weight loss products in the 1920s sated stout women’s frenzied appetites to lose weight fast, efficiently and pleasurably. The unnamed lotion in the above example, for instance, in appearance seems little different from any other French beauty product—except for the fact that it boasted the ability to both dissolve fat while shoring up the skin’s elasticity so as to ensure that the weight loss is carried “in a normal way.” The prevalence of products such as this within the fashion media was part-in-parcel of what Stearns has described as a veritable explosion of weight loss products in the 1920s, which itself was a direct response to the increasingly intense pressures for women to reduce. Consumer culture, he contends, “imitated life first, rather than the other way around.” Indeed, as *Vogue* claims above, in these so called “enlightened times” in which, presumably, consumer culture had a scientific answer for every problem, there was “no need for a woman to have a heavy figure.” What set these weight cures apart from the more widespread popularity of sporting and dieting, however, was the manner in which they promoted localized, scientific weight loss. Indeed, rather than sweating away indiscrete pounds in a gym, these new products promised women that, from the comfort of their own homes, they could effectively reshape their bodies—eliminating problem areas while maintaining desirable curves—through the targeted application of various creams and, somewhat less commonly, of electric and mechanical instruments and devices. Compared to the brutish, increasingly antiquated and time-consuming task of exercising, these methods were framed as distinctly modern alternatives.

In spite of what, at the surface, may seem like a vast chasm that separated the two schools of thought that underpinned these different approaches to weight loss—one hand, behavioral amendments for a healthy lifestyle, and, on the other, miraculous cure-alls to instantly banish fat—they were nevertheless underpinned by strikingly similar logic. A survey of advertisements, advice and testimonials reveals that one of the main selling points of both beauty and fitness culture as well as dubious fat melting products was that they guaranteed natural, safe and specifically drug-free routes to reducing. While less harmful oral cures such as digestives, diuretics and laxatives were all in wide use in the United States in the early twentieth century, so too were arsenic, caffeine and amphetamine-derived pills that sped up the metabolism.

75 The products of the twenties, however, had their origins in a slew of slimming beauty products that were popular in the late nineteenth century. Kate Nelson Best describes some of these—including depilatories, electric baths, corsets, pills and creams—which appeared with increasing frequency in French magazines in the 1850s and 60s. See Best, *History of Fashion Journalism*, 52.

76 At the end of the “Dressing Table” columns, readers were instructed to write to *Vogue* regarding specific inquiries about products. A typical disclaimer read in the following manner: “Note—Readers of *Vogue* inquiring for names of shops where dressing-table articles are purchasable, should enclose a stamped and addressed envelope for reply, and state the page and date of *Vogue*.” See “On Her Dressing-Table,” *Vogue* (June 1, 1920), 114.

77 Stearns, *Fat History*, 18.
thereby raising the body’s basal temperature to literally burn off fat. These products, physicians and scientists quickly learned, however, had dangerous side-effects, such as raising the heart rate and blood pressure, and could even cause premature death. Yet, the public’s desire to lose weight with these so-called “rainbow pills”—named so because of their disconcertingly bright candy coatings—ultimately outweighed any negative consequences, owing to their massive popularity and widespread recreational usage. So prevalent were these products and so urgent was the public’s desire to reduce that Schwartz has even deemed this period “The Grim Twenties”—a sentiment that underscores the extreme and even life-threatening lengths to which women went to be slender. In the 1930s, however, these approaches to weight loss came under growing scrutiny from within the medical community, even as recreational usage spiked. Yet even as early as the 1910s, there was an evident backlash against weight-reducing drugs and pills of all stripes—one which was manifest within fashion discourses. Indeed, perhaps the only things more dire than fat were the various drugs that were increasingly being discredited by the purveyors of these new weight loss cures, the public and the medical community alike.

Within this context, weight loss creams and soaps, diet foods and flesh compression or “body shaping” devices were marketed as natural supplements to an already healthy lifestyle, but also as quick fixes to the problem of overweight for the desperate. In particular, miracle creams and soaps, which bore many resemblances to the era’s beauty products, were marketed as long term “cures” to overweight—guaranteed to dissolve excess adipose tissue quickly, easily, pleasurably and permanently, but, perhaps most importantly, without the use of drugs. These products, which littered the back pages of fashion and women’s magazines, had their origins in age-old remedies for fat, dating back to at least the eighteenth century’s “chemical revolution,” and were attributed to famous physicians and scientists. In spite of claiming scientifically proven results, however, such attributions were more often than not mere marketing bluster since many of the products contained little more than common pantry staples. However, this did not stop manufacturers like Florazona from claiming that their product—vaguely described in advertisements that frequently appeared in *Vogue* as a non-internal means of “washing away excess flesh through the pores” by rousing the “glands…from their sluggish, dormant state”—had the full-throated endorsement of physicians and nurses in addition to “thousands of delighted users” who had opted for a “natural way” to lose an alarming “8 to 15 pounds in only two weeks!” Yet, even while claiming to artificially intervene in a natural bodily function by permitting women to essentially sweat fat away, Florazona stressed that their “pure and

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80 In reference to this notion, Schwartz also speaks about the limited popularity and growing acceptance of surgical weight loss during this period. Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 177-179.
harmless” product was but one element of a healthy lifestyle and “the most essential of toilet requisites.”

In catering to a fashion-consuming readership, however, the Florazona advertisements that appeared in the pages of *Vogue* also employed fashion tropes alongside more vaguely scientific claims, which, at least visually, helped the advertisements to assimilate better into the classifieds content, but which also drove home the urgency of their marketing appeals. In one, published in a 1927 issue of *Vogue*, the visual trope of the mirror is invoked as a woman—one who has presumably recently reduced her weight with the aid of Florazona—beholds a full-length reflection of her newly slender body, outfitted in a dress that drapes fluidly from her shoulders, while in another, the company declares, “Be Slim—Be Popular! No need to envy gracefulness any longer…. Slenderness means beauty, fashion, health” (Fig. 92). Featuring an illustration of a visibly stout woman with a sullen appearance staring enviously at an elegant, slender woman in the company of a man, appearances are again held above health as women’s main impetus to pursue weight loss regimens. Scare copy such as Florazona’s exclamation, “Be Slim—Be Popular!” was an advertising strategy that was becoming increasingly prevalent, but also more drastic, in the 1920s. As Marchand explains, in these instances, the parallel strategies of “scare copy” and “negative appeal” painted the world as cold and unfriendly—one of

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82 Florazona Advertisements, *Vogue* (April 1, 1927), 160; *Vogue* (February 1, 1926), 129.
“normative expectations applied with unmerciful severity.” With a dramatic episode of social failure enunciated within vociferous advertising copy, products then stepped forward to offer friendly help to the reader, employing rhetoric scarcely different from advice discourses. As a social failure, the problem of fat was declared in advertisements, to borrow Vigarello’s words, as “a manifest failure to reform oneself.” Within these spaces it was therefore not so much a product that was being sold, but rather social security in an unsympathetic world. Indeed, it may be said that in the above advertisement the product that was being sold was not so much Florazona, but rather slenderness and the attendant popularity and beauty that came with it.

Advertised alongside Florazona were similarly fantastic topical beauty creams that promised to help lift stout women out of their embodied misery. Nan Reenë’s Reducing-Cream, for instance, advocated a targeted, simple and safe means of breaking down fatty tissue without having to resort to “tiresome exercise or the annoyance of a diet.” By applying the cream every night, one advertisement said, a woman could “bring youthful elasticity to the contour muscles,” permitting her to measure “beauty by inches” (emphasis in original). Tellingly, the advertisement is illustrated with a drawing of a woman measuring her hips with a measuring tape (Fig. 93)—one of the most important and also anxiety-causing body parts for women in the 1920s, or one of the first places female “obesity” was thought to take hold. Here again, beauty is measured quantitatively. In spite of their pseudoscientific claims, however, these products were marketed as cosmetics as much as remedies for and preventative aids against the problem of overweight. A far cry from medicinal cures for the problem of “obesity,” these were natural additions to a modern women’s toilette, advertised in close proximity to other cosmetics as well as to garments and slenderizing corset advertisements. Within this context, weight reducing cures were naturalized as essential components of everyday beauty.

Alongside the numerous advertisements for fat-melting beauty products, women perusing the back pages of fashion magazines also encountered a variety of diet foods, which

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81 Ibid.
82 Vigarello, *Metamorphosis of Fat*, 175.
83 Ibid., 147.
promoted the idea that the corpulent could eat their way to thinness. For example, Doctors' Essential Foods Company—which advertised in Vogue between 1917 and 1929, right at the height of the first weight loss craze in the United States—asserted that three slices of their Basy Bread "a day will drive the fat away" (Fig. 94). Like weight loss creams and soaps, Basy Bread was said to be free of harmful fat-reducing chemicals, which it maintained physicians had universally condemned, and was marketed as a simple and pleasurable way to reduce fat. Unlike the aforementioned products, however, Doctors' Essential Foods claimed that theirs was the one tried-and-true method for permanent weight loss and prevention:

Physicians universally condemn all so-called "anti-fat" pills, salis, purges "specifics," teas, etc., as thoroughly unscientific, if not extremely harmful and dangerous as a general rule....

Fat cannot be removed by medication, nor can it be sweated off, starved off, purged off, or massaged off. The only logical—the only safe, sane and certain—way to rid the body once and for all of excess fat is to so regulate the food of the patient that nature of her own accord will gradually expel it. The body burns fat slowly or rapidly according to the way it is fed. The amount of food eaten is not so vital as is the kind that is eaten. (emphasis in original)\(^{60}\)

The product of "years of scientific research," Basy Bread, eaten as part of a diet that allowed no potatoes, oils fats or sugars,\(^{60}\) was said to transform "excessive and unhealthy fat to normal, firm and healthy flesh—notably, female flesh, as the choice use of pronoun in the quotation indicates.

In many ways, however, diet foods like Basy Bread were very much at odds with the underlying cultural perception that fat was the result of overconsumption—even if the science behind what exactly caused weight gain still lagged behind.\(^{63}\) While women of all sizes were being targeted for these products,\(^{62}\) stout women were differently perceived as a particularly

\(^{60}\) Advertisement for Basy Bread by Doctors' Essential Foods Company, Vogue (May 1, 1917), 159.


\(^{62}\) Stearns, Fat History, 37.

\(^{63}\) Through the 1910s and 1920s, advertisers had a unified concept of their market: white, middle class and female. It wouldn't be until after World War II that consumer goods industries would move past the notion that there was one single unified consumer market and embrace the concept of market segmentation. See Scanlon, Inarticulate Language, 198.
voracious and vulnerable consumer class, as well as a paradoxical product of both under- and over-consumption. As Schwartz explains, while the fat woman was perceived as "stuffed with sweets and likely to die of lung congestion or the complications of diabetes," she was also ironically the figure of under-consumption, or of "domestic inefficiency in the midst of a flood tide of goods."94 Balancing a cultural bias against fat women with a desire to court them as consumers, the diet and beauty industries therefore worked parallel to one another in creating new products, with over-blended scientific claims, that catered to the specific needs of stout women. Even if the fat reducer reducing almost always boiled down to aesthetics, these goods employed pseudoscientific and pseudomedicinal discourses, not unlike those claims made by Easy Bread, to assure the efficacy and reliability of their products, but which also tapped into deep-seated cultural stigmas and anxieties about the causes of and cures for overweight. While, cumulatively, these new products guaranteed fast and effortless weight loss, the notion of eating oneself thin, however, ran counter to widely-held beliefs about how stout women grew stout in the first place; rather, to apply a cream or massage away fat was a process that still involved body work or "body maintenance" and thus aligned better with prevailing notions about female propriety in the care of the self. The efficacy of these products notwithstanding, fat women meant fat profits for the booming diet and weight loss industries. The fashion media, however, provided a welcome promotional boost to these products by cross-referencing them within the context of fashion and beauty advice,95 therein normalizing their use and naturalizing them as an indispensable part of the stout woman's self-fashioning practices. Indeed, advertisers and magazine editors worked in tandem to disseminate and mediate women's desire; however, embedded into these discourses was an almost inescapable pressure to reduce.

Perhaps the most remarkable of these new products were those that promised to either rub or vibrate fat away. Among them, Dr. Thomas Lawton's Safe Fat Reducer, a nd, for instance, was

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94 Schwartz, New Satisfied, 136.
95 The cross-overs between editorial and advertising content were an offshoot of the growth of advertising in the United States more generally between 1900 and 1930. Stalnacke notes that there was a thirteen-fold increase in advertising revenue in the United States during this period, while consumer spending on beauty products ballooned from $17 million in 1914 to $141 million in 1925. See Stalnacke, Javertidean Loggings, 198, 206. As a result, argues Best, new types of beauty columns emerged to take advantage of the consumer's frenzied appetite for these goods through adversorially disguised advice columns. This resulted in a pointed conflict between fashion magazines' editorial mission and the revenue demands made by the publishers. For further discussion, see Best, History of Fashion Journalism, 50.
advertised in Vogue between 1919 and 1924. During these five years, the Lawton's advertisements promised quick and safe weight reduction "within 11 days or money refunded" (Fig. 95). Although the advertisements are scant with information about how the device actually worked, the non-electrical, handheld instrument was said to enable localized weight reduction from ten to one-hundred pounds that targeted only "unhealthy, disfiguring fatty tissue" while retaining the integrity of so-called "normal" flesh—a notion that further underscores the prevailing trope that within every stout woman there was a slender woman waiting to break free. Appearing in Vogue in the late 1920s, advertisements for Campbell's Electric Vibratory Massage promised similar results, but with the added speed and efficacy of electric vibrations:

A slender figure, without diet, without medicine, without tiring exercise—at the touch of a button! Vibratory massage, the secret of successful French health culturists, now available in the privacy of your own home. All that a skilled masseuse can do for reducing hips, back, thighs and calves, you can do for yourself in 10 minutes a day with the Campbell Electric Exerciser.50

Appearing in the cluttered classifieds section of Vogue, the Campbell's advertisements were in good company alongside a slew of other products that took a similar approach to weight loss (Fig. 96). Appearing in succession beneath a December 1929 advertisement, for instance, were listings for Dr. Walter's Rubber Garments, including models for reducing the chin, thighs and even the ankles and calves that, through external means, promised to melt excess fat off the bones.

As the decade wore on, fat reducing products seemed to grow increasingly sophisticated just as the spectrum of stoutness grew wider. Suddenly, via these slimmer advertisements, advice columns and fashion editorials, any woman could potentially see stoutness in herself, at least in parts—an idea which was bolstered by the fact that stoutness advertisements during this period were featuring ever-slimmer depictions of stout women (a point already discussed in chapter five). A survey of these products further underscores the notion that—as far as the beauty, fashion and fitness industries were concerned—women no longer grew uniformly fat, but rather fat in places (Fig. 97). While all over

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50 Advertisement for Campbell's Electric Vibratory Massage, Vogue (December 7, 1929), 175.
stoutness was still roundly vilified, the chin, ankles and abdomen were all frequent targets for weight loss—all of which being areas that not coincidentally were growing progressively more visible as headlines rose, dresses grew slimmer and haircuts became shorter. In turn, manufacturers increasingly saw the potential in products that targeted weight loss in these newly-revealed expanses of flesh. Indeed, as Smith so aptly observed, "fashion at once made women more desirable, more efficient, and in need of new goods." Thus, progressively absent from the classifieds section were products that promoted generalized weight loss and in their stead were increasingly specialized products that promised to help efficiently and scientifically eradicate fat.

