Historicizing Fat in Anglo-american Culture

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I’ve always thought of opera singers as overweight ladies in too much bad make-up.
—Renée Gallimard/Jeremy Irons in M. Butterfly (David Cronenberg, 1994)

Gallimard’s remark conjures up the notorious stereotype of the opera singer—especially, but not only, of the female lead or diva—as an icon of almost incommensurable girth. From the time when opera was as popular a genre as cinema is today, its stages were peopled with singers whose size, as well as voice, was made an object of speculation. Both spectacularized and speculated upon, the opera singer was and is the origin of a mysterious power that is simultaneously immaterial, expressed in waves of sounds, and deeply rooted in the body as the source of that very sound. It is this exceptional body, whose bulk sometimes may only ironically be referred to as “healthy,” that creates the most exquisite sounds. As a consequence, opera both influences and challenges normative representation of the body, using the voice as source of representational and cultural power. As cultural critic and self-proclaimed opera queen Wayne Koestenbaum writes, “the diva interrupts our idea of health, because what she produces is unnatural but also eerily beautiful.”

Interestingly, Gallimard’s otherwise normative remarks are directed to an uncommonly slim Chinese singer, Song Liling, who at the end of the
A film is revealed to be a man and thus, seemingly, no opera diva at all. Hence the remark also exposes, maybe unwittingly, the way operatic representation works to denaturalize certain normative understandings of embodiment, including sexed embodiment. The definition of opera divas as “overweight ladies” may thus benefit from some emphasis on the second term, linking the singer’s bulk with the fact that opera divas have mostly been women. The woman singer’s monstrous aura was passed down to her by her forefathers, the castrati (quite literally, castrated men) of baroque opera. As a consequence, a bond emerges between fatness, a more general “monstrosity” of the diva, and the gender politics of opera.

The penchant of the genre for high-range voices actually puts into question the very gender binary that is ingrained in many of its narratives. On the one hand, the spectacularized body of the diva partakes of an imaginary economy that, from the castrati’s freakishness to the nineteenth-century dying heroines, inscribes a monstrous body at the center of representation as the Other against which normative identity is constructed. On the other hand, the operatic voice itself, emerging from the singer’s flesh, becomes the cultural signifier of a powerful marginality, offering the audience the perverse pleasure of a triumphantly anormative body.

Hence fat, as this essay illustrates, occupies an ambiguous position in relation to opera. On the one hand, here as in other landscapes of the Western social imaginary, “fat” is contiguous with the unhealthy, anormative body, which is singled out exactly for its monstrosity. On the other, the power of opera as an elite Western genre authorizes a counternarrative where the category of fat is considered a mark of greatness. Therefore, even if the stories I will refer to show a contradictory attitude toward the weight of opera divas, a weight that has been influenced in more recent times by Hollywood standards of shapeliness (as it will emerge especially in the cases of divas Maria Callas and Deborah Voigt), the operatic imaginary advocates for itself an autonomy from Western medical and social discourses of the body. Because of this, the opera imaginary makes room for a positive image of fat as mysterious source for the operatic voice.

**FAT VOICES**

As Gallimard’s remarks underscore, the double bond between opera and fat, more than a technical specificity of the genre, is a matter of cultural imaginary. From the old saying according to which “great voices often come in large packages” to Edward W. Said’s remark that “[the Metropolitan’s reper-
tory] has in turn encouraged the idea that opera is about overweight and disturbed people who sing unintelligibly and loudly”—which uncannily echoes Gallimard’s line quoted at the beginning of this essay—the stereotype of the fat diva has been a staple of the popular perception of opera, often independently from the singer’s actual girth. The discourse of fat inscribed on the publicly constructed body of the opera diva marks the unsound center of my argument, a center that deconstructs socially accepted boundaries between fat and thin as well as between male and female, straight and queer, actual bodies and represented bodies. In particular, the fat opera singer’s body highlights that any body is constructed through competing discourses, which struggle over it to define what is “real.”

Given the importance of popular culture in the elaboration of the diva’s body as fat, it is perhaps appropriate to turn to the popular Rough Guide to Opera for a consideration of the multiple, and even contradictory, ways in which fat is imagined across the opera world. So important is the subject to many that the book actually dedicates one of its explanatory boxes to an investigation of the vexed question as to whether girth is indeed one of the causes of operatic prowess. The question cannot ultimately be resolved because opera itself draws on conflicting discourses to articulate this problem, as the two seemingly contradictory positions expressed in the Rough Guide clearly demonstrate.

The explanatory note first claims that “there’s no direct link between girth and vocal technique.” As the Guide considers specific examples, though, a relationship between the two is assumed. Indeed, exactly because the Guide assumes some causal relationship between the two, in the end it even seems to criticize the recent trend away from notably fat sopranos: “that said, while the number of overweight sopranos seems steadily to be diminishing, the number of great sopranos seems to be diminishing as well.” The claim that there can be no relationship between voice and size is contradicted by opera historiography.