7.2.2 Sweat Equity: Rubber Wearables for Permanent Weight Loss

Another reason why a round fat back strikes terror into the heart of a woman is the fact that there is nothing more indicative of age than this. To remedy this defect there is a comfortably fitted lightweight rubber jacket to be worn for a portion of the day at least… For women who possess a symmetrical back, but whose hips are too generous, there is another reducing garment…. There is also a chin strap to be used if the face is too fat, and a mask to be worn at night; many have found this most efficacious in

clearing the complexion. The garment for the back may be bought for $7, the hip garment for $9—or $13 if made to measure—the chin strap for $2, and the mask for $6.\textsuperscript{98}

Although the above passage from a 1918 “Dressing-Table” column might suggest otherwise, fatness, first and foremost, is an affliction of the abdomen. As Carden-Coyne and Forth have observed, in Western society, the abdomen is holy political if deceptively innocuous. It is an object of medical and scientific knowledge as well as a longtime target of bodily reform, or “… an integral aspect of our sense of self as well as a favored site of self-fashioning.”\textsuperscript{99} Extending this latter notion further, it may be argued that the abdomen is an area of the body that, unlike other parts of the female body, such as the breasts or hips, has not at any point in modern, Western fashion history been made to appear exaggeratedly larger through the use of dress, undergarments or, more recently, plastic surgery.\textsuperscript{100} Although the relaxed Directoire line of the late eighteenth century and the tubular profile of the 1920s both, in their own times, created a fashionably straight-up-and-down appearance, curves—and especially that of the belly—could not unduly protrude from and therefore break the clean lines of these silhouettes. While these styles did not emphasize the waist, they did, however, obfuscate the body underneath altogether. Indeed, with very few exceptions, the hourglass has formed the foundation of the ideal female figure throughout much of modern fashion history.\textsuperscript{101} It is therefore unsurprising that the abdomen has been the target of such fervid and extreme measures to reduce it, both through impermanent means such as corseting, as well as via more permanent, if improbable, measures.

That being said, it would be inaccurate to claim that weight loss historically has been the sole preserve of the waist; throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the targets for reducing were as varied as weight loss cures themselves. As has been demonstrated throughout this dissertation, with the rise of consumer culture in the early twentieth century an acute bodily panoptic awareness was engendered amongst women who were growing more attuned to beauty norms and to their bodies’ own deviations from these standards. In the above excerpt from \textit{Vogue}, fatness is revealed as a deformity not merely of the waist but also potentially of the back, chin, hips and face. For women who struggled with weight in these spots, however, an ever-expanding array of devices was available that promised to both affordably and efficiently melt or compress away unsightly fat deposits from any and every part of the body—a point which is well

\textsuperscript{98} “On Her Dressing-Table,” \textit{Vogue} (November 15, 1918), 84.


\textsuperscript{100} Another exception to this rule would be the fashion for the belly and hips to protrude slightly from underneath generously cut garments—a fashion that was briefly popular in Europe both in the early fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and which is famously captured in Jan van Eyck’s \textit{Arnolfini Portrait} (1434). This style, however, was more suggestive of pregnancy than it was of corpulence. For further discussion see Edwin Hall, \textit{The Arnolfini Betrothal: Medieval Marriage and the Enigma of van Eyck’s Double Portrait} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 105-106 and Neil Haughton “Perceptions of Beauty in Renaissance Art,” \textit{Journal of Cosmetic Dermatology} 3, no. 1 (2004): 231.

illustrated by advertisements for Dr. Jeanne B. Walter’s Rubber Garments (Fig. 98). For as little as two dollars, a woman could purchase a Vigger-endorsed compression device that, when worn for only a few hours a day, could supposedly yield a wholesale transformation of her figure. As Sue Best has written, the physical and discursive powers exerted on the body—and in particular the special emphasis placed on the process of “becoming”—within consumer culture (but I would add also within fashion media discourses) created bodies that were “open and vulnerable to suggestion and consumption.”

By extending this notion, it may be argued that through the process of putting on these devices, the porous boundaries of the non-normative body were sealed off; in doing so, order was brought to the disorderly body, so to speak. Somewhat more paradoxically, however, these wearable weight reducers entered women’s lives as a viable if counterintuitive means to make the body complete—or at least more aligned with the norm—through the subtractions of excess in discrete problem areas. Through the act of putting on these devices, women could effectively “take off” fat.

Among these “problem areas,” the chin became an especially urgent target for weight loss in 1920s fashion and beauty discourses. To combat the dreaded “double chin,” newly revealed by cropped haircuts and plunging necklines, the chin-strap emerged as a product conceived to slenderize the neck and jaw over time with daily wear. Resembling a postsurgical compression wrap that was worn either for several-hour increments or overnight, as a

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103 See Douglas, Parity and Danger.
wearable object that promised permanent results, chin-straps made a departure from other common weight-reducing products that were ingested or absorbed into the dermis. Beauty articles appearing in women’s and fashion magazines increasingly decried the appearance of the double chin while promoting these goods to their readership. Indeed, as one 1926 *Vogue* article titled “Beauty Points” stated bluntly:

One chin apace is quite sufficient for each of us and the approach of a second should be viewed with alarm. A good contour- or chin-strap is beneficial in making a double chin disappear, and there are efficacious reducing creams to be had.104

Another *Vogue* article, titled “The Importance of Being Beautiful: The Neck,” which appeared slightly earlier in an August 1924 issue, took a very similar approach:

Something that ages a woman perhaps more than any other one thing is a double chin. . . . A new device that is proving most efficient in reducing the double chin may now be obtained at a moderate price. This is easily used and makes the flesh firm and smooth. A good contour or chin-strap is also beneficial.105

104 “Beauty Points,” *Vogue* (March 15, 1926), 33-34.
Illustrations accompanying this latter article visualized the aging effects of fat around the face and neck in a duo of side-by-side or before and after silhouettes, the top pair focusing on the chin explicitly, under which reads the sentiment, “... it is true that in much chin lies little beauty” (Fig. 99).

In both cases, the double chin was identified as a discrete problem area while the chin strap was recommended as a commonplace, if obvious, remedy. As they were advertised in the classified sections of women’s and fashion magazines, the “science” behind chin-straps held that the compression provided by these devices would variously break up fatty tissue, shore up muscles or, when used in conjunction with various serums or lotions, would dissolve “extra” chins. These products—advertised as early as 1914 in Vogue and Harper's Bazaar, but which appeared far more frequently in the 1920s—were sold by Elizabeth Arden, Dorothy Gray, Eleanor Adair and Dr. Jeanne B Walter, all of whom had salons in New York City, which the afflicted could visit to receive additional reducing treatments. While Eleanor Adair marketed her “hygienic and unsurpassed” Ganesh chin strap, which for five dollars would eradicate both
double chins and facial wrinkles, Elizabeth Arden promoted her chin strap along with her “remarkable rejuvenating method of skin treatment...[that] strengthens and invigorates tired muscles, dissolves unwieldy fat...until the years actually seem to roll away” (Fig. 100). While these half-page advertisements were unambiguous in their commercial ambitions, at least in appearance, other advertisements both visually and discursively blurred the lines between advertising and editorial content. Dorothy Gray’s full-page advertisements, which appeared alongside the main editorial content in Vogue (that is, in the center of the periodical rather than in the back with the classifieds), were a manifestation of an industry shift that was set in motion as early as the 1910s as advertisers embraced the power of the psychological appeal. Indeed, as Marchand explains, in the 1920s, advertisers grew increasingly sensitive to the fact that Americans—struggling to cope with rampant social and technological advancements—had been set adrift and were in search of a “secure sense of selfhood.” Searching for answers and resolutions, in addition to advice literature, American consumers looked to other sources that were both convenient and ubiquitous: mass advertising. Echoing Vogue’s editorial content that lay in close proximity, and which had clearly established what an aesthetic and social failing a double chin could be, in one advertisement Grey asked the prophetic question, “Are you developing a too full under chin?” (Fig. 101). Further, the visual parallels between this advertisement and the aforementioned article, “The Importance of Being Beautiful: The Neck” are readily apparent with both employing before and after images—one affirming the other. Siding with the reader by striking a responsive chord, Grey’s “medicated silk-faced rubber” chin strap thereafter entered as a simple solution to a dire problem—a sympathetic companion in a world that was rife with judgment.

In many ways these ad men, who so shrewdly paralleled the discourses of the fashion media at large through their copywriting were, to borrow the words of Marchand, “apostles of modernity.” As vital cultural intermediaries whose gospel pervaded everyday media discourses, advertisers did more than find clever ways to skirt around “explosive” language: They were translators of disorienting cultural evolutions into graspable terms as much as they were shepherds of the latest scientific and technological innovations. Through their work, they both identified the pitfalls of modern life for the insecure consumer and then intervened with quick and easy solutions. In doing so, they made the progresses of modernization seem both desirable and exciting. Indeed, the sterile, medical and even bizarre appearance of chin straps might have proved too off putting to female consumers more familiar with weight reducing creams and serums that more closely resembled elegant French beauty products, and which were more easily integrated into existing beauty regimens than a chin strap.

Within the spaces of advertisements, however, these odd-looking wearable contraptions were transformed into miraculous, scientifically-engineered cure-alls. As they were pictured in these spaces, women donning chin straps and alternately peaceful and blissful expressions were rendered early twentieth century cyborgs—totally in harmony with technology, and no longer

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106 Laird, Advertising Progress, 290-291.
107 Marchand, Advertising the American Dream, 13.
beholden to primitive and time-consuming exercise regimens. Here again, the machine metaphor is useful for understanding how these objects served to effectively modernize weight loss, but also women’s bodies. While the principles of Taylorism aimed to increase the efficiency of work by segmenting the production process into fixed and incremental stages, products like chin straps had a similar effect on the body by localizing reducing to perceived problem areas. Rather than working out the entire body, women could now just engage in the more efficient practice of piecemeal weight loss. Just as the Ford Model T—the ultimate symbol of manufacturing efficiency—was constructed in stages, so too was the modern, supple body; however, not unlike an automobile, the body also required regular servicing in order to keep it in top shape. Indeed, as Featherstone has written, with progress, “the same instrumental rational orientation adopted towards goods is turned inwards onto the body.”

instrumentalized in the never-ending project of body maintenance, as was especially the case with rubber reducing girdles.

While rubberized weight reducing corsets and girdles experienced a brief surge in popularity in the mid-1920s, the precedent for rubber clothing had been established more than half a century earlier. With the discovery of how to vulcanize rubber in the 1840s—a process which made the material both more durable and more pliable—an infinite number of both industrial and everyday uses emerged for rubber. In the clothing sector, manufacturers dreamt about how, given the crude state of standard sizing during this time, rubber could be incorporated into shoes and garments to expand the range of fits, thereby lowering production costs and increasing consumer satisfaction. Rubber was also enthusiastically embraced as a means to eliminate the necessity of sewing together discrete parts of a garment (for rubber garments could be molded in one piece) and was celebrated for its hygienic properties and specifically for its ability to repel water. As a result, in the fashion capitals of Paris, London and New York the fashionable sect could be seen donning a range of rubberized garments—from collars to underwear to shoes—in the mid-century “rubber craze.” However, by the end of the nineteenth century, and with increasingly affordable rubber garments being adopted by people in all income brackets, rubber had gone from being a symbol of bourgeois modern elegance to being widely decried as vulgar. Physicians were also increasingly voicing their doubts about the hygienic properties of rubber. Although rubber undergarments were embraced by some for the manner in which they gently supported the body’s comportment—both for fashion and for orthopedic purposes—the garments nevertheless trapped perspiration close to the skin, thereby inhibiting the body’s natural functions. Indeed, although rubber was celebrated for its ability to repel water, its subsequent demise was partly spurred by its corollary ability to keep moisture in. By the turn of the twentieth century, rubber garments had therefore all but fallen out of fashion.

In spite of their sharp decline in popularity at the century’s turn, as both the New York Times and Women’s Wear reported in 1925, rubberized corsets and girdles experienced a widespread, if brief, surge in popularity mid-decade. In an exact ideological reversal of the rubber craze that occurred decades earlier, however, the popularity of rubber corsets in the 1920s—that is, corsets that were made entirely of rubber, which differed from the more

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111 Ibid., 437-438.
112 Ibid., 446.
113 As the Times reported in 1925, “A reported increase in the sales of corsets during the past year is attributed by some manufactures partially to the rubber reducing corset fad of a year ago.” See “The Business World: Larger Sales of Corsets,” New York Times (August 26, 1925), 30. Women’s Wear also wrote in 1925 about the fact that rubber reducing corsets had “generally been considered ‘out’ by the manufacturing world,” but were still popular amongst some consumers who were “anxious” about their figures spreading. See “Reducing and Molding Ceinture Featured by Saks-Fifth Avenue,” Women’s Wear (November 19, 1925), 26. See also “Aftermath of Rubber Craze Seen in Demand for Back-Lace Types,” Women’s Wear (May 14, 1925), 26 and “Western Cities Report Steady Demand for Pure and Fabric-Covered Rubber Reducers,” Women’s Wear (November 5, 1924), 36.
widespread adoption of elastic and rubber elements in girdles of all kinds during this period—was attributable to the insight that, through the perspiration caused by the friction of rubber against flesh, women could permanently sweat away fat with the added benefit of reshaping their figures in the short-term. Different from the rubber craze of the mid-1800’s, however, the rubber corsets and girdles of the 1920s were almost singularly marketed to stout women, and were therefore principally framed as tools for promoting weight loss rather than as viable replacements or substitutions for canonical fabric and steel models.

A 1924 *Vogue* article titled “A Guide to Chic in Corsets” attests to this shift, discussing, on the one hand, the fashion for delicate lace and silk underthings for slender women, and on the other, the deeply ambivalent practice of reshaping the body without appearing corseted or overly stiff for stout women. With the article framed as an advice piece—beginning with an entreaty from a stout woman named Mrs. M.W. for guidance in how to avoid a matronly appearance and to achieve “graceful lines and a much better foundation for [her] clothes” when purchasing a corset—*Vogue* goes on to sing the praises of the reshaping abilities of stretchy undergarments at large, but also speaks to the peculiar role of all-rubber corsets in forming the foundation of the stout body:

As for the new all-rubber corsets that everyone is talking about, experiment and observation have shown that they do just what the makers claimed they would do—reduce flesh. They are much more comfortable worn over cotton or linen undergarments. Many women wear them alternately with a corset of cloth material. The all-rubber corset is for reducing exclusively and is not to be considered in any sense solely a fashion or dress garment.

Here, *Vogue* at once offers the stout woman advice about how to corset the body to achieve both the temporary appearance of slenderness as well as how to attain permanent results. On the former end of this spectrum, long line, front-lacing corsets that extended beyond the hips were viewed as the most desirable for the stout-of-frame, given their ability to create a fashionably flat back and to compress the hips, and were thus best suited for everyday wear. Unlike conventional corsets, however, rubber reducing corsets, as *Vogue* explains, were only to be worn for reducing purposes—and thus privately in the space of the home—and not as so-called “fashion” garments.

The dangers and pitfalls of wearing these rubber corsets for too long were recounted within several *Women’s Wear* articles that spanned the mid-century rubber craze, and which grappled with the curious status of these as both garments and “not”—or rather, as wearables that uneasily straddled the spheres of weight loss, medicine and fashion. As one article explained, the new rubber undergarments were somewhat surprisingly being adopted by medium-build and slender women to wear underneath bathing suits because of their water-repelling qualities. To stout women, however, these were marketed as alternatives to

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“impractical” dieting and exercise regimens. Even so, the viability of these as a means to long-term weight loss were debated within the industry as little to no formal research had gone into their efficacy. A store in New York, however, conducted a trial of the rubber weight reducing corsets over a three-week period in the spring of 1924. The results of the study were recounted in *Women’s Wear* as follows:

At the end of two weeks, reduction of from two to three inches through the hips were reported. A small increase of waistlines was discovered. Some women objected to the rapidity of the reduction because it necessitated immediate altering of clothes, but in general, satisfaction prevailed.

In the third week continual perspiration induced by the garments, making them uncomfortable to the wearers, occasioned a report of discontent. It was sad that the closeness with which these garments hugged the body led to friction which in some cases had resulted in a raw condition to the skin covering the muscles flexed in bending. Relief was demanded and comfort obtained by the majority who decided to alternate the rubber reducer daily with some other kind of corset or restraining garment.

In a more casual, less-scientific survey of the efficacy of reducing corsets, one Philadelphia-based corset buyer recounted to *Women’s Wear* the feedback he had received from consumers. Explaining how rubber models should be sold only as accessories and not as alternatives to traditional corsetry, the buyer remarked that “it is a mistake to ask people to adopt the rubber reducing corset for all time wear, as the tendency is to spread, as we found when hundreds of women came to us after having worn the rubber garment.” Somewhat different from the findings of the New York study, here, the buyer touches upon the notion that, after sustained wear, rubber garments had a reputation for losing their elasticity, and therefore their ability to reshape the figure. Continuing, the buyer therefore explains how when purchasing a rubber corset, the stout woman should be “emphatically told that she probably can attain good results if she wears it only during the part of the day when her appearance is not her first concern.”

In spite of *Vogue*’s warnings and the findings from the studies published in *Women’s Wear*, however, manufacturers of reducing corsets marketed their wares as viable and, perhaps more importantly, modern alternatives to traditional stoutwear corsetry. One of the most popular and widely-advertised rubber reducing corsets was known as the “Madame X” model—a generic name for reducing corsets, but one which in no uncertain terms referenced John Singer Sargent’s 1883 painting of the same name—was manufactured by at least two different firms: I. Newman & Sons, a Chicago-based company, and the New York-based Thompson Barlow Company. In long-form, full-page advertisements that ran within most major women’s and fashion magazines

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116 “Blanche Cervelli, Singer, Originated Miracle Reducer on West Coast,” *Women’s Wear* (May 14, 1924), 17.
117 “Practical Tests of Rubber Reducing Corset Conducted by Retail Store,” *Women’s Wear* (May 14, 1924), 17.
118 “Further Reflections on Rubber Corset as Reducing Agent,” *Women’s Wear* (July 15, 1926), 38.
119 Valerie Steele also remarks upon the fact that rubber corsets and girdles were tenuously received by consumers and manufactures who were concerned about the long-term efficacy of rubber as a reducing agent. See Steele, *The Corset*, 154.
120 “Further Reflections,” 38.
from Vogue to Harper’s Bazaar to The Red Book—throughout the mid-1920s, the Madame X girdle was praised as “a new method of fat control that does away forever with hot, tiring exercises, unsatisfying diets [and] costly and wearisome massage treatments.” The “science” behind the Madame X was further elaborated upon in a 1924 Vogue advertisement, which lingered on the newness of the technologies embedded within the garment:

Here is a light, flexible girdle that you slip into in a jiffy, that you wear as a corset.

And you walk, you breathe, you sit, you climb stairs, you bend—never for a moment conscious of this astonishing girdle but knowing that it is at work every minute, meeting every move of your muscles and tissues, gently massaging, gently kneading—minute by minute moulding [sic] the fat away! It is a wonderful new form of self-massage, healthful because it keeps the pores open and breathing, comfortable because it does not melt away fat or press it elsewhere, quick because the Madame X Girdle is made of a new kind of live rubber, “dry-heat” cured, and specially designed for reducing purposes.122

122 Ibid.
In other instances, the efficacy of the Madame X was attributed to the manner in which it promoted a “vigorous circulation of the blood... around the abdomen and hips” through “unconscious massage.” The efficacy of these new technologies was further driven home by consumer testimonials, which spoke to how quickly and dramatically the girdle worked to eliminate unwanted inches when worn consistently. Indeed, as one customer known as Mrs. E.G. Daneska wrote, “I have reduced my waist to 29 inches from 36. I wear the girdle all day and wouldn’t be without it.”

Importantly, and breaking with the advice proffered by both *Vogue* and *Women’s Wear*, rubber reducing girdles were widely marketed as alternatives to traditional corsetry, which could be worn all day—a point underscored in the above testimonial. They were also framed as superior alternatives to conventional body shapers due to their ability to instantly transform the figure, while still promising long-term results. Across advertisements for the Madame X girdles, illustrated renderings superimposed on top of photographs of women demonstrate the girdle’s ability to instantly straighten out the body’s undesirable curves, while side-by-side silhouettes reveal before and after results (Figs. 102, 103, 104). Indeed, as two ads variously claimed, stout women could “Look Thin While Getting Thin,” or “Look Slender While Getting Slender.” In

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appearance, however, the Madame X girdle was scarcely different from sterile, medical chin straps, and thus stood in stark contrast to the delicate, lacy and gently-reshaping undergarments that were so popular amongst slender women. The pink silk-covered Nemo-flex rubber reducing girdle was a more aestheticized alternative to conventional reducing garments, and therefore blended in better in a woman's lingerie drawer, but which—by merit of the fact that it was rendered in full-color in a double-page advertisement in *Vogue*—stood out amongst other corset advertisements (Fig 105).

Different from other weight reducing methods such as exercising, applying creams, or even wearing a chin strap, the rubber reducing girdle was, by design, meant to be integrated into everyday life and into women's wardrobes to facilitate constant, unconscious weight loss. To quote the aforementioned Madame X advertisement from the September 15, 1924 issue of *Vogue* again, through the ordinary actions of breathing, sitting, climbing and bending while wearing a rubber corset, women could transform the project of body maintenance into a full-time, albeit unconscious, occupation. While slender women were proverbially casting off their corsets in the 1920s—much to the chagrin of corset manufacturers who had unfounded fears of a precipitous decline in profits—for the stout woman, the front-facing corset and the rubber girdle emerged as not only viable but necessary means to form the foundation of the stout body, both in the long- and short-term. Indeed, in spite of all the technological interventions that had emerged in

the 1920s to promote weight loss, the corset—although new and improved—remained an integral component of stout embodiment.

To this end, it may be argued that the discourses of slenderizing were not only embedded within the design of stoutwear, but in the self-fashioning practices of stout embodiment itself. Through the case of the rubber reducing girdle and the chin-strap, however, it may be argued that there occurs an inversion of the logic of body maintenance, as well as that of self-fashioning. Functioning automatically—that is, by promoting involuntary or unconscious weight loss—they represented a return to corporal and therefore less than modern forms of “punishment,” perhaps therefore also attesting to their short-lived popularity within a society that so valued outward expressions of self-care. Said differently, weight reducing girdles did not require any additional time expenditures on the part of the wearer since they acted independently of the wearer herself, and thus were not adequate moral or ethical compensations for perceived over-indulgences. Even as they were promoted as perhaps the most technologically-advanced and efficient solutions for stout women who long struggled to reduce, the fact that they relied on such antiquated means of reshaping the body rendered them decidedly less than modern. Indeed, while Wosk’s “mechanical woman” employed new inventions to achieve a fashionable appearance, perhaps the most genuinely modern approaches to slenderizing the stout body were more hands off, and in turn, did not require mechanical interventions or a reduction in weight at all.

7.3 Fitting In: Dressing the Stout Body Slender

Scholars writing about the cultures of slimming in the United States—both historical and contemporary—have, on the whole, neglected the capacity for dress to reshape or at least to provide the appearance of visibly slenderer bodies. Indeed, while many scholars have written about the dire lengths to which women went in order to attain the slender ideal, fewer have written about the inverse—or the tactics women employed to fit fashion to their figures in the construction of this norm. For instance, in her research on weight loss advertisements in turn-of-the-century film fan magazines, Addison narrowly defines “body shaping” as those “activities that attempt to alter permanently the size or shape of the body, as opposed to modifying it temporarily through the use of clothing or other cosmetic devices.” In doing so, however, she explicitly excludes those consumer products that only provisionally created the appearance of slenderness. Likewise, in their study on the culture of slimming in early twentieth century French fashion media, Stewart and Janovicke use the paradox of “corsetless craze” as a jumping off

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127 See, for instance, Banner, *American Beauty* and Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*. For a more contemporary consideration, see Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*.
128 The term “body shaping” is a more specific manifestation of Featherstone’s notion of body maintenance. See Addison, “The Rise of Body Shaping,” 10
point, but limit their analysis to dieting and exercise. While these approaches lend credence to Steele’s and Wilson’s discussions of the slow process through which the corset became “internalized” throughout the twentieth century, they nevertheless fail to acknowledge how dress may itself be employed to achieve a fashionably slender appearance independent from the corset or girdle.

The scholarly neglect of the construct of “figure flattery”—or the practice of using clothing to make the body appear more slender—stands in stark contrast to the pervasiveness of this concept within fashion and popular culture during the twentieth century and beyond. Indeed, even in the few studies that explicitly focus on how the appearance of a visibly more slender body can be achieved through dress, scholars have failed to clearly articulate the differences between invasive and non-invasive—or conversely, permanent and impermanent—techniques. On the whole, the enduring scholarly neglect of dress as a temporary way to create the appearance of slenderness while respecting the form of the “natural” body underneath the garment is rather arbitrary considering the fact that dress may be regarded as one of the most obvious, if mundane, means of transforming the size and contours of the body.

To quote Entwistle again, “human bodies are dressed bodies” (emphasis in original), and thus the body, dress and the self must be addressed in their entirety and as a totality. To that end, whether permanent or not, body shaping technologies across the spectrum of consumer goods ensured a similar end result in the fashioning of the public body. Stoutwear was underpinned by a discernible slimming discourse or imperative—an idea that I will expand upon in the conclusion—and therefore stands as an overlooked technology in the fashioning of the stout body when considered within the context of self-fashioning practices. Slimming as a practice, I argue, is not one that occurs independently from dress. Rather, “dressing to look slender” may be situated on a continuum of practices and products—from exercise to rubber weight reducing girdles—that fall under the remit of body maintenance as a Foucauldian technology of the self. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the practice of self-fashioning is a technology of the self, one that Entwistle argues reveals “a conscious desire for improvement.”

In his own words, Foucault defined technologies of the self as activities that permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies...so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality.

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129 Stewart and Janovecek, “Slimming the Female Body?”
131 For instance, Klepp explores fashion advice literature for fat people but does not clearly articulate how these practices differ from or relate to other methods of slimming the non-normative body. See Klepp, “Slimming Lines,” 457-459.
132 This dearth in fashion studies scholarship runs counter to the fact that advice for how to dress to look slender proliferates with mainstream culture at large.
133 Ibid., 6.
134 Ibid., 25.
Foucault further explains that while perhaps in his earlier works he had “insisted too much on the technology of domination and power,” technologies of the self may enable a way to understand how individuals act upon themselves in order to achieve certain psycho-social ends. Indeed, Foucault's understanding of the concept of technologies of the self therefore underscores how agents in different historical moments interpret and embody discourse.

With this definition in mind, stoutwear, not unlike the quick-fixes and cure-alls I discussed in the previous section, should be understood as a vital tool in the project of body maintenance, and which was instrumental in the self-fashioning of the stout body. Indeed, one might argue that perhaps even more than beauty and weight reducing products, stoutwear—as the raw material of everyday self-fashioning practices—was a central factor in the construction of the stout body. However, it may equally well be argued that the practice of dressing to look slender actually subverts the project of body maintenance. Indeed, even if dress and the body are inseparable, as Entwistle argues, it can nevertheless be reasoned that dressing is a process that occurs only at the surface of the flesh and therefore independent from efforts to physically intervene in the body. By definition then, dress practices at large stand at odds with prevailing definitions of both body shaping and body maintenance. To dress to look slender is therefore to undermine the influence of dress as a principal motivator in a woman's efforts to lose weight or to permanently alter the shape of her body in order to fit into and, perhaps more importantly, to look socially acceptable when wearing fashionable clothing. In a reversal of the quotation from fitness advisor Marjorie Dorks with which I opened this chapter, by dressing to look slender, a woman fits her clothes to her figure, rather than fitting her figure to her clothes. With clothing serving as a flimsy barrier between culture and the body, it is a surface upon which more “hands off” techniques and technologies can be employed in order to, for instance, obfuscate and camouflage undesirable curves as is the case with stoutwear. Indeed, much the same could be argued for the manner in which dress is used to delimit the gender binary or, conversely, to subvert these categories through performance and parody separate from biological sex, such as in drag performances.

In the following two subsections—the final two of this chapter, and the final analytical investigations of this dissertation—I will further develop these ideas by exploring the discourses of the less invasive ways that stout embodiment could be self-fashioned through impermanent, non-physical means. In doing so, I will turn away from advertising to focus on overt self-fashioning advice that was published within some of the early twentieth century's most popular fashion and style guides, as well as within women's and fashion media at large. These advice

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136 Ibid.
137 This line of thinking has been most famously pursued by Judith Butler who argues that the practice of drag “implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself” by playing upon the dissonance between the biological sex of the performer and his or her outward, fashioned appearance. See Butler, _Gender Trouble_, 187. On the other hand, as Entwistle, drawing upon Butler, has written, clothing styles—such as light pink for baby girls and blue for boys, or skirts for women and trousers for men—function to naturalize gender. See Entwistle, _Fashioned Body_, 140-145.
138 For a full list of the style guides I consulted in this chapter, consult chapter two or the bibliography at the end of this dissertation.
discourses, I argue, might help us to better understand the particular techniques women employed to bring their bodies more in line with the slender ideal. Indeed, such advice was abundant in early twentieth century fashion discourse and very much reflected the larger societal preoccupation with body maintenance and body shaping propagated by the stoutwear manufacturers, advertisers and the fashion media at large.