Even though the Guide certainly plays on a more contemporary pathological understanding of the fat body, it continues to embrace older assumptions that a fat body is necessary for the large operatic voice and that a thinning of the body will lead to a thinning of the voice. In this, opera helps to denaturalize the assumption that the fat body is equated merely with pathology and ill-health. Still, the Rough Guide offers stories that underscore the monstrous nature of the diva’s fat body, as in the case of Fanny Salvini-Donatelli, the scapegoat for the notorious fiasco of Traviata on its opening night in 1853. The parodistic effect of Salvini-Donatelli “portraying a frail young woman expiring from the ravages of tuberculosis”—while weighing ‘precisely 130
kilograms’” was not lost on the audience, nor is it on the present-day writer of the Guide, who tells the story with explicit gusto.° The role of consumptive Violetta, the eponymous “traviata” or “loose woman” of Verdi’s opera, was also (literally) pushed to its limits by Luisa Tetrazzini (1871–1940), whose “eating habits became the stuff of legend.””8 The two divas’ bodies, and their related epicurean habits, starkly contrasted with the consumptive heroines they often played, but apparently this was not considered a hindrance to their performance—at least not until the twentieth century. Not until Maria Callas did it seem problematic for such parts to be played by a fat lady, and in her life Callas drew a parable that established for many a new bodily standard for operatic bodies.

Callas, herself a 200-pound Violetta in 1953, embodied the stereotype of the plump soprano until the Metropolitan Opera asked her to lose some weight. This advice marked a new politics in opera’s management of singers’ bodies, and a turning point in Callas’s career, as she went on a reducing diet that was to transform her into the svelte Audrey Hepburn–like appearance of her last roles. The transformation of Callas’s body from fat to thin marked, and still marks, a moment of crisis in her audience’s response to her as singer and public persona. It is not possible here to account for the widespread phenomenon of diva-worship that marks the reception of the woman still known as “la Divina.” Significantly, fatness plays an important, if contradictory, role in the imaginary surrounding Callas and thus the opera diva generally, functioning as a signifier both of lost greatness and of bodily weakness. Koestenbaum suggests just such a mysterious relationship between Callas’s body and voice: “Callas revised her image twice: when she lost weight, and when she lost her voice. Her body was a liability she had the power to revise; her voice was a virtue she lacked the power to retain.”9

Koestenbaum’s chapter on Callas in The Queen’s Throat, aptly titled “The Callas Cult,” is both an account and in itself an example of how the body of the diva may become an object of consumption, appropriated and rewritten by the complex universe of fandom. This essay considers later how the fat diva may be appropriated by fans in order to offer a powerful voice to an otherwise marginalized subject position; here, though, it is necessary to introduce the agency of fans in the consumption and creation of the diva’s public body. Exactly because Callas is at the center of contradictory discourses surrounding fatness, she can be appropriated in different and even contradictory ways by her fans. The countless fan reviews of recorded performances of Callas on the Internet may be quoted as part of an imaginary that appropriates the diva’s body in a multifaceted way that cannot be confined to any single, predetermined narrative.
Certainly, the performances of Callas’s “fat” and “thin” bodies are assessed in very different ways depending on the tastes and commitments of fans. Thus the “fat Callas” of her 1953 Trovatore is often praised for the interpolation of high notes that “thin Callas” could not perform anymore. Similarly, her fat 1953 Tosca (directed by de Sabata) is hailed by the Rough Guide as “the finest Tosca on record,” yet her thin 1964 Tosca (directed by von Karajan, apparently the last recording she completed in studio) is considered a landmark in operatic singing for its dramatic “roughness.” Notably, this version puts into place a strong bond between Callas’s voice and image (an element generally “removed” by recording technology), as it is generally associated with the only visual testimony of Callas’s renewed dramatic abilities, her Covent Garden Tosca of the same year which consecrated the ultimate Callas icon.

Thinness and fatness as aural (instead of visual) signifiers become literally audible over Callas’s body, no matter what its size. Callas’s story contributes to the operatic imaginary that wants a sublime voice to come from an anormative, perverse body: a body that is always constructed as monstrous, both in thinness and in fatness. If Callas’s fat body needed to be revised so that it could conform to the impending normativization of thinness on the part of the opera world, Callas’s thin body was monstrous too, as it made her the source of harsh sounds, breaking the rules of operatic belcanto. Callas’s monstrosity, in the Latin sense of monstrum (something that has to be shown, or put on show) is thus “made flesh,” the superfluous flesh that, even when put “under erasure” by diet and fitness, marks the exceptionality of every singing body.

According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the narrativization of the female body through this strategy puts into operation an economy of medicalized bodies “whose actual gaps, overlays, and semi-erasures spell out a much less enabling rebus: a pattern of discreditation and impossibility for the female body of any class and race and of any size.” This impossibility of the female body, in the case of the opera diva, is counterpointed by an overarching possibility, the overexposure of the diva’s body as object of consumption. Thus John Dizikes writes of Callas’s iconic death in his Opera in America: “‘Shriveled, shrunken, isolated,’ Maria Callas died of a heart attack on September 16, 1977, in her bedroom, a quiet end to a tumultuous life, a life lived in art and for art, art of such intensity that it threatened to consume life, and then, love supplanting art, love of such intensity that it devoured life.” What was once a fat body is here described as “shrunken,” but despite its now apparently diminished size at the moment of its undoing, the underlying imaginary remains obsessed with the (supposed) ravenousness of the diva. Indeed, these
opposite yet complementary images endow the singer with irrepressible appetites that bring her from “consuming” the outside (food as well as “life”) to turning cannibalistically against herself as her appetites are seen as literally consuming her.