Through this analysis, themes that I have discussed previously in this dissertation will crop up again—namely the prevalence of technological, modernist and pseudoscientific logic to justify the efficacy of slenderizing dress practices. Indeed, the practice of dressing to look slender—presented by these writers variously as an art and as a sophisticated, scientific discourse—was for all intents and purposes just another technology amid a litany of new products and weight loss regimens that promised to help the stout body inch closer to the slender ideal. Different from exercise, dieting and the great number of products and devices that promised alternative ways to reduce body fat, however, the dress practices described within the advice literature respected the contours of the stout body. Indeed, as Florence Hull Winterburn wrote in *Principles of Correct Dress* as early as 1914, “Let us respect our natural contour…. There is beauty in flesh if it is firm and healthy.” Similarly, as Jane Warren Wells wrote in the introduction to *Dress and Look Slender* more than a decade later,

“How to select clothes that are certain to make you look slender is the most important knowledge a modern woman can have. Surely it is the most important art in the whole field of fashion.” (emphasis in original)

As Wells suggests above, dressing to look slender was a way for stout women to circumvent the tiring, difficult and, perhaps most importantly, often unsuccessful practice of weight loss. In many ways, dressing to look slender could therefore be framed as a “counter” or “reverse” discourse—or as an empowering means through which stout women could reject the cultural and corporeal imperative of body shaping by focusing instead on surface appearances.

In almost the same breath, however, Wells also suggests that stout women “deserve to be dowdy if we haven’t enough pride, ingenuity, and perseverance to conceal intelligently and comfortably a few extra pounds.” Her advice thus falls short of embracing stoutness *per se* in her tacit endorsement of figure concealment as the prevailing ideology behind dressing as a stout woman. Indeed, as she writes later in the volume, “We can’t enjoy our pounds unless we work to

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139 Nicklas makes similar observations, noting that a number of scholars have written about how nineteenth century fashion was written about as an art; less attention, however, has been paid to how fashion and dress were discussed as a science. See Charlotte Nicklas, “One Essential Thing to Learn is Colour: Harmony, Science and Colour Theory in Mid-Nineteenth Century Fashion Advice,” *Journal of Design History* 27, no. 3 (September 2014), 218.


142 Ibid., 10.
dress them so that their number is not even surmised, let alone accurately guessed.” For stout women, the act of getting dressed could therefore only scarcely be regarded as a “liberating” practice; rather, the rules presented to stout women within advice literature were to be learned and thereafter embodied in order to create if not a slender appearance, then a “passable” and stable one. Building upon this notion, it may be argued that even as Wells and her contemporaries provided seemingly empowering alternatives to reducing via self-fashioning practices, body fat within these discourses is still always regarded as abject and other—something if not to be lost, then something to be covered up and concealed through dress. Thus, revealed within these sources is a deep and inherent tension that calls into question the limits to which women were willing to go in embracing stout embodiment through the ambivalent practice of dressing to look slender, which further underscores the fact that embedded within stoutwear was a slenderness imperative.

This final section investigates these tensions—between normativizing discourses and counter discourses, and between dressing to look slender as a more modern form of body maintenance—through a discussion of early twentieth century advice discourses about how to appear slender through dress. Beginning with the so-called “aesthetics of being inconspicuous,” I then move on to discussing the practice of “dressing from the neck up.” Taken together, this analysis provides a new lens through which we can view self-fashioning as vital to the construction of both the cultural and the fleshy body—one that is sensitive to how dress can provide a temporary means of transforming the body, and which underscores the importance of surface display in public self-fashioning practices.

7.3.1 Seen but not Heard: The Aesthetics of Being Inconspicuous

It is true that nobody admires a fat woman—that is, if she looks fat. To avoid looking fat, the stout woman must constantly be on the alert for correct dress suggestions. She must use good judgment regarding every part of her costume, disregarding the fads and fancies that come into fashion’s realm each season.144

Don't wear gay designs in your frocks if you are short and stout.
Don't wear a number of colors in the same costume if you are stout.
Don't try and dress in a juvenile style if you are not that type.145

The above two quotations, both from 1925, represent the two ends of the spectrum of advice literature that a stout woman was likely to encounter in her pursuit of guidance about how to dress to look slender in the first decades of the twentieth century. In the former, home economist Mary Brooks Picken takes a more sweeping or perhaps positivistic approach by telling

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143 Ibid., 82.
144 Mary Brooks Picken, Harmony in Dress (Scranton: Woman’s Institute of Domestic Arts and Sciences, 1925), 40.
145 Rita Stuyvesant, “Even as You and I: Vertical Stripes Add Height,” The Brooklyn Daily Eagle (February 6, 1925), 16.
her readership that while nobody may admire a stout woman if she “looks fat,” she nevertheless has the ability to effectively conceal her more undesirable curves through clever dress tactics and by generally avoiding the pitfalls of adopting too-fashionable clothing styles. On the other end of this spectrum is advice proffered by Brooklyn Daily Eagle fashion columnist Rita Stuyvesant who is more emphatic and clear in her directives by providing an easy-to-follow, if limiting, list of fashion “don’ts.” While Picken puts forth the notion that hope is not lost for the stout woman—writing elsewhere in her volume that while the stout woman “has greater odds to overcome than her thin sister,” she can still nevertheless “wear most of the styles devised by fashion authorities” through clever adaptations6146—Stuyvesant, however, merely underscores what the stout woman already knew: that, both physically and metaphorically speaking, there was little room for her in fashion. Despite their different approaches, however, both writers highlight a key facet of dressing to look slender: In order to self-fashion not necessarily a slender body but rather an “appropriately stout” body, or one which visibly aspires to slenderness, the stout woman had to both learn and live a wide-ranging canon of advice. As Keist has found, this advice spanned everything from how to choose appropriate dresses, to how to alter the waistlines, hemlines and necklines of extant garments, to how to choose the most becoming accessories.6147

Different from fat-reducing quick-fixes, there was a steep learning curve to the practice of dressing to look slender—one which encompassed not only the more straightforward matters of how to achieve “harmony” in dress through thoughtful applications of color and pattern, for instance, but also advice for how to comport the body so as to reduce the appearance of “bulk” along with tips and advice for good grooming. As if tacitly acknowledging how they had long been marginalized by the fashion industry and the media, the dress advice for stout women was exhaustive as it was at times patronizing with writers attempting to reconcile the prevailing narrow, sylphlike beauty ideal with the lived realities of stout embodiment.

Although striking a more sympathetic tone than the mainstream fashion media—which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, furthered the stereotype of the stout woman as a “determined dresser” and derided and sometimes even mocked her for her penchant for bright colors, elaborate trimmings and excessive, even infantile, silhouettes—dress advice for the stout woman nevertheless centered on the notion that, to be well-presented if not fashionable, she had to exercise great caution and restraint when dressing. Across these sources, “camouflage” was a key term in advice discourses that advocated for the stout woman a simple, conservative, generally inconspicuous but nevertheless timely appearance—one which stood somewhere between fashion and simply fitting in. Indeed, while most style guides provided specific guidance for figures that deviated from a norm that each advice writer defined on her own terms—such as tall and slender, short-waisted or flat-busted types—most agreed that, if the goal of dressing was to overcome what Picken disparaged as “defects and irregularities,”6148 the stout figure posed the greatest challenge.

6146 Picken, Harmony in Dress, 39.
6148 Picken, Harmony in Dress, 24.
While most early fashion and style guides catered to a variety of body types and women—from the stout woman to the tall, slender woman, to the petite woman—one guide stands apart from the larger body of early twentieth century advice literature for its singular focus on the sartorial plight of the stout woman. Jane Warren Wells’ *Dress and Look Slender* (1924) was dedicated to those women “who have started diets and failed with them [and] who have tried exercises and become discouraged.” Unlike the other guides, it was written by a self-proclaimed, self-identifying stout woman who, because of her excessive weight, had long struggled with achieving a fashionable appearance. In both tone and rhetoric, Wells’ volume—which is nearly autobiographical in parts—more so than other style guides possesses a more empathetic quality; the author’s struggle mirrors the reader’s struggle. Inspired to write the book after having gained weight during pregnancy, Wells described to her readers on the first page, how:

> Before I tipped the scales so definitely myself, I paid little attention to the problems of the big woman, for of course I was not vitally interested in weight reduction or size concealment. But when I found my own clothes not meeting and the children in the family saying I was getting fat, I began to take notice.  
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> Rather than physically altering her body through exercise, dieting or other therapies—all of which were practices that Wells deemed potentially deleterious to one’s health and which could have the undue effect of “aging the tissues of the body ten to fifteen years”—Wells advocated for, in her words, “disposing” of extra weight through other, more thoughtful means. After much trial and error, Wells made the realization that “If I could not safely reduce, I would at least give the appearance of having reduced. If I could not actually take off thirty pounds, I would make myself look thirty pounds lighter in the eyes of others” (emphasis in original).
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> While Wells advocated that her readers practice self-acceptance, she did not, however, mince words about the fact that, in her experience, the realities of modern life require youthfulness and slenderness:

> A woman’s clothes should be beautifully alluring and complementary. This is woman’s heritage, and any woman who allows her lack of knowledge to make her unhappy or unpleasing to see has only herself to blame. It does take information, ingenuity, and a little energy. But oh, how worth while [sic] the result will be!

In “Chapter II: The Real Secret of Dressing to Look Slender,” Wells went on to argue that the ability “to select clothes that are certain to make you look slender is the most important knowledge a modern woman can have,” while also claiming that it is perhaps “the most

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150 Ibid., 1.
151 Ibid., 2.
152 Ibid., 4.
153 Ibid., 8.
important art in the whole field of fashion."\textsuperscript{14} Thus, and in many ways not unlike style guides penned by slimmer authors, the notion of using dress to camouflage the stout body is framed even in this standalone volume as the implicit goal of dressing as a stout woman. Indeed, such advice is pervasive in \textit{Dress and Look Slender}, but is especially central in a chapter titled “Cardinal Rules for Dresses that Camouflage Size.” Throughout this chapter, Wells provides side-by-side renderings of dresses that, on the one hand, can make the stout body appear larger, and, on the other, disguise stoutness so as to create what she variously deems a “right expression of clothes,” or a “happy degree of perfection that will prove quite as much of an asset as the appearance of slenderness” (Fig. 106).\textsuperscript{15} Here, the notion of camouflage through dress operates on two levels: that, on the one hand, of concealing fat flesh to create a slender appearance and, on the other, of helping the stout woman to blend into her surroundings.

An exercise in restraint and self-sacrifice beyond fashion or personal taste, the imperative of dressing the stout body slender across advice literature was one foregrounded by the necessity of diminishing the appearance of excess; no less important, however, was that of highlighting the stout woman’s positive attributes—the principal goal of this delicate balancing act being to achieve sartorial and aesthetic equilibrium so that the stout woman could simply “blend in.” Across advice literature, beyond stressing the importance of good garment fit, writers emphasized fabrication and garment color as core concerns for the stout woman when either purchasing ready-made garments, when having garments custom made or when sewing them at

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 71.
home from paper patterns. Amid the fabrics that were on the stout woman’s “don’t list,” taffeta was particularly reviled by the advice writers. Indeed, as Wells explained in *Dress and Look Slender*,

> Every fat woman loves pastry and taffeta. We know that before we start. Pastry you can eat if you study hard to dress correctly, but taffeta you cannot wear because it sticks out where it shouldn’t and does not cling as it should. The surest way to have you avoid it is for me to tell you that it adds 20 pounds, and it truly does.  

Here, Wells implicitly invokes the platitude that a woman cannot both “have her cake and eat it”—which in this case can be taken quite literally—arguing that the stout woman must choose either her taste for pastries or taffeta, but not both, due to their shared ability to increase a woman’s bulk. In general, however, beyond taffeta, any fabrics that stood away from the body were, perhaps quite obviously, verboten due to their ability to make the body appear larger, while pandering to the stereotype of the stout woman as a “determined dresser,” discussed in the previous chapter. Fabrics that were too clingy, too noisy, transparent or that reflected light—from silks to chiffon—were also off-limits for their tendency to, as Picken wrote, “attract attention.” Instead, stout women were advised to not stray far from fluid wools and sturdy shirting, or fabrics which were regarded as having the ability to conceal the flesh while also creating a defined silhouette.

Beyond avoiding clothing that added physical size to the stout body—advice which was perhaps something of a given considering the overall streamlined appearance of both the fashionable silhouette and of the body during this period—the issue of dressing so as to not “attract attention” was a core tenet of, if not synonymous with, dressing to look slender. As such, the advice writers generally cautioned against bright colors or striking tonal contrasts that would cause the stout woman’s dress and body to stand out in a crowd. According to Wells,

> If you intend to take your rightful place among well-dressed women you must watch carefully the color of your dress and hold, in the main, to the quiet colors or shades.... These make outlines less definite, help your observers to lose sight of bulk and thereby make your size inconspicuous.  

Through such advice, individual taste was overshadowed by the more pressing need to blend in. Indeed, the stout woman’s goal, according to Wells, was not to aspire toward the heights of fashionability, but rather to merely being well-dressed, which in this instance is synonymous with anonymity—the dull, dark colors of the stout woman’s clothing helping her to recede into a crowd rather than to stand out.