Thus the diva’s body is located on the divide between the two meanings of the word “consumption”—“decay, wasting away or wearing out” and “the using up of material . . . for the support of any process.” Such an emphasis on consumption in both of the above-mentioned senses is not surprising given that the diva’s body is associated with the mouth through her defining role as a singer. The singer’s mouth demands to be noticed, not only because it is the source from which the sound issues, but also because it voraciously opens toward the audience itself. The central icon of the gaping mouth partly explains why the diva has been consistently imagined as fat and ravenous, her appetite and body made visible through the act of singing. As Koestenbaum explains, “singers are supposedly fat. The body must be huge. The body must spill over, embarrass itself, declare immensity.”

The diva’s body is supposed to spill over, as and through voice. Already for Roland Barthes, singing is an activity that speaks first and foremost about the body, especially its cavities and orifices where sound is created. Its idiosyncratic individuality “speaks” through the voice by what Barthes calls the “grain of the voice,” defined as “the body in the voice as it sings.” The grain asserts the materiality of the body itself as an instrument producing sound. This performing body is put on display through a voice that exposes the body’s entrails, and hence produces a spectacularized body. Although Barthes writes that “opera is a genre in which the voice has gone over in its entirety to dramatic expressivity, a voice with a grain which little signifies,” other critics and opera fans believe otherwise. Linda and Michael Hutcheon, indeed, are keen to underscore that “opera is an embodied art form; it is the performers who give it its ‘phenomenal reality.’ . . . And it is specifically the body—the gendered, sexualized body—that will not be denied in staged opera.” Positioned as it is at the nexus of conflicting cultural and historical discourses, the fat body of the diva draws on cultural meanings offering fans forms of queer attachments that can ultimately undermine normative sexed and gendered meanings.

**THE POLITICS OF DIVA CONSUMPTION**

The multiple and even contradictory ways in which the opera diva’s fat body is understood are evident in the two contradictory meanings of the
word “consumption,” amply discussed by Linda and Michael Hutcheon in a chapter of their *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* (1996). Starting from the point that opera “gives meaning to both the disease and the one who suffers from it, meaning that includes but *supplements* the medical understanding of bodily pain,” they argue that opera draws on nineteenth-century medical understandings of the body. \(^{20}\) Indeed, opera is essential for understanding the spectacularized body as it is objectified by nineteenth-century medical science.

These two modes of representation, the operatic and the medical, overlap in the elaboration of cultural perceptions of illness and the sick body: according to them, in the nineteenth century—the century of Salvini-Donatelli’s *Traviata*—consumption was represented in popular culture as an illness caused by “consuming” desire. Hence consumption was a disease itself as much as a symptom of desire, which was in itself considered a pathology. In this context, the desiring, willful women at the center of operatic plots, the Carmens, Violettas, and Lucias of romantic repertoire, who stubbornly challenge patriarchal authority in order to conquer the object of their love, embody desire as Foucauldian counterdiscourse to medical and social imperatives. Despite this challenge, however pleasurable in the context of opera representation, these defiant performances must eventually be domesticated. According to Catherine Clément’s overview of opera narratives, “beyond the romantic ideology lines are being woven, tying up the characters and leading them to death for transgression—for transgression of familiar rules, political rules, the things at stake in sexual and authoritarian power.” \(^{21}\)

Clément’s argument here strongly recalls Judith Butler’s point on the categories of “gender” and “sex,” where the body (and with it the voice and its “grain”) is constructed as “the limits of the social *per se,*” what is bound to nature and beyond the power of discourse. \(^{22}\) Ironically, it is on the construction of this anormative body that the norm itself is reinstated. Hence the performance of desire by the opera diva actually supports the normativization of social codes on gender and sexuality by ultimately representing what should be beyond representation—desire, the body, the voice. In much the same way, Koestenbaum writes about the voice that supposedly marks the idiosyncratic identity of the individual: “voice accords presence—a myth that remains compelling, although we are supposed to know better. . . . This conviction that having a voice means having an identity is a cultural myth, just as sex is human nature but also a myth.” \(^{23}\) Butler’s and Koestenbaum’s discourses echo each other as they pose both singing and sexuality as bodily practices that are described in terms of excess and deviation by the same cultural strategies that put them into operation. The pristine innocence of the body in a place and time “before” sexuality is mirrored by the voice’s own journey.
through and out of the body: “just as breath surges out through the voice box into the ambient air, so our unmarked, unformed soul loses its imaginary innocence and becomes branded for life with a gender and a sexuality.”

If, as Butler and Koestenbaum argue, voice and sexuality are discursive constructions inside culture, then they must be considered as discourses localized on the body as it is perceived and experienced through history. In particular, the cultural construction of operatic voices marks a fundamental passage in European history. Here, the shift of focus from “male” castrati to “female” prima donnas overlaps with studies on human sexuality that start to categorize bodies physiologically in the binary terms of male/female. In this, the operatic voice is involved in what Foucault calls the “putting into discourse of sex.” As the castrati were replaced by female singers, opera started to distinguish between male and female characters and male and female voices, and the soprano register became the undisputed territory of the prima donna. For most of the nineteenth century, the spotlight of opera theaters was on women singers, so much so that it has been defined as “the golden age of diva worship.”

Even so, the narratives that emerge in the nineteenth century inscribe the female body of the diva in the discourse of repression. As desperate heroines struggle to assert their desire, their efforts are relentlessly thwarted by operas that make the audience take pleasure in their undoing: “on the opera stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing. The emotion is never more poignant than when the voice is lifted to die. . . . Not many women have access to the great masculine scheme surrounding this spectacle thought up to adore, and also to kill, the feminine character.” These desiring, ravenous women are the stars and scapegoats of opera as spectacle: as with Violetta from Verdi’s Traviata, their desire—for the male protagonist, for a longed-for heterosexual union, for desire itself—consumes them as much as does the literal consumption that afflicts many heroines in opera. Because of this dynamic, the genre triggers a medicalization of drives that anticipates psychoanalysis, and especially its role in sanctioning anormative behaviors. In this context, consumption, afflicting opera heroines from Violetta to Puccini’s Mimì in La Bohème (1896), is constantly articulated as the illness that affects the bodies of desiring women. The tubercular woman expresses uncanny desires, and in so doing, she herself is “desired, desiring and desirable.” The diva’s body may undergo a process of redemption only through its metamorphosis into a sick body, expressing in the flesh the “sick” desire that literally consumes it.

The body put on display by the tubercular heroine is hence doubly consumed, by the disease as well as by the audience, as it is transformed into
spectacle through the display of the operatic voice itself. This double display also underscores the unique historical position of “consumption” to the understanding of the diva’s body. Jon Stratton describes a cultural shift in the significance of “consumption” as European society shifted away from an economy of production to an economy of consumption. In this context, the medical discourse of tuberculosis was probably the last one where the term “consumption” remained associated with the largely negative idea of “being consumed” instead of the emerging positive one of acquiring goods:

Where previously the term “consumption” had been thought of as a using-up of something, from the eighteenth century onwards it began to be used in texts of political economy to describe the acquisition of material goods. The earlier meaning of consumption remained through the nineteenth century and was implicit in its long-standing use as a name for tuberculosis.  

Both meanings of consumption converge on the body of the consumptive woman, who is consumed by her illness even as she is consumed by emerging medical discourses. As Stratton explains, “expressing the new concerns of spectacularized surveillance, tuberculosis became a spectacle and was voyeuristically consumed, appropriated, by the male attendants on the woman.” At the same time as the (female) corpse was consumed by male observers in the anatomical theater, the spectacularized body of the consumptive opera heroine was consumed by the audience of opera. In both cases, the medicalization of the (mostly but not exclusively female) body both grounds and troubles normative discourses on gender and sexuality, as the woman’s body is represented as exceeding the very norm it is used to establish.

The emergence of medical discourses on sexuality and the body overlaps with the moment when fat itself shifts from a signifier for wealth to a signifier for sickness. Thus tuberculosis remains not only the sole context in which consumption is not associated with “material goods,” but also a residual cultural space where thinness is associated with sickness. Whereas previously it was often seen as rich and wealthy, the fat (female) body was becoming increasingly associated with the poor and the lower class. Such contradictory discursive meanings of consumption and fat converge on the diva’s body in ways that are unpredictable. To be more specific, consumption reverberates not only with the newly emerging positive sense given to the acquisition of material goods, but with older, negative, and pathological associations with the emaciated body. Both the emerging pathologization of the fat body and the older pathologization of the emaciated one depend on a medical discourse. As Sedgwick writes,
The shift of thinness from being a lower-class to an upper-class female signifier, and vice versa of fatness, had among its mediators one especially powerful discourse—the medical—whose structure of knowledge, at once elastic and relentlessly *naturalizing*, ensured that what emerged from the shift of bodily meaning was not a clean and newly inscribed slate of role assignments, but instead a palimpsest of fragmentary meanings.\(^{32}\)

In relation to the burgeoning capitalist economy, the fleshy female body represents the short circuit of social and symbolic economy. As Michael Moon writes, “as a form of representational labor, the fat woman’s work of emblematizing the circulatory embolisms of a culture might be said to fall into the economic category, not of either production or reproduction, but rather of waste management.”\(^{33}\) The fat diva powerfully embodies this palimpsest of fragmentary meanings, opening up a queer site for resisting normative and normalizing discourses. Excess and consumption become the twin sides of narratives about nineteenth- and twentieth-century divas, where their excess resides in the voice they produce as much as in their appetites and their relation with accepted norms of behavior.