Shortly thereafter, however, Wells went on to qualify her sentiment by explaining how, among all of the dull colors, “We look smallest in dull black, but can look almost as slender in

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158 Wells, *Dress and Look Slender*, 130.
black that has brightness either in the fabric or the dye.”\textsuperscript{159} The logic behind the capacity for dark colors to make the body appear smaller and therefore less conspicuous emerged from the widely-held belief amongst advice writers that “dark colors make objects appear to be smaller [while] light colors make them seem larger.”\textsuperscript{160} Anne Rittenhouse, a New York Times fashion columnist and author of The Well-Dressed Woman (1924), recommended drab colors in order to counterbalance the stout woman’s colorful complexion, which, she argued, “suggests three nourishing meals a day, with sugared pastry instead of dry toast at the tea hour.”\textsuperscript{161} Indeed, black was something of a mainstay of mass-manufactured stoutwear, if not a perennial annoyance to stoutwear consumers who perhaps had more fashionable aspirations. In August 1922, for instance the New York Times fashion section reported that “dark colors will again be the rule this season in dresses designed especially for stout women…. Black models predominate in this showing [however,] brown is another favored shade, and there is the usual proportion of navy.”\textsuperscript{162} Of the fashion industry’s penchant for dressing the stout woman in black, however, Picken wrote in The Secrets of Distinctive Dress about how it was as if manufacturers of stoutwear said to themselves, “‘Camouflage the stout woman’; that is, [choose] materials…so that the silhouette of the body will not be in evidence and that the optic nerve will not be able to conceive how large the figure actually is.”\textsuperscript{163}

In spite of the wide availability of muted garments, however, when wearing dark or drab colors, the stout woman toed a fine line between looking slender and looking matronly. While slimming, matte black fabrics, according to Wells, could also have the unintended effect of making the stout woman appear far beyond her years.\textsuperscript{164} Even worse, perhaps, Winterburn wrote that black was the color of the “sallow, melancholy [stout woman], rather awkward from self-consciousness, and scarcely knowing her own natural advantages…. Generally speaking, the woman who is fat and dark is full of antagonisms.”\textsuperscript{165} For the stout woman, the task of using color as a tool to mediate her stigma by making the body appear smaller was therefore at times a bewildering exercise in chromatic give and take. Much like the experience of fat embodiment itself, dressing to look slender was beset with contradictions. Attesting to this point, as Marie Cary explained in Style and the Woman, albeit somewhat paradoxically, “The jolly woman must not wear black. It is for her stunning sister or her mysterious cousin. She must wear cheerful colors; not gay ones, for they would increase her size.”\textsuperscript{166} In delimiting style directives for what she called the “Junoesque” or tall and stout figure, Cary therefore offered the following insights about how to choose colors that were at once “cheerful” but not “gay”—a distinction that, in her eyes, was of the utmost importance to the stout woman:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 134.
  \item \textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 129.
  \item \textsuperscript{161} Anne Rittenhouse, The Well-Dressed Woman (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1924), 93.
  \item \textsuperscript{163} Picken, Secrets of Distinctive Dress, 167.
  \item \textsuperscript{164} Wells, Dress and Look Slender, 134.
  \item \textsuperscript{165} Winterburn, Principles of Clothing Selection, 115.
  \item \textsuperscript{166} Cary, Style and the Woman, 20.
\end{itemize}
In an effort to reduce her size, the Junoesque type often dresses in a somber way for the entire year. In the summer, when all outdoors is gay, black and its neighbors are likely to make the large woman look gloomy and heavy. To avoid that appearance, have her discard black, but wear shades darker than those the smaller women are wearing. If they are appearing in jasmine yellow, she may wear a deeply tarnished yellow. Thus, she keeps down her size, but remains in harmony with her surroundings.167

Here, Cary further complicates the task of dressing to look slender by arguing that, rather than simply diminishing the relative size of the stout body, color should instead be employed to assist the stout woman with blending into or finding “harmony with her surroundings”—a sentiment that is a holdover from the general tendency within industrial age design discourses to conceptually conflate women and their dress with the interiors of domestic spaces.168 Elsewhere in the volume, Cary offers further, and much more specific, advice explaining how, for instance, the stout woman might be able to better blend into a kitchen setting by wearing “chambray, gingham and cotton crêpe [to] harmonize with [its] painted walls and enameled woodwork,” or recede into other domestic settings by identifying her “favorite spot” in a given room and choosing her dress in advance so that she can match “the largest expanse of color in the background,” thereby making her appear, by comparison, diminutive.169 Less didactic than a simple list of “dos” and “don’ts,” these advice discourses demanded from the reader a rudimentary knowledge of color theory and a certain amount of taste. Perhaps most importantly, however, the stout woman needed to possess a great degree of body awareness, her social station and her environment so that she could choose dress that would sufficiently compensate for her bodily excesses and shortcomings. As effective as dress could be in camouflaging excessive flesh, there was no magic bullet for making the stout body appear slender.

The advice writers’ general reticence to make strict prescriptions for what the stout woman should and should not wear recalls how, in nineteenth century advice literature, authors eschewed strict dress conventions for the more overarching concern of “harmony” in dress.170 Indeed, as Steele has written, fashion advice writers have long tended to stress “that it was ultimately less important that clothing should be in the height of fashion than that it should be becoming to the particular individual.”171 For the average woman throughout fashion’s history, the ability to select flattering garments or to display a harmonious and virtuosic handle on color and pattern has therefore functioned as an outward expression of either good taste, or, conversely, as a means of elevating her positive physical attributes. For the stout woman, however, the advice writers concerned themselves less with how to help the stout woman improve upon what was already there (for the stout body was an inadequate “canvas” for

167 Ibid., 10.
169 Cary, Style and the Woman, 10-12.
experimentations in color theory, so to speak), but rather to advise her in how to fashion an inconspicuous appearance. Indeed, the last thing the stout woman wanted to do was to draw attention to her self-fashioning through overtly flamboyant or intrepid sartorial displays and therefore to invite admiration, or worse, scrutiny, from onlookers. In many ways, dressing to look slender was an exercise in self-restraint as it was a performance of deception, for the optic techniques of camouflage only worked at a distance. Rather than being underpinned by concerns about taste and harmony—and thus different from advice for more normatively-sized women—an undercurrent of anxiety therefore ran through advice for the stout woman, for any minor infraction could ruin the illusion of slenderness entirely. Underscoring this notion, in The Well-Dressed Woman, Rittenhouse explained in the introduction to her chapter “Clothes for the Fat Florid Woman” how the appearance of the stout woman “can be made or marred by a single accessory.”

In many ways, dressing to look slender was less an act of self-deception (for style guides trained their readers to be highly attuned to their own shortcomings) than it was an outward-facing public performance—one enacted within spaces in which the public gaze demanded conformity and anonymity. Fashion scholars have long discussed the modern city as a wellspring of sartorial anxiety, for it is on bustling urban streets and within department stores that the ominous normativizing gaze is personified and the success of an individual’s self-fashioning—straddling the desire to put the self on display and to blend in with the anonymous masses—are put to the test. Indeed, as Buckley and Clark remind us, the city street is a stage upon which an individual can negotiate the tensions that exist between fashion and dress, the individual and the collective and the ordinary and the everyday. As discussed previously, the genre of advice literature at large was therefore, at least in part, a product of the anxieties provoked by modernity and urbanization. Due to the performative nature of dressing to look slender, the dialectic between public and private figured centrally in the advice proffered by style writers who discussed the home as a space in which the stout woman could indulge in the frivolities of fashion without consequence. Stout women were therefore advised to derive joy from color and ornamentation in dress only in the privacy of their own homes and in the company of sympathetic friends. For instance, as Winterburn said of “the plump little woman,”

It may be that she will choose black and white or dark blue for her outdoor costumes, and use considerable art to give them all the slenderness consistent with comfort. But in the house she may queen it without fear, for her friends, especially her men friends, will delight in her piquant style. The little plump woman is completely herself in a dainty

172 Rittenhouse, Well-Dressed Woman, 95.
173 Among them, Elizabeth Wilson—drawing upon Baudelaire, Benjamin and Proust perhaps best distilled how the modern city fostered a dissonance between the individual drive of self-expression and the collective desire to fit in when she described how the city bred anonymity based on the fear that “anyone might see you” that was tempered by the need to “let the world know what sort of person you were.” See Adorned in Dreams, 137. Entwistle, drawing upon Simmel and Sennett, has also written about the relationship between identity construction, modernity, authenticity, artifice and the city. See Entwistle, Fashioned Body, 112-125. For a more recent discussion, see also Buckley and Clark, Fashion and Everyday Life, 27-51.
174 See Buckley and Clark, Fashion and Everyday Life, 7-14.
In the above passage, Winterburn tacitly underscores what many stout women already knew: that while friends and family could look past a woman's stoutness to appreciate her other physical and social attributes, the societal gaze was almost singularly preoccupied with surface appearances and first impressions.

Invoking the stereotype of the stout woman's unrestrained love for color and pattern, Wells, however, offered even more restrictive guidance in trying to curb the stout woman's appetite for excess, writing how the best advice “for those of us who like ruffles, frills and bright colors is to put them on our night clothes where no one but our very own selves can see.” Continuing, the home economist explained that, in spite of stout women's seemingly universal love of color, it should be omitted from their wardrobes altogether:

Because we love red, orange or King's blue is no sign we must wear it on our backs for all to see. Buy a little piece of fabric with just the colors you revel in; put it in the dresser drawer, or let it ornament a chair back, look at it every day, and thus satisfy your longing for color. Then wear those very simple things you know will be becoming.

Here, Wells suggests that because the stout woman cannot apply color discerningly, it is perhaps best to relegate it to furnishings or, more dramatically, to secret fabric swatches, which were only to be enjoyed in private.

To an extent, advice such as this merely served to underscore *Vogue's* contention that the stout woman was little more than a “soft solace in a world of sharp curves,” or a figure better suited to the forgiving spaces of the domestic sphere than to bustling urban streets. This sentiment was echoed by Florence Hull Winterburn who suggested in *Principles of Correct Dress* that the stout woman’s “mission is to cheer and delight a weary world by her brilliant toilettes, conventional on the street, but gay and expansive in the house.” Her body not fit for the spaces and places of the modern world, much of the advice for dressing to look slender therefore encouraged the stout woman to fight her “natural” inclination to color and ornamentation in dress when in public in favor of a neutral uniform that averted the critical gaze. As will become clear in the following section, however, the stout woman was permitted, albeit to a limited extent, a degree of leeway when it came to how she styled her hair, wore her makeup and accessorized—a practice I define as “dressing from the neck up.”

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176 Wells, *Dress and Look Slender*, 12.
177 “The Human Female Figure,” 76
Protection inevitably always triumphed over personal style within advice discourses as the end goal of dressing to look slender ultimately, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, had less to do with making the stout body appear more slender than with having it disappear altogether. In creating an inconspicuous appearance, however, it was not enough for the body to simply be shrouded in a slenderizing color palette; rather, in order for the overall illusion of slenderness to be perceived as successful to onlookers, the stout woman's bodily comportment—much like her clothing—had to be distilled and refined to only its most essential movements. Thus, in addition to understanding the basic principles of garment construction, color theory and optical illusion, the stout woman also needed to possess not only an intimate knowledge of her own body and its flaws, but also of her body's relationship to dress and of her bodily habitus, or of her way of being in the world.

Through these advice discourses, the intimate relationship between dress, the body, the self and culture is revealed; however, so too are latent stigmas about the fat, female body as unhygienic, unladylike and unrefined. Indeed, these discourses went hand-in-hand: advice about bathing or table manners commonly appeared alongside instructions for how to create the appearance of height in dress through a thoughtful application of vertical lines, for example. This point is well illustrated by an early piece of advice literature for the stout woman, which ran in the *New York Times* in 1910. While the piece begins with basic style directives such as, “She must discriminate in styles,” it lingers, somewhat curiously, on the stout woman’s carriage and manners (or perceived lack thereof):

She must watch her manners, particularly her table manners. She may not take liberties with her elbows, lop over the table, or eat carelessly. Daintiness is essential if she would not be repulsive....

She must learn to take life quietly. Excitement, rushing, and temper are conducive to apoplexy and do not improve looks. The red-faced stout woman, looking ready for apoplexy, is not a pleasing vision.

She must be dignified. It moves the onlooker to tears to see the stout full of airs, graces, and kittenish coyness. Her dignity should not interfere with jollity; the hearty laugh is a hallmark of avoirdupois.

She must learn to toy with food. Fasting is not healthful, banting is a trial to the soul, but greediness in the stout is as unpleasant as it is fleshmaking [sic].179

While some of the above advice clearly parallels that published within fashion magazines and fashion advice literature—such as the notion that stout women must avoid “kittenish” or overly youthful manners of dressing and so too should she refrain from acting overly “coy”—other advice is both far more basic and far more patronizing. The *Times* insistence that the stout woman must not “lop over the table, or eat carelessly,” for example, is less a behavioral modification than a sly and somewhat insidious commentary on the stout woman’s perceived intelligence, her lack of refinement and her knowledge of basic hygiene. In the above, explicit

advice is countered by more disparaging remarks, such as, “She must learn to take life quietly,” which is countered by the sentiment, “The red-faced stout woman, looking ready for apoplexy, is not a pleasing vision.”

The tone of such advice discourses echoed the increasing awareness and general disdain of stout women in American society in the early twentieth century, but which grew increasingly more pervasive in the 1920s as their corporeal deviations from the slender norm grew all the more obvious. Stearns notes how, with the surge of the commercial diet industry in the teens and twenties, marketing appeals were often accompanied “with a moral mockery of the women for whom they were intended,” which inevitably bled into dieting, weight loss and slenderizing discourses at large. With their body fat rendered as an outward symbol of their laziness, lack of self-discipline and general stupidity, stout women grew inured to literature that, at once, reified the very same critical gaze against which it claimed to protect them. Even within sources that were more outwardly sympathetic than the Times column above—such as Jane Warren Wells’ *Dress and Look Slender*, which in many ways was a first-person account of Wells’ own struggle with stoutness—there was an undercurrent of fat stigma that was woven into the discourses of even the most well-intentioned advice. For instance, in a chapter dedicated to all the “little things that make the big differences,” Wells offered advice for how the stout woman should walk, stand and hold her arms. Among them, walking with a light step was foregrounded as the most important so that “people will forget to guess your weight” and so that “you won’t appear to weigh a thousand pounds.” Advice for how to comport the body was also featured within the aforementioned Times column, which explained how the “stout woman must not slump” and must likewise “train herself to light walking,” for nothing the article claimed “shows her weight like dragging her feet and clumping heavily.” While the Times advice stands as a more obvious manifestation of the general social contempt of stout women in the 1920s, the fact that both current and former stout women like Wells engaged these discourses reflects what Stearns has described as an embodied form of “self-hatred”—one which was nurtured by the fact that body fat had come to be almost universally regarded as a “badge of irretrievable personal shame.”

However, these discourses also reflect the fact that dress is a “situated bodily practice”—or a practice both formed and informed by an individual’s environment and social circumstances. Drawing upon Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, Entwistle explains how while “the fashion system provides the ‘raw material’ of our choices,” these choices are always defined “within the context of the lived experience of the woman, her class, race, age [and] occupation.” To this list, however, we might also add her physical size. To view dress practices through the theoretical lens of habitus is to arrive closer to understanding the structural influences of social norms and expectations on dress practices. While it is impossible to know the outcomes of the dress practices of the stout woman through texts alone, the inclusion of discussions of hygiene, bodily

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180 Stearns, *Fat History*, 83.
183 Stearns, *Fat History*, 84.

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comportment and grooming within fashion advice discourses provides a more well-rounded picture of the world the stout woman inhabited, as well as of the social stigmas she had to mitigate and the obstacles she had to traverse in choosing “appropriate” dress. It may therefore be argued that these advice discourses generate or at the very least, illuminate, the bodily habitus of the stout woman. Said differently, a slenderizing black dress was culturally meaningless until it was invoked in the public performance of dressing to look slender—a performance that encompassed both dress and the body, and which could only be successful if there was harmonious relationship between the two.

To this end, in Wells’ text both dress and various “self-care” regimens went hand-in-hand in the performance of dressing to look slender. In a chapter titled “Neatness and Cleanliness are Essential,” Wells describes how she grappled with whether or not to include a chapter on hygiene, for it might “put an ugly frame on an otherwise beautiful picture.” In spite of her initial reticence, however, she decided to address the matter of personal cleanliness and grooming, writing,

We may not have beautiful clothes, and may grieve that we are not willowy enough to wear the smart extremes in dress, but our grieving is totally unnecessary. We can learn truly to be as attractive, as admirable as our slender sisters if we set out with the will and determination to express perfection so far as our ability and intelligence will allow: A fresh bath, some clean talcum, clean, well-fitting underthings, neat, good-looking shoes and modest stockings can give an enhancing foundation for the dress we have so carefully planned. And when we are spic and span from the inside out we are sure to dress with more dignity, more poise, than we possibly could otherwise.

Here, Wells seems to take stereotypes against fat women as lazy, slovenly and unhygienic head on, arguing that self-care can actually elevate the stout woman’s morale and therefore her appearance from “the inside out.” When viewed through the lens of habitus, we get some sense of the agency of the stout woman who could choose (or not) to follow Wells’ directives in order to mitigate fat stigma.

At the same time, however, in their endeavor to teach stout women how to “live” in their stigmatized bodies by responding and adapting to social pressures, it may be argued that fashion advice writers like Wells in many ways more deeply entrenched or normalized prejudices against stout women. Indeed, it seems that it was not enough that the stout woman was burdened with the expectation of looking slender; they also had to appear overtly clean, not make a sound and not omit any displeasing scents in an outward performance of personal hygiene. Indeed, perhaps the only thing worse than looking fat was making a carnal display of the physicality of the fat body through the more primitive senses of smell or hearing. Fat women could be seen (if only in the abstract) but they could not be heard. To this end, just as dark and drab colors were held in

185 Wells, Dress and Look Slender, 49.
186 As Entwistle writes, habitus enables the researcher to “talk about dress as a personal attempt to orientate ourselves to particular circumstances and thus recognizes the structuring influences of the social world on the one hand, and the agency of individuals who make choices as to what to wear on the other.” See Entwistle, Fashioned Body, 37.
With the fleshy contours of the stout body sufficiently obscured to the point of annihilation through dress and comportment, however, advice writers could turn their attention to the practice of “dressing from the neck up.” Encompassing both beauty practices and accessorizing, the practice of dressing from the neck up assumed that once the body was sufficiently deodorized, quieted and camouflaged, stout women could focus on emphasizing their more desirable features and, to a lesser extent, enjoying a more frivolous approach to fashion. A number of advice writers acknowledged that while body fat was a sizable burden, many stout women—due to their plentiful diets and leisurely lifestyles—were regarded as possessing pleasant complexions and healthy hair. When properly attended to, advice writers believed that these positive attributes could be highlighted in order to further distract from their bodies. In *The Magic of Dress*, for example, Gould explained how “the very fat woman often has fine hair and features. She often has beautiful skin and hands and feet. Dress may so enhance these attractions so that all the rest, yes, all the rest, is overlooked.” Buttrick similarly emphasized the importance of the stout woman’s features from the “neck up,” writing,

> She should always…concentrate attention on the head and face, so as to keep the body inconspicuous.

> …In general, all the decorative features of the costume should be concentrated around the neck and down the front of the garment, to keep the face and head the center of interest for the whole body.

Much like Buttrick, Cary also accentuated beauty practices and accessorizing as an effective way to distract from the body explaining how, by framing her face with complementary colors and well-proportioned accessories, the stout woman’s “lovable qualities will show to advantage, and she will be able to forget her trials and tribulations of figure.” To this end, the stout woman’s

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187 I encountered the phrase “dressing from the neck up” frequently during my field research for my Master’s thesis, and was one that was invoked with great frequency by one of my older informants, Glinda. This phrase alludes to the fact that, with the dearth of fashionable options provided to plus-size women by retailers and manufacturers, they have little choice but to focus on their hair, makeup and accessories in order to craft a fashionable appearance. While it is somewhat anachronistic to apply this phrase to early twentieth century dress practices, it is nevertheless apt due to the manner in which it so appropriately encompasses the range of advice that focused specifically upon facial beauty and hygiene. For more on dressing from the neck up, see Peters, “You Are What You Wear.”


neutral manner of dressing functioned as a framing device for a more overt expression of beauty and femininity from the neck up. Much like the science of color theory discussed in chapter four, dressing from the neck up was but another trick that the stout woman kept up her generously-cut sleeve in drawing attention away from her body.

In fact, it could be said that the head and neck were the final if only preserve of beauty for the stout woman. Specifically, however, the hair was foregrounded as being of particular importance by many writers. Wells, for instance, claimed that “most big people have nice hair, and they should keep it,” and therefore urged her reader to “do everything you can...to retain every possible attraction, and your hair is one of them for it suggests womanliness.” The fashionable but androgynous cropped and bobbed haircuts of the era were regarded as not only unbefitting on the stout woman, but as a veritable assault on her femininity. While cropped haircuts on women were an emotional flashpoint within American culture at large in the 1920s, the bob took on a new urgency on the head of the stout woman. While bobbed hair was first and foremost a symbol of the erosion of prewar gender roles, in a more complicated sense, it was a rejection of femininity altogether. Indeed, as Roberts writes, the short hair of the femme moderne or the flapper was a “rejection of the well-defined female form [that] symbolized her lack of cultural intelligibility.” More than just rejecting femininity, the modern woman’s streamlined body, crowned by a neat helmet of hair, obfuscated gender difference altogether.

Much like the flapper, the stout woman’s body lacked the classic corporeal hallmarks of normative femininity; unlike the svelte flapper, however, her largeness was neither a suitable nor fashionable expression of femininity. Thus, for the stout woman—whose femininity already stood on shaky ground—a cropped haircut was deemed an insufficient and abstract counter to a body that not only stood at the margins of femininity, but which was, to borrow the words of Adam, “beyond or outside of that boundary” altogether. Beyond the fact that cropped hair did little to assert the stout woman’s femininity, these haircuts, while ubiquitous, were further deemed inappropriate due to the fact that they were disproportionate to the stout woman’s overall size and were overtly youthful. Indeed, as Rittenhouse explained, the stout woman’s hair should be neither “careless” nor “juvenile.” Rather, she explained how the hair “demands excessive neatness which, after all, is the important struggle every stout woman must make through life.” In choosing a hairstyle, stout women were therefore encouraged to eschew the severity of the bob in favor of a softer hair style that would harmonize with her exaggerated features.

As with her other practices of self-fashioning, the stout woman’s beauty regimen from the neck up was ultimately an exercise in self-restraint. Even with her body sufficiently camouflaged through dress, her hair in order and her body rendered sufficiently odorless, weightless and silent, the stout woman was still advised to curb her taste for ornamentation and

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195 Ibid., 103.
excess when choosing accessories. Although hats, shoes, handbags and jewelry were auxiliary to the stout woman's overall "look," they still had to be chosen with the utmost care—the most important factor in this process being that they were in proportion with her considerable size. Even when it came to jewels, Wells advised her readers that "...if it doesn't express slenderness—if it's a big cameo or a heavy pair of earrings...—put it away and forget where you put it." Indeed, a well-chosen accessory could be the proverbial "icing on the cake," either distracting from a bodily flaw or highlighting a particularly handsome feature; on the other hand, however, an ill-chosen bracelet could draw attention to a chubby wrist, or a too-tight shoe could make a flabby foot appear even larger (Fig. 107). It was believed that the most minor infraction could ruin the entire illusion of slenderness. As Rittenhouse explained at length in The Well-Dressed Woman,

A lock of hair out of place, a shoulder strap slipping above the décolletage of the bodice, an unbrushed finch, a hook and eye that shows, a collar rumpled, a belt creased, a bad joining of two garments at the waist line, a white corset cover revealed beneath a dark, transparent bodice, these are sad mistakes for the fat flax woman. She might well try to imagine herself under military inspection to compel her to give strict attention to each detail of her costume; or she might think of herself as a square-rigged ship about which every line must be tast and trim. The moment she becomes careless, she looks unseaworthy.

Elsewhere, Rittenhouse further drives this point home by explaining how the stout woman must be "as well-groomed, as securely fastened as a fine horse on parade." Even though advice writers conceded that stout women possessed some degree of beauty from the neck up, it was hardly a space for experimentation and free play. Rather, it was part-in-parcel of the stout woman's complete look, or perhaps the foremost manifestation of the great amount of time,

106 Wells, Dress and Look Slender, 46.
107 Ibid., 97.
108 Ibid., 159.
energy and knowledge she put into monitoring her bodily habitus within a world that was not built for her. Indeed, as Rittenhouse explained, “The lesson of concealing flesh is difficult, but a combination of flesh, bone and muscle…needs concentration and knowledge if one is to dress well.”

7.4 Conclusions

The practices and discourses of self-fashioning the stout body discussed in this chapter stand as a testament to Foucault’s assertion that the notion of technologies of the self may help us to move beyond the purely negative power dialectic that exists between individual bodies and institutions of power by creating a space in which we can consider how a human being turns him- or herself into a subject. Although the stout body was always self-fashioned in response to or in dialogue with the early twentieth century’s prevailing and normativizing standards of beauty, when framed as Foucauldian technologies of the self, it becomes possible to account for the role of individual agency in this process. Indeed, by looking at the advice given to stout women, this chapter explored the channels through which fashion’s discourses were ultimately embodied by the individual in the construction and management of the stout body—the logical end point of a dissertation that has been preoccupied with the question of how discourses are constructed, disseminated, materialized and, finally, translated onto the body.

A central precept of this chapter was the matter of “dressing to look slender”—a strategy perhaps most vociferously advocated by Jane Warren Wells in Dress and Look Slender. Dialoguing with ideas put forth in previous chapters, this chapter therefore revealed how slenderness, as much as stoutness, was a social construct, but also how self-fashioning discourses naturalized the slenderizing discourses of stoutwear design. Indeed, as revealed in the advice put forth in style guides, it was taken for granted that stout women should aspire toward slenderness—whether that be through physical or mechanical weight loss practices or through the more modern practice of dressing to look slender. To this end, it could be argued that the experience of stout embodiment was very much defined by a woman’s very attempts to negate it.

If the dress discourses of style guides are any indication, however, the practice of dressing to look slender was both ambivalent and tenuous, with even a misplaced hair possessing the ability to ruin the “illusion” of slenderness so carefully constructed through thoughtful dress practices and the inventive application of camouflaging colors, lines and patterns. Indeed, although dress within advice discourses is imbued with a remarkable degree of power in its ability to transform the body, as Wilson reminds us, dress only disguises “the recalcitrant body we can never entirely transform.” Indeed, just as the performance of drag calls attention to the

199 Ibid., 143.
constructedness of gender binaries, or modernist painting calls attention to the very act of painting itself; dressing to look slender may have had the opposite intended effect in emphasizing the stout woman’s inability to conform to the slender ideal.

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203 In his seminal essay, “Modernist Painting,” Clement Greenberg argued that the essential feature of modernist painting is its flatness. Thus, rather than aspiring toward realism and the creation of three-dimensional space within the pictorial pane (or “art that concealed art”), modern painting, he argues, “declared the surfaces on which they were painted.” In this way, modernist painting called attention to the very act of painting itself. See Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 5-10.
“Stout” has outlived its usefulness as a designation of a type of dress. …

There is a certain odium attached to the “stout” designation, that exists among merchandise managers, among buyers, among salesladies and among the consumer. All think back to a time when a “stylish stout” was anything but “stylish.” …

Perhaps one of the best recommendations that could be made in this connection is to abandon the term “stout” entirely.

(M.F. Reuben, *Women’s Wear*, January 7, 1929)

In 1929—only fourteen years after it foreshadowed that stoutwear was primed to become one of the most lucrative sectors of the ready-to-wear trade in the United States—*Women’s Wear* similarly, but unceremoniously, announced its demise. Quoting M.F. Reuben, vice president of the New York-based Ru-Mark dress company, the trade journal remarked that the term stout had entirely “outlived its usefulness.” While he conceded elsewhere in the article that “of course, stout dresses have been developed more and more [and] the styling has improved greatly,” customers had seemingly cooled to the novelty of being able to “get garments that would fit properly in the larger sizes [without caring] particularly whether the styling was conspicuously good or not.”

More than that, however, he chalked up the slowing of the trade to the lingering stigma that surrounded stylish stouts that, in actuality, were “anything but ‘stylish.’” Along with a collective of other stoutwear manufacturers—which included familiar names mentioned throughout this dissertation, like Wm. Hendricks, Inc., Graceline Stout Dress, Co. and I. Heller & Co.—Reuben therefore sought to enact the “abolishment of a classification that seems to have lost its usefulness, and to attempt to get a reasonable share of the regular size women’s dress business.”

A 1930 article also published in *Women’s Wear* announced the industry’s final death knell. Quoting William Hendricks, a veteran stoutwear manufacturer, the trade journal “reached the conclusion that there are no stout women.” According to Hendricks, this was due to the growing popularity of “Hollywood diets,” new fads in exercise amongst American women and, perhaps most importantly, the new, increasingly body conscious fashions that were believed to have “condemned curves” once and for all.

These claims, however, would prove to be somewhat overstated. Indeed, a number of stoutwear manufacturers continued to produce stoutwear well into the 1930s and beyond, albeit under a different name. Not least of these was Lane Bryant, which pivoted to manufacture and sell so-called “junior plenty” and “chubby” garments to teens and young women in the 1940s.

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2 Ibid.
3 “‘Stout’ said to Have Oultived Its Usefulness,” *Women’s Wear* (January 10, 1929), 9.
5 Ibid.
and 50s, and, beginning in the 1980s, plus-size garments. Today, the company holds the largest share of the plus-size market in the United States. What the above articles did get right, however, was the fact that the fashion landscape in the United States had undergone a dramatic evolution between the 1920s and 30s, as too had the culture of beauty, weight loss and dieting.

No longer could women expect to hide their excess flesh within the folds of the revealing, albeit generously-cut tubular dresses that were popular in the 1920s, which at one point had, quite literally, brought her back into the folds of fashion. Moreover, and with the effects of the Great Depression disrupting every facet of American life, Milbank notes that clothes in the 1930s “reflected leaner times,” both literally and figuratively: “For the first part of the 1930s figures were almost emaciated [and therefore] clothes were narrow, long, and spare,” or “simple to the extreme.”