**THE WEIGHT OF THE DIVA**

The opera diva, consumed by desire, is also consumed as spectacle, as a monstrous voice/body put on stage for the audience’s delight. It is not by chance that in his paragraph on “Fat,” Koestenbaum describes the singers’ extreme appetites as the consequence, more than the cause, of the audience’s own: if “singers . . . are hungry creatures—hungry for fame, money, glamour, artistic satisfaction,” it is only because “we want to consume the singer; we go to the opera to eat voice, to eat trills and cavatinas and the failed or successful ‘Ho-jo-to-ho.’ . . . Farrar spoke of the public’s cannibalistic urge to see a singer served to it already overcooked by hard work, a talent ‘fried brown and curled at the edges.’”\(^{34}\) Some fans have tried to placate the diva’s hunger by offering their own culinary abilities to please her ravenousness: thus Auguste Escoffier dedicated a famous peach dessert to soprano Nellie Melba, devising it so that the small amount of ice cream would not harm the singer’s vocal chords, whereas Ernest Arbogast, chef at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco, dedicated Chicken Tetrazzini to Luisa of the legendary eating habits, to her prowess on stage and at the table.

These episodes of culinary fandom are only one of the elements of a wide imaginary linking opera singing with food—usually huge amounts of it. In
the novel *Of Lena Geyer* (1936), Marcia Davenport portrays fictional opera singer Lena as ravenous in terms of both sex and food. The novel is quite sparse in descriptions of her figure—her lover, the Duc de Chartres, describes her on stage as “extraordinarily tall, broad-shouldered, and young, with an erect carriage and a wonderfully free and flowing style of movement.” Notably, many pages are devoted to the diva’s relationship with food. Originally from Prague, European Lena finds it difficult to adjust to American eating habits, especially when on tour. Her American manager, one of the many first-person narrators in this multi-voiced novel, writes that “Lena was a hellion about food. She was cranky and finicky and sometimes I wanted to tell her to go back to Europe and sit on it. She never would touch anything that was canned or cold storage or fried. . . . Jesus, how she raved.” Because he could not provide her with the food she desired during her tour across the United States, Lena would by the end address him in the nastiest ways:

when she was getting near New York at the end of a tour she’d begin peppering me with telegrams like these:

GALLON OF PUREÉ MONGOLE WHOLE ROAST CAPON FIVE RAW FRESH VEGETABLE BOTTLE CLOS VOUGEOT PLEASE HAVE ON PLATFORM WHEN TRAIN ARRIVES LENA

MAKE NO ENGAGEMENTS FIRST TEN DAYS WILL BE BUSY EATING LENA

HAVE LOST THIRTY POUNDS ON YOUR FILTHY TOUR LENA.37

Lena gives voice to the belief, later made evident (to some) in the real-life example of Callas, that weight loss brings with it a loss of power. The singers’ strength comes from the body’s ability to bear the stress and fatigue it must undergo to produce the exquisite operatic voice. The effort to produce this voice is compared with sexual exertion; thus Lena tells her lover that her energy “could not come out in two places at once. It came out either in bed or on the stage.” Writing about fictional opera divas, Susan Leonardi and Rebecca Pope underline that it is the diva’s bodily strength—in contrast with the sick, fragile body it is often asked to perform—that marks her as a freak, a monster that jeopardizes the patriarchal order with its very existence. As they write, “it is hardly surprising that a woman with so much *physical* power . . . creates anxiety and ambivalence, or that she becomes, for many writers, the sign of femininity itself, and by extension the sign of otherness.” 39
All of the characteristics explored up to now—those, for example, that were evident in the “fat” and “thin” Callas’s performances—are part of a cultural construct that affects the perception of divas, whether fictional or real. The public persona of the opera singer emerges as a constructed identity or, as Koestenbaum puts it, “an artificial system, part choice, part circumstance.” Thus the diva is a social construct, yet, due to her performative power, she can exercise a powerful kind of agency. Here, “performative” is meant to convey Butler’s idea that “acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body. . . . Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative.” Consequently, diva identity is written on the body, constructed through socially accepted narratives of normativity and excess. Her condition is also performative in an additional and anormative sense. The diva has what Richard Poirier has termed the “curious power” of public performance, “curious because it is at first so furiously self-consultive, so even narcissistic, and later so eager for publicity, love, and historical dimension.” In its public dimension, the bulky opera diva offers herself up as object of consumption that is also an anormative, atypical, and, as explored further below, a queer model and object of desire.

This public dimension is also the ground on which the political issue of fatness may come to be fought. Recently, the firing of majestic soprano Deborah Voigt by the Covent Garden Royal Opera Company—purportedly on the grounds that she did not fit into the cocktail dress designed for a production of Strauss’ Ariadne auf Naxos—has been widely criticized as showing that “the tyranny of image, of glamour, glitz and good looks, seems to be muscling in on just about every aspect of our culture.” In this case, against the example set by Callas, the opera world has been firm in advocating autonomy for itself from the standards of beauty of the Western public scene. Calling attention to the very different aesthetic sensibility embraced by some in the opera world, Tim Ashley writes in the Guardian that “whatever you think about her weight, Voigt is actually extremely beautiful.” Even in his defense, Ashley’s remark also underscores how unlikely the coupling of “weight” and “beautiful” sounds in the terms of the dominant culture.

Voigt’s remarks to the Sunday Telegraph concerning the controversy—“I have big hips and Covent Garden has a problem with them”—recall a similarly defiant headline describing Tetrazzini’s farewell tour: “Sure Tetrazzini is fat, doesn’t care who knows it!” In both cases, opera offers an alternative aesthetic that associates the fat body with power. As an embodiment of this power, Voigt proclaimed, “I believe that this attitude towards heavy people
is the last bastion of open discrimination in our society.” In response to the controversy, Voigt can be said to be performing what Sedgwick calls “coming out as a fat woman”:

[It] is a way in the first place of making clear to the people around you that their cultural meanings will be, and will be heard as, assaultive and diminishing to the degree that they are not fat-affirmative. In the second place and far more importantly, it is a way of staking one’s claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of the representation contract between one’s body and one’s world.

Insofar as opera opens up an oppositional space in relation to the standards of beauty upheld in larger society, Voigt has been able to take a political position against contemporary fatphobia in speaking out against the discrimination of the fat.

In 2006, though, Voigt seemed to revise her position on fat-affirmativeness as she underwent gastric bypass surgery, a surgery designed to force the individual to lose weight by surgically reducing the size of the stomach and thus the ability of it to hold (and process) food. Remarkably, both the surgery and the subsequent weight loss were played out in the public arena, as both specialized and popular press covered the story. The New York Times correspondents have devoted plenty of attention to Voigt’s case, from her firing in 2004 up to her final appearance in the much-commented cocktail dress at Covent Garden in 2008; while pictures of her “new” figure, often in a “before and after the cure” fashion, have peopled the press since then, celebrating her success.

Notably, commentators who describe this procedure, even in enthusiastic terms, have described the opera world as somewhat apart from the aesthetic and medical standards of the “outside world.” Commenting on Voigt’s early career and her soft spot for “heavy meals,” Daniel Schorn comments,

She could take some solace from the fact that the opera world she was heading for was a haven for the large-boned, the zaftig, even the enormous. From turn-of-the-century diva Luisa Tetrazzini, who had a pasta dish named after her, to latter day stars such as Jessye Norman and Jane Eaglen. Voigt followed in their heavy footsteps, and as her career soared, so did her weight.

In Schorn’s telling of the tale, the opera’s welcoming attitude to outsized divas sounds like a forbidden paradise, where Voigt was allowed to indulge in those pleasures and bad habits that forced her to surgery as a drastic solution
for her weight problems. Thus, opera remains a place that is “outside” the
dominant culture and, presumably, in need of reform to bring it in line with
the health-obsessed culture outside of it.

Voigt’s story as told in this and other reports brings a step forward the
spectacularization of the diva’s body, as details of her weight loss have been
speculated over by a more or less specialized opera press: the inner work-
ings of the diva’s body are again monstrous, on display, policed and medical-
ized under close scrutiny by the public eye. As with Callas, her voice follows
suit: “The question everyone seems to want answered is: can she still sing?,”
wonders interviewer Charlotte Higgins, to whom Voigt rather ambiguously
answers, “In terms of the timbre, the size? I don’t think the size of my voice
has changed.”52 The size of the voice may not conform to that of the body:
the operatic voice remains fat, an obese voice in a slim body.

It may be argued whether Voigt’s slimmer body fits accepted categories
of normative “thinness,” as she still is (reportedly) a UK size 14–16, hence
far away from Hollywood or TV, let alone fashion, standards of thinness.
Reshaping her body to suit health as well as aesthetic standards, Voigt’s body
pushes the boundaries between “thinness” and “fatness,” appropriating the
agency offered to her by opera to expose (maybe inadvertently) how the
body, either fat or thin, is constructed in the public arena. If, on the one hand,
she has indeed “thinned down,” Voigt has also in a way “fattened up” the
realm of thinness as defined by the media in order to accommodate her still
generous curves.

What Voigt has clearly shown to be aware of is the discrimination against
fat people, and especially fat women: “I once read a review pointing out
how overweight I was . . . but they said that the tenor had shoulders like a
linebacker. They did not also say that he had a stomach like a nine-months-
pregnant woman.”53 Indeed, during the twentieth century the huge diva has
been gradually joined (and sometimes superseded) by an equally huge male
“divo.” These male singers, from Enrico Caruso to Luciano Pavarotti, have
also been massive celebrities in culture at large. This shift toward the glam-
orization of the tenor voice clearly shows that male bodies may occupy the
imaginary space of the “diva” as impressively as female bodies. If we also
consider that these male divos tend to be tenors, that is, the highest male
voice range—the one that more closely “sounds” like a woman—this late
evolution of the divo only shows that gender parameters, from voice range to
bulkiness, may migrate from body to body irrespectively of normative gender
attribution. As a consequence, any body, irrespective of biological affiliations,
may be culturally inscribed in what Barbara Creed defines as the “feminine”:
“I employ the term ‘feminine’ as that which contests binaries, including a
rigid notion of sexual difference that would insist upon separate male and female selves.”