Within this context, and specifically with regard to fashion, fatness had gone from being a burden that could be variously hidden or re-shaped through dress, to being utterly intolerable as the rift between fat and thin grew ever wider. As the science of “obesity” was growing progressively sophisticated and as more drugs and cures emerged to combat fat, overweight people found themselves increasingly scrutinized, scorned and stigmatized in the 1930s and beyond. In a sense, fat had become a signifier of one’s lack of control, but more importantly, a symbol of one’s lack of patriotism, or what Vigarello describes as a manifestation of her “dereliction of duty…at a time when working on oneself and adaptability [became] obligatory criteria of value.” Although she did not disappear—for every era has its fat woman even though what constitutes fat is both volatile and historically relative—the stout woman found herself in eclipse, relegated to the margins of fashionability and subject to a new host of euphemisms and platitudes for labeling and making sense of her errant curves and deviant bulges.

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6 See, for instance, “Chubby Fashions on Slender Lines at Lane Bryant,” *Women’s Wear* (August 27, 1953), 3; “Chubbies Have their Own Fashion World,” *Women’s Wear* (July 10, 1957), 77; “Lane Bryant Sells Fall Style Shows,” *Women’s Wear* (August 6, 1958), 9. One article, however, reported on the contentiousness of the term “chubby,” explaining how “sales clerks have been instructed to soft-pedal the word chubby whenever possible to spare the feelings of the young girls who are often sensitive about their rounded figures.” See “Chubby Customers Encouraged to Shop at Lane Bryant for Specially Styled Underwear,” *Women’s Wear* (June 4, 1947), 17. For further discussion about the term plus-size and its emergence in the 1980s, see Peters, “Fashion Plus: Pose and the Plus-Size Body in *Vogue*, 1986-1998.”


8 The most notable change was perhaps the rise of the American designer in the 1930s. See Arnold, *The American Look*, 13-30; Milbank, *New York Fashion*, 100.

9 See, for example, Rebecca Arnold, *The American Look*, 39-74.


11 For a discussion of the drugs that emerged in the 1930s to combat “obesity,” see Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 191-235. Also notable during this period was the fact that “obesity” for the first time had come to be linked with other causes of mortality and other health conditions, namely heart conditions. See Seagrave, *Obesity in America*, 132-138.

12 Vigarello, *Metamorphoses of Fat*, 175.
In terms of the discourse of large-size garments, the “rules of formation,” to borrow Foucault’s phrasing, had changed in the late-1920s, and as a result, the stoutwear business as it had been known would slowly cease to exist. Under the leadership of M.F. Reuben, some of the most prominent of the remaining stoutwear manufactures would, in 1929, reorganize their businesses to focus on the standard-size trade, while Women’s Wear would concurrently discontinue its “Styles for Larger Women” insert—the consequences of which were discussed in chapter three. With no industry leaders championing the trade and as women increasingly declined to label themselves or identify as such, the term stout and all its permutations would fall almost entirely out of use from 1930 onwards. This would be to the detriment of the stout woman who, in this new era, would effectively cease to exist as both an object and subject of fashion as mentions of her would suddenly and surreptitiously drop off within fashion media discourses. Large-size garments would not figure centrally within the American fashion landscape again until the 1980s when high fashion designers, both in Europe and the United States, turned their attention to the newly-discovered and underserved “large-size” market, which would later come to be known as “plus-size fashions.”

8.1 The Slenderness Imperative: Then and Now

Although stoutwear was a relatively short lived phase in the longer history of the large-size garment industry in the United States, the legacies of stoutwear nevertheless colored the practices and processes of large-size women’s garment design, manufacturing, advertising and retailing long into the twentieth century and beyond. For instance, the early twenty-first century debates about whether or not to abolish the term plus-size and the controversies swirling around the segregation of large-sizes in separate departments have clear origins in the early twentieth century, and specifically in the exhaustive debates that were had in the pages of the professional media about terminology and the potential benefits of having separate stoutwear departments. However, perhaps the greatest and most enduring legacy of stoutwear may be located in how it ushered in a new era of large-size garment design and manufacturing rooted in

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13 This occurred within a climate in which fat women were coming under increased scrutiny. As has been discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, Stearns has notably deemed the middle part of the century, spanning the 1920s-1960s, as the “misogynist phase” in the history of fat. See Stearns, Fat History, 71-97. For further discussion about the plus-size boom in the 1980s and 1990s, see Peters, “Fashion Plus.” For primary reportage on this movement, see, for example, “Large-size Boom Generates Ego Consultants,” Women’s Wear Daily (January 7, 1984); “Large-size Departments Told to Increase Their Range,” Women’s Wear Daily (November 16, 1984); “Large-Size Dresses Heat Up,” Women’s Wear Daily (March 13, 1984), 29; “Large Sizes Growth Prompts NRMA Seminar,” Women’s Wear Daily (October 9, 1984), 30; “Stores Find Large-size Dress Pickings Slim,” Women’s Wear (March 16, 1982), 10.


15 This issue was perhaps most prominently raised by the actress-turned-fashion designer, Melissa McCarthy. See “Melissa McCarthy Says Labeling Clothing as Plus-Size Tells Some Women They’re Not Worthy,” TIME, August 17, 2015, http://time.com/4000679/melissa-mccarthy-clothing-line-plus-size/.
mass manufacturing and, perhaps more importantly, undergirded by the principles and conventions of standardization.

Indeed, although the idea for a stoutwear industry separate from mainstream ready-to-wear initially emerged from the observation that the prevailing conventions for sizing and grading garments in the early twentieth century were insufficient for achieving precise fits amongst women whose bodies fell outside of the narrow spectrum of standard sizes, the stoutwear industry very much implemented its own set of standards in order to resolve the persistent problem of fit—standards which, as the quote with which I opened this chapter evidences, inevitably proved insufficient. Even as Albert Malsin's tripartite sizing system took into account stout bodies of different proportions, and while the Associated Stylish Stout Wear Makers' Sveltline System attempted to circumvent the matter of fit altogether by basing all of their designs on the same uniform foundation, each nevertheless tapped into the rationalizing impulses of scientific management in the vein of trying to reduce waste and improve the efficiency of large-size garment manufacturing. However, with its unpredictable curves and bulges that stood in contraposition to the streamlined aesthetics of the machine age, the stout body revealed itself as a pressure point within this system. Thus, rather than designing for the individual stout body and all of its flaws, stoutwear manufacturers designed with a stout ideal in mind, or for a body that visibly strove toward the era's increasingly youthful silhouette. Indeed, it is not an overstatement to suggest that the stoutwear industry was built on the bedrocks of modern fat stigma. Whether by physical means, such as physically reshaping the stout body with undergarments, through the application of optical illusions to the surfaces of dress that made the body merely appear smaller or by simply rendering the stout woman's garments plainer in style and ornamentation than those designed for her slender counterpart, these methods revealed a deeply-entrenched bias or slenderness imperative within stoutwear discourse that not only impacted the construction of garments for larger women, but which pervaded the realm of design and aesthetics, too. Indeed, by the late-1920s stoutwear had gained a reputation for being drab, conservative and unfashionable—a reputation the industry would struggle to overcome as the tubular silhouette gave way to the slinky bias cut in the 1930s.

Although fatness increasingly became a marginal and unacceptable mode of female embodiment due in large part to shifting attitudes about diet and exercise in American culture during this period, a central finding of this dissertation is the idea that stoutwear discourses furthered the notion that there was a correct way to be stout. Indeed, the stout body as it appeared within and was discussed across the fashion media between the years 1915-1930, was streamlined and contained. It was a big body—at least when compared to the sylph-like bodies that appeared elsewhere in the fashion media at this moment—but it was one that was exceptionally clean, quiet and had no flesh out of place, and one which, in form if not in weight, approximated the prevailing silhouette. The industry's patent impulse to correct the flaws of the stout physique whether through design or through fashion illustration echoes Mary Douglas' notion—first introduced in chapter two and thereafter revisited in chapter seven—that that
bodily margins are “thought to be specially invested with power and danger.” According to Douglas, in Western thought, bodies that are leaky, malformed or otherwise non-normative (e.g. the pregnant body, the sick body or the fat body) are powerful symbols of disorder and uncleanness. Speaking specifically to the manner that fat is regarded in the West, Richard Klein has written that it is a “kind of cancerous growth…inessential to the body or its image…. Fat is something that we wear; it is on the outside of our inside.” Within this context, the natural response to such disorderly bodies has been to impart order.

Systematizing body shapes as through the conventions of sizing is one means of doing so. Indeed, standardized sizing is an exemplary Foucauldian technology of the body for the manner it assigns a statistically-derived number to every human form, but also for the manner in which it creates categories of standard and deviant bodies. However, as this dissertation has proven—especially in chapter four—dress conventions more generally should also be regarded as technologies of the body for the manner in which they make the fleshy, “pre-cultural” body fit for the social world. Indeed, as a number of fashion scholars and theorists have argued, clothing effectively completes the body within societies that demand that bodies be properly dressed. In Adorned in Dreams, Wilson remarked that “if the body with its open orifices is itself dangerously ambiguous, then dress…not only links that body to the social world, but also more clearly separates the two.” Similarly, Entwistle has written that dress is “more than a shell.” As a materialization of cultural values, dress “imposes itself on the body and constrains it to act in particular ways.” This dissertation affirms these ideas by demonstrating how stoutwear “constrained” the stout body, to use Entwistle’s phrasing, while also casting light on the specific processes through which the fat, female body was made decent and acceptable through the medium of stoutwear.

The slenderness imperative of stoutwear design discourse may therefore be understood as a disciplinary mechanism—one which served the dual function of both containing and controlling the stout body in a society that increasingly mandated that the female body not only be slender, but visibly evidence the time, resources and energy that went into its care and maintenance. As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, the slenderness imperative touched every facet of the industry, from the design of stoutwear (as discussed in chapter four), to the manner in which stout bodies were represented within the fashion media (as discussed in chapters five and six), to the norms that dictated stout women’s self-fashioning practices, and which circulated within advice literature (as discussed in chapter seven). As this dissertation has proven, however, in shaping fashion practices, the discourse of stoutwear also gave shape to the stout body itself. Indeed, and within this context, the stout body evidences how the flesh is

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17 Douglas, Purity and Danger, 142.
20 Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 3.
21 Entwistle, Fashioned Body, 10.
22 Ibid., 15.
effectively fashioned through discourse, but perhaps more importantly, how discourse materializes within and through the design, manufacture and dissemination of dress.

Today, however, the slenderness imperative manifests in more subtle and perhaps more insidious ways. With the rise of “body positivity” over the last two decades—a grassroots movement that was largely born within feminist blogging communities in the late twentieth century, but which has since been co-opted by fashion and beauty conglomerates from Dove soap to Lane Bryant—retailers are increasingly reluctant to explicitly market their wares as “beautifying” or “slenderizing.” Rather, these terms have been replaced with the neoliberal discourses of “self-care.” While a nascent rhetoric of self-care can clearly be glimpsed in the self-fashioning advice discourses that were the focus of chapter seven, unlike the early twentieth century, in the twenty-first century women are no longer urged to pursue an illusory, normatizing and singular feminine ideal through their dress practices; rather, they are told to cultivate the best possible iterations of themselves. Within fat acceptance communities specifically, self-care is frequently and increasingly coupled with the notion of “radical self-love,” or the idea that women should not only embrace, but also flaunt their fleshy tummies and expose their cellulite by wearing tight, colorful and revealing garments—a movement that has been coupled with the reclamation of the term “fat” as an empowering descriptor.

In the marketing of plus-size fashion, but also within popular plus-size fashion and style guides since the 1990s, this notion has manifested in and through the diffuse and sanitized construct of “figure flattery,” or the idea that clothing should complement, rather than compete with, the wearer’s unique figure. A recent and striking illustration of this discourse may be glimpsed in the marketing of Lane Bryant’s so-called “Power Pockets” denim line, which launched in early-2018 (Fig. 108). Designed as an alternative to wearing uncomfortable and constraining foundation garments like Spanx, the jeans feature a hidden interior panel of tightly woven nylon mesh that spans the area from waistband to the crotch and which is said to “keep everything under wraps without feeling like you’re in a vice.” While critiquing the convention of constricting the flesh into a feminine hourglass shape through elasticized body shapers and compression tights—undergarments that are here obliquely likened with wearing a vice—with their Power Pockets denim, Lane Bryant nevertheless upholds the idea that slenderizing is a perfunctory, almost taken for granted, aspect of dressing as a woman of size. In the early twentieth century, this idea materialized in and through scientifically-designed stoutwear upon which principles of optical illusion and architectural practice were applied; in the twenty-first century, it is most famously espoused within the “fatshion” community. See Peters, “You Are What You Wear,” 51.

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23 Lury discusses the origins body positivity movement within the context of the rise of what has variously been described as “commodity feminism” and “feminist consumerism” in the early twenty-first century. For an overview of these debates, see Lury, Consumer Culture, 130-131.


25 This idea was most famously espoused within the “fatshion” community. See Peters, “You Are What You Wear,” 51.
century, however, the technology of slenderizing is quite literally sewn into the fabric of the fat woman’s clothing.

Indeed, while figure flattery is here couched in the empowering discourse that every woman can look good in the skin she’s in, so to speak, it nevertheless upholds the hegemony of white, Western beauty ideals—or at least the vague notion that all women should aspire to feel beautiful—and perpetuates the idea that the body is an object of compulsory self-surveillance and tireless body maintenance. More than that, however, it furthers the notion that there are both “good” and “bad” ways to not merely dress as a fat woman, but to be fat. Although the standards for what constitutes the fat, feminine ideal have perhaps expanded over the last century in tandem with Americans’ waistlines, within the context of the contemporary “obesity epidemic” and the concurrent trends in diet and health, plus-size fashion, not unlike stoutwear, continues to promote a controlled, contained and sanitized vision of fat, female embodiment—a topic that merits further investigation and which will be considered in greater depth below.

8.2 Fashioning: From Discourse to Practice

By situating stout as a discursive construct—or, in Foucauldian parlance, that which “defines the possibilities of what can and cannot be said about a subject” in a given historical moment,26 and which “systematically forms” the object of which it speaks27—this dissertation has shown how fashion (as image, object, idea and industry) exists as a meaningful and productive site in which not only fashions for the fat woman are created, but in which the fat body is itself contested, constructed and, perhaps most importantly, known. Indeed, by locating this study within the field

26 Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, 103.
of fashion—and thereby building upon (but also departing from) extant cultural histories of fat and of the fat body, which only include cursory considerations of fashion, or, more problematically, diminish fashion as merely “a small part” of the cultural and discursive construction of fatness—this dissertation has exposed how the fat body is itself fashioned and through the discourses, practices and objects of dress. By adopting and applying such an approach, I have aligned myself with other scholars—and mainly those working within the field of fat studies—who reject the biological determinism of fatness and instead frame it as a product of culture. Different from these scholars, however, I envision the fat body as an inherently dressed body, and thereby argue that a cultural history of fatness must necessarily investigate the relationship between the fat body, dress and the larger fashion system.