Indeed, in Koestenbaum’s reading, the “male” voice of opera, embodied by the stentorian tenor of Verdi’s Otello, only exposes “the paradoxes of appearing male.”

Much as the diva’s femaleness may be considered the Freudian alternative to the mutilated maleness of eighteenth-century castrati, the same could be said for manliness in the opera divo. Through the freedoms and constraints of operatic singing, this masculinity may paradoxically find a voice in the feminine “hysterical excesses and eccentricities” that marked Jon Vickers’ performance of Verdi’s last hero to Koestenbaum’s “queer” ear. More patently, it exposes the performative nature of maleness in the representational clash between the illusion of heroic masculinity and the huge and patently unfit bodies of singers like Pavarotti, Domingo, or Roberto Alagna. For all their charm, these divos’ physique is as much at odds with contemporary Hollywood-style parameters of beauty and fitness, as is that of their female counterparts. The rumor that Alagna recently walked out of the premier night of Aida at La Scala because (among other things) he was annoyed by the popularity of the far hunkier first dancer Roberto Bolle only confirms that the capriciousness, touchiness, and prima donna syndrome of the diva are firmly in place even when “performed” by men singers.

Koestenbaum lists Otello’s failed performance of masculinity in his “Pocket Guide to Queer Moments in Opera,” defined as those that may be “queerly ventriloquized” or just “listened [to], queerly,” where “queer,” following Sedgwick, is not limited to the public affiliation to a homosexual sexual identity, but refers more widely to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.” Koestenbaum’s queer listening to opera thus conjoins homosexuality as a sexual identity that is still marginalized in relation to the heterosexual matrix, and the love of opera as a marginal, baroque, and “dead” genre. The opera diva—still, generally, a woman—is the voice that makes sense out of an imaginary landscape of cross-gendered subjectivity, offering a strategy of empowerment: “I build queerness from banal and uplifting stories of the conduct of famous fiery women,” Koestenbaum proclaims.

Together with the operatic voice, the fleshy body of the opera diva becomes a mark of presence that may be appropriated by the queer fan to find a voice, even if by proxy: “our ability to speak of ourselves has been fore-shortened; we turn to opera because we need to breathe, to regain a right we
Imagine is godgiven—the right to open.” The body of the diva foregrounds the possibility of a triumphal marginality, of an anormativity that takes pride in its own difference, and that is able to migrate from the diva’s to the listeners’ body. Here, the exuberant flesh of the diva draws a connection with the queer body with its excessive desires, which literally “exceed” the heterosexual norm: “there are cultural and emotional affinities between large women and gay men; both are entrusted with understanding the body as shame and as difference, the body all mouth, unable to stop making statements, signifying too extremely—the body a clue that a mistake has been made.” Koestenbaum here associates queerness and fat as marking the body as excessive, in terms of size or desire. On another note, Michael Moon draws on autobiographical recollections to explain the strategies of identification that join the fat diva and the gay adolescent:

One happy aspect of the story of my own and many other gay men’s formations of our adolescent and adult body images is that the fat, beaming figure of the diva has never been entirely absent from our imaginaire or our fantasies of ideal bodies; besides whatever version or versions of the male “power-body” of the seventies and eighties . . . the diva’s body has never lost its representational magnetism for many of us as an alternative body-identity fantasy, resolutely embodying as it does the otherwise almost entirely anachronistic ideal, formed in early nineteenth-century Europe, of the social dignity of corpulence.

Here paradoxically queer desire (the desire of a man for another man) is echoed and partially defined by the desire for the fat female body. This excessive and queer body is counterpointed to the power-body male physique, which also troubles normative discourses through its performance of a hypermasculine body formation which makes too much of an effort at embodying straight masculinity. This excessive body, Moon insists, contrasts but also conjoins the fat body of the diva, both being either male or female but never straight.

Gay icon Freddie Mercury was himself not only a queer diva but an opera queen, and this led him later in life to write and perform a whole album, Barcelona, in duet with opera diva Montserrat Caballé in 1988. “The moment that you stepped into the room you took my breath away,” reads a line of “Barcelona,” the title track Mercury wrote as a personal homage to the diva of whom he had admittedly been a life-long fan. In its feeding the diva’s hunger not with food, but music, the song breaks an acknowledged convention...
of the imaginary of popular music. Indeed, Mercury draws upon an operatic tradition as he performs his appreciation for a body which is neither thin nor young; more importantly, this is no “body” but the one resonating in the clear, pure voice of Montserrat Caballé. In this, the song is indeed operatic—much as Calaf may fall in love at first sight with a massive Turandot in Puccini’s opera (a dear personal memory from one of my early opera nights), Mercury can share flights of sound with his beloved Caballé, shaping a queer, overtly “different” grammar of desire.

Mercury may be considered the pop equivalent of Callas herself. His body, shaped according to the 1970s gay fashion for the power-body, ended up consumed by the twentieth-century “illness of the century.” Mercury’s thinness in the live performance of Barcelona, underlined by his black tuxedo, may be read post facto as a mark not of fitness but of illness; in contrast, Caballé’s huge body flies lightly across the stage, clad in a dramatically glittering black caftan like a superhuman entity—much more so in the 1999 Union of European Football Association championship match performance, with Caballé singing alone on stage while the now-deceased Mercury hovers in the background, reduced to a pixellated, disembodied image.

Caballé’s “survival” performance, her voice and presence, acts as a reverted homage of an opera diva for a distinguished fan. Here, her fat voice acquires an overpowering positive stand, the mark of “presence” against the threat of death and forgetfulness: “‘fat,’ in diva iconography, means ‘presence.’” A desperate attempt at survival against the inevitable decadence of every body—either thin or fat, ill or healthy—Caballé thus mourns but also keeps alive the “other” voice, welcoming it, as it were, in the amleness of her own body.

In broader terms, every diva performance may be situated at the very edge of survival, as it struggles with the repertoire of a supposedly dead genre. In this way, with the power of her voluptuous voice, the diva renegotiates the boundaries of sheer life, hence subverting the representational contract that marks the fat woman’s body as just “waste management.” As a result, her voice becomes a strategy of resistance against hegemonic discourses about the body, making it a powerful statement against any biopower-laden normativity for herself as public persona as well as for the listeners who take pleasure in this voice and body regardless of their sexuality or gender affiliation. From the margins of normative representations of the body, the opera diva firmly places herself at the center of her own corpo-reality, as the locus from which operatic performance draws its eerie beauty and power.
NOTES


2. As this essay will chiefly focus on nineteenth- and twentieth-century prima donnas, it is beyond its scope to explore the construction of otherness through the heritage of castrato voices—where castrati, incidentally, were also said to be physically huge. For an authoritative account on the subject, see Thomas McGeary, “Gendering Opera: Italian Opera as the Feminine Other in Britain, 1700–42,” Journal of Musicological Research 14 (1994): 17–34.


4. The questioning of the boundary between reality and representation is at the heart of feminist and queer theory, which constitute the main theoretical frame of my argument. It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer an overview of the theoretical positions involved; yet, the reader should be here made aware of the fact that “the issue of ‘what is real and what is not’ will come up [. . . ] in the form of what seem to me artificial oppositions: evasion versus commitment, the images of women versus real women”; see Lidia Curti, Female Stories, Female Bodies: Narrative, Identity and Representation (London: Macmillan, 1998), 1.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


11. This is the only visual recording of Callas performing in an opera; her other experience in acting (that interestingly enough did not include singing), the title character in Pasolini’s Medea, is beyond the scope of this essay. For an interesting interpretation of Callas’s signifying body in the film, see Fiorenzo Iuliano, “Burning Memories to Retrieve the Past: Contaminations of Bodies and Histories in Pasolini’s Medea,” AION Anglistica 11.1–2 (2007): 129–44, www.anglistica.unior.it (accessed June 27, 2009).


15. Ibid., 6a.


18. Ibid.

19. Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, “Staging the Female Body: Richard
9: “It’s Not Over Till the Fat Lady Sings”


23. Koestenbaum, The Queen’s Throat, 155.

24. Ibid.


27. Clément, Opera, 5.

28. Žižek draws this connection in uncompromising terms: “the moment of the birth of psychoanalysis (the beginning of the twentieth century) is generally perceived as the moment of opera’s death—as if, after psychoanalysis, opera, at least in its traditional form, was no longer possible”; see Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, Opera’s Second Death (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), vii.

29. Hutcheon and Hutcheon, Opera, 21.


31. Ibid.


33. Ibid., 232.

34. Koestenbaum, Queen’s Throat, 101.


36. Ibid., 237.

37. Ibid., 242.

38. Ibid., 124.

39. Leonardi and Pope, Diva’s Mouth, 49, italics theirs.

40. Koestenbaum, Queen’s Throat, 87.

41. Butler, Gender Trouble, 136.


52. Quoted in Higgins, “The Fat Lady Slims.”
53. Ibid.
55. Koestenbaum, Queen’s Throat, 202.
56. Ibid., 203
58. Koestenbaum, Queen’s Throat, 198.
60. Koestenbaum, Queen’s Throat, 85. Koestenbaum identifies himself as an “opera queen,” defined elsewhere as “any member of that particular segment of the American gay community that defines itself by the extremity and particularity of its obsession with opera” (Mitchell Morris, “Reading as an Opera Queen,” in Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Musical Scholarship, ed. Ruth A. Solie [Berkley: University of California Press, 1993], 184). Although “opera queen-ness” has generally been limited to gay men, it must be noted that similar strategies of identification with the diva may also be found in lesbian discourses on opera, although expressed in different and less structured terms. See especially Terry Castle, “In Praise of Brigitte Fassbaender (A Musical Emanation),” in The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 200–230; Elizabeth Wood. “Sapphonics,”
9: “It’s Not Over Till the Fat Lady Sings”


61. Koestenbaum, Queen’s Throat, 16.
62. Ibid., 101.
64. Koestenbaum, Queen’s Throat, 102.