While this dissertation stands as an interdisciplinary study that straddles cultural history, dress history, fat studies, media studies and sociology, among others, it explicitly seeks to contribute to the field of fashion studies, and specifically to a body of fashion studies scholarship that examines the intersections of fashion, dress and the body. In doing so, it answers Entwistle’s call for scholars to consider how fashion is “produced, promoted and worn by bodies.” Given the lack of surviving garments to study and the overall neglect and marginalization of large-size fashions within extant histories of fashion and of fat, this dissertation employs the fashion media as a fertile site in which to explore the processes and practices of fashion production, promotion and consumption. Indeed, as I showed in chapter two, fashion discourses do not merely determine what is fashionable; they actively form both the objects and the practices of which they speak. This line of thinking emerges from Foucault’s basic insight that nothing exists outside of or beyond discourse. More explicitly, however, it stands as a demonstration of Foucault’s argument that discourses are “immanent in a practice, and define it in its specificity.” As was outlined in the introduction, each chapter in this dissertation reveals how the discourses of stoutwear manifested or defined fashion practices, from the design of stoutwear, to its dissemination, to the point at which women got dressed.

By employing both the thinking and methods of Foucault in this way, this dissertation builds upon and advances the fashion studies literature that examines the relationship between fashion, dress and the body. It does so both through its explicit focus on discourse, and in its focus on fashion design and design practice. As an extension of this body of work, this dissertation therefore considers how discourse materialized within and through fashion practices such as stoutwear design. Indeed, the discourse of stoutwear design—which was undergirded by a naturalized, almost taken-for-granted imperative to slenderize the body in order to bring it more in line with the era’s increasingly youthful ideal, or what I defined above as its slenderness imperative—stands as an apt if not ideal site for considering how discourse actively forms the objects of which it speaks. Beyond the remit of the stout body, however, this dissertation also demonstrates how the fashionable silhouette within any given historical epoch is the product of

28 Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 19.
29 Entwistle, Fashioned Body, 1.
30 For further discussion of this precept, see section 2.4.2.
31 Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, 46.
cultivation and discipline. This notion has been pursued in other works, such as those that have examined the history of the silhouette and practice of corseting, yet few have looked so explicitly at the role that discourse plays in actively fashioning these practices, objects and ideals.

Indeed, in addition to examining how discourse materialized in stoutwear design, this dissertation also explores how discourse formed and informed other fashion practices—an exploration which was notably enabled by a close, parallel reading of professional media and mainstream fashion media. From the art of selling stoutwear (chapter five), to the construction and constitution of fat stigma within women’s and fashion magazines (chapter six), to the practice of self-fashioning as evidenced within style guides (chapter seven), this dissertation provides a comprehensive analysis into how the discourse of stoutwear touched every facet of the industry, or the production of fashion as image, object and idea.

At the same time, however, it implicitly acknowledges that fashion was not the sole site within which the discourse of stoutwear was produced. Rather, drawing upon Rocamora’s notion of fashion media discourse, it is framed and dealt with throughout the dissertation as “a space of knowledge with porous boundaries, a wide constituency of layered nodes and ideas, themes and concepts that cut across [texts] and fields.” It is for this reason that my analysis shifts, at times, from fashion media discourse into the wider field of social and cultural production, looking to a diverse range of ideas, objects, movements and phenomena, from actuarial science, to the carnival freak show, to fitness culture, to Gestalt psychology, which formed and informed the “rules of formation,” or the set of values and assumptions that provided the language for discussing, thinking about, visualizing and knowing the fat, female body in early twentieth century American fashion. By taking such a wide-ranging glance at the external forces that gave rise to the stoutwear industry, this dissertation also demonstrates how fashion is itself a microcosm of social and cultural values, which throughout this dissertation can most clearly be glimpsed in how fat stigma shaped the ideological foundation of the industry.

In its entirety, this dissertation therefore both contributes to fashion studies in general and to the history of American fashion and dress specifically. Methodologically, and with its focus on situating spaces of the stout woman’s erasure as the principal sites of investigation, it also presents a methodological model for researching and telling histories of other bodies that have been forgotten, neglected or marginalized by fashion. In many ways, this dissertation is therefore both a micro-history and a parallel or alternative history of early twentieth century American fashion. At the same time, however, this dissertation also finds resonance in the present.

As discussed above, the contemporary media discourses surrounding the profitability of plus-size fashion bear many resemblances to those about stoutwear a century earlier. In this sense, the relays between stoutwear and plus-size fashion evidence labyrinthine nature of fashion

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32 This idea has perhaps most notably been put forth by Ingun Grimstad Klepp; however, she does not examine how this process works from a historical perspective. See Klepp, “Slimming Lines,” 453.

33 See, for example, Steele, The Corset; Bruna, Fashioning the Body.

34 Rocamora, Fashioning the City, 56-57.
history wherein, as Evans has aptly written, the “traces of the past surface in the present like the return of the repressed.” Indeed, with the benefit of hindsight, many of the conversations and controversies surrounding plus-size fashion sound uncannily familiar if not modern, as if fashion has, over the past century, forgotten everything and learned nothing—while fat women continue to suffer, sartorially, from this seemingly incurable and perpetual amnesia.

8.3 Final Thoughts and Future Research

If there is one idea that this dissertation has set out to prove, it is the idea that discourse is not just text, or a set of intangible, floating concepts, but that it has real effects on real bodies in real time. In considering this point, I return to the historical images of stout women with which I opened this dissertation (Fig. 2).

Seeing women of size on bustling urban streets, posing with friends or walking on the beach as in these photos reminded me throughout my research that the discourse of stoutwear was not only relegated to the pages of fashion magazines and trade journals, but that it materialized in clothes that were bought and worn by real, fleshy bodies. Although in many instances stoutwear proved to be a rarefied site in which designers, artists and manufacturers could test the potentialities of dress to transform the figure, these images also presented a counter-narrative or counter-discourse in which stoutwear positively functioned as the raw material for the construction and constitution of stout women’s identities through the practice of self-fashioning. Indeed, although there was much discussion surrounding the stout woman’s problematic body and, by turn, her inability to fit into the architectures and rhythms of modern life within early twentieth century fashion media discourse and beyond, these women do not look egregiously out of place. Rather, in some of the images, the women even appear fashionable—a fact which reminds us that all of the rules for being well dressed as much as the construct of the ideal body were merely suggestions, as omnipresent and powerful as they might have been.

As fertile as these photographs were in providing a visual backdrop to my primary research, however, they were underutilized within my analysis. This was due to the fact that, given the limitations of time and space, I had to draw boundaries around which sources I would ultimately prioritize. Through this process, the textual nature of fashion media, professional media and style guides ultimately better served the archaeological method of discourse analysis I adopted. Nevertheless, these vernacular photographs of stout women present rich new pathways for future research—not least of which would be to take a deeper look into how large-size garments were consumed and worn by fat women in different historical epochs. Indeed, Buckley and Clark argue that photographs permit an “archaeological excavation” of dress in everyday life and the performance of the self in the public sphere. When supplemented with firsthand

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35 Evans, *Fashion at the Edge*, 9. Granata also proposes a cyclical “new history” of fashion that is non-teleological and which is largely mediated through film and other media. See Granata, “The Bakhtininian Grotesque,” 369.

accounts, such an “excavation” of surviving photographs of stout women could bolster the research presented in this dissertation by providing a counter-narrative of stoutwear through a focus on stout women’s self-fashioning practices.

Similarly, while I used surviving stoutwear catalogs anecdotally or illustratively within the dissertation—specifically in chapters four and six—a future study of stoutwear might look more closely at the relationship between the representation and marketing of stoutwear within the high fashion press (i.e. periodicals like *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*) versus the manner in which they are presented within more quotidian, or low- and middle-class spaces like mail order catalogs. Indeed, as I found through my own primary research, to hold and gingerly thumb through a fragile mail order catalog from a century ago is to be reminded of the fact that while discourses of stoutwear and stout bodies circulated within the rarefied spaces of the fashion media, mass-manufactured and inexpensive stoutwear—as fashion forward as it may have been—existed ancillary to or just outside of the formal fashion system. Such a study might therefore more closely interrogate the relationship between high fashion and everyday fashion, or, more specifically, the specificities of urban, suburban and rural fashion consumption in the United States.

A further avenue for future research may be an investigation of the consumption and dress practices of fat men in the early twentieth century. Although my focus was on women’s fashion, I nevertheless witnessed how men’s large-size fashion and women’s stoutwear were treated differently within the fashion media. Indeed, as was discussed briefly in chapter three, as early as the mid-nineteenth century, tailors and mail order retailers boasted about their ability to create well-fitting garments for men of any size, even as women of size continued to be marginalized and neglected. A future study could compare the media discourses of large-size men’s clothing versus those of stoutwear within the context of ready-to-wear and standardized sizing.

A last avenue for future research lies in investigating how these discourses manifest in the present. Indeed, although much has certainly changed in the fashion industry over the last century, the present discourses of self-care, radical self-love and figure flattery so present within the fashion media discourses of plus-size fashion have clear origins in the early twentieth century discourse of body maintenance. This dissertation, one of the first to investigate the early history of plus-size fashion, provides a much-needed historical footing for such an investigation; however, it also presents a model for understanding how the fat, female body is both embroiled and constructed within these discursive webs of power.

By adopting Foucault’s archaeological method, my focus throughout this dissertation has been on the sliver of time spanning 1915-1930, or a period which, on the one end, saw the term stout first fall into wide and accepted use and, on the other, saw it fall out of favor; however, a similar approach could equally well be applied to excavate other histories of the fat, female body, as, for instance, the “chubby” body of the 1950s, the “plus-size” body of the 1980s and 1990s or the newly-minted “curvy” body. Indeed, in a field that still largely continues to privilege the output and culture of high fashion, it is important to remember that there are still many micro-histories of both bodies and of dress styles that still need to be told.
Archives Consulted, Primary Sources and Bibliography

Note on Citation of Newspaper, Journal and Magazine Articles
Throughout the dissertation, individual articles are fully referenced in the footnotes and include publication date and, when possible, page numbers. These sources were found in the physical and digital archives listed below. All of the major publications (i.e. newspapers, trade journals and women's and fashion magazines) in which these individual articles were found are also listed below. Unless otherwise noted, all issues of each publication dating to the years 1915-1930 were consulted.

Archives Consulted

Digital Archives
Archive.org
Chicago History Museum Collection Online
HATHI Trust
Home Economics Archive: Research, Tradition, History (HEARTH), Cornell University
Photography Collection, New York Public Library
Proquest Historical Newspapers
Museum of the City of New York Collections Portal
Newspapers.com

Physical Archives
Cornell Costume & Textile Collection (Ithaca, New York)
Costume Collection at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (New York, NY)
Costume Institute, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, NY)
Costume & Textiles Collection, Museum of the City of New York (New York, NY)
Fales Library and Special Collection (New York University, New York, NY)
Goldstein Museum of Design (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN)
Gallery of Costume (Kent State University, Kent, OH)
Robert and Penny Fox Historic Costume Collection (Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA)

Primary Sources (Major Publications)

Newspapers
Brooklyn Daily Eagle
Chicago Tribune
Decatur Daily Review
Detroit Free Press
New York Herald Tribune
New York Times
Philadelphia Inquirer
Pittsburgh Daily Post

Women's and Fashion Magazines (Fashion Media)

Bustle
Good Housekeeping
Harper's Bazaar
Refinery 29
The Ladies' Home Journal
The Red Book Magazine
Vogue (American)

Trade Journals (Professional Media)

Advertising and Selling
American Cloak and Suit Review
Business of Fashion
Corset & Underwear Review
Dry Goods Economist
Dry Goods Merchants Trade Journal
Printers' Ink
Women's Wear (Women's Wear Daily)

Books (Style Guides, Textbooks and Trade Publications)


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Svensk sammanfattning

Avhandlingen undersöker hur den mediala modediskursen både synliggjorde och konstruerade den feta kvinnokroppen inom ramen för den tidiga storleksanpassade klädindustrin i USA och det som mellan åren 1915 och 1930 kom att kallas för "stoutwear".

Genom att undersöka ett brett spektrum av olika mediekällor, däribland modetidningar, branschtidningar, kataloger och stilguider, enligt Michel Foucaults arkeologiska metod, belyser avhandlingen hur modediskursens produktiva karaktär lade grunden till själva uppkomsten och konstruerandet av den fylliga kroppen och visar hur diskursen om stoutwear reglerade den feta, oregleriga kvinnliga kroppen. Där tidigare forskning kring förhållandet mellan kläder och kropp teoretiserat hur kroppen formas, bygger denna studie vidare på denna och visar hur diskurserna manifesterar modets praktiker och därmed ger form till den kulturella kroppen.

Första kapitlet presenterar forskningsproblemet och en sammanfattning av den existerande litteraturen gällande "plus-size" mode samt en definition av avhandlingens terminologi. Som en förlängning av introduktionen diskuterar kapitel två viktiga metodologiska och teoretiska utgångspunkter, däribland praktiken att skriva en modehistoria utan "mode", utan faktiskt, materiellt arkiv samt förklarar diskursanalys, visuell analys, kroppens teknologier, modediskurs och mode som en situerad kroppslig praktik. De efterföljande analytiska kapitlen går från "makro" (industrins organisation och grund, "stoutwear design" samt reklamstrategier) till "mikro" (förkroppsligade klädpraktiker) för att påvisa hur diskurserna kring "stoutwear" berörde alla nivåer av modets praktiker. Kapitel tre ger en bred historisk bakgrund till studien genom att undersöka "stoutwear-industrins" ursprung och identifierar de viktigaste aktörerna och företagen som medverkade till skapandet och själva idén om stoutwear-industrin. I kapitel fyra diskuteras de olika designdiskurserna kring "stoutwear" och hur de är sammanlänkade med modernismens estetik och den framväxande teknologin för standardiserade klädstorlekar. Kapitel fem undersöker försäljningspraktiker för stoutwear och tittar på hur stoutwear marknadsfördes i modepressen generellt samt hur den såldes in till olika varuhus. Viktiga frågeställningar i det här kapitlet rör representativa konventioner gällande feta kvinnor i modepressen samt segregeringen av stoutwear i separata avdelningar. I kapitel sex diskuteras betydelsen av att se fet ut och själva konstruktionen av stigmat i modepressen vid sidan av det slanka idealet. Slutligen undersöker kapitel sju stilguider som en plats för den diskursiva konstruktionen av självidentitet genom "self-fashioning".

Avhandlingens slutsats är att diskursen om stoutwear bars upp av ett "slankhetsideal", av en disciplinär regim som manifesterade ett "stout ideal." Denna tvärvetenskapliga studie belyser i sin helhet en mikrohistoria som nästan helt försummats inom den konventionella modehistorien och särskilt i den amerikanska, samtidigt ges ett teoretiskt bidrag till den litteratur som rör förhållandet mellan mode, kropp och kläder.
Stockholm Fashion Studies
Published by Stockholm University
Editor: Klas Nyberg

1. Philip Warkander, “This is all fake, this is all plastic, this is me” – An ethnographic study on the interrelations between style, sexuality and gender in contemporary Stockholm (Stockholm, 2013): 234 pp.


