Historicizing Fat in Anglo-american Culture

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Fat feminism came into its own in 1974 at a Los Angeles feminist event commemorating the death of Cass Elliot, a singer with the popular group the Mamas and the Papas and a famously fat woman. Early and erroneous reports suggested that Elliot had choked on a sandwich. Her death certificate related her death to obesity. The images of Elliot, ridiculous, obese, and dying through greed or sloth, were exactly the sorts of stereotype the first fat feminist activist group, Fat Underground, was trying to counter. So they took action. Apparently spontaneously, twenty-five candle-bearing fat women took over the stage. “Feeling was very intense” among them, according to founding member Aldebaran. \(^1\) Lynn McAfee, a speaker for the group, called Elliot’s death a murder. As Fat Underground insisted, the fact that she was fat didn’t kill her, but likely the constant dieting she was subjected to had brought on the heart attack that did. McAfee passionately indicted especially the medical establishment for what the group saw as “genocide against fat people.” Spontaneously, women from the crowd joined Fat Underground on stage. Later *Sister*, a Los Angeles feminist publication, announced the arrival of a fat feminist liberation movement. \(^4\)

Fat feminism crested in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the context of grassroots feminist movements. Shifting its center from Los Angeles to San Francisco toward the end of the 1970s, the movement created a radical fat feminist identity politics that challenged the larger culture to redefine fat from a sign of sickness and failure to a sign of power, beauty, and resis-
The fat feminist critique of cultural assumptions about fat and gender is still enormously significant today. Fat feminism is also important for its illumination of identity politics. Because fat was difficult to define and not an immediately obvious identity category, it challenged activists to engage in a fascinating, convoluted, and productively inconsistent battle to assert that there was, indeed, a category of fat women upon which they could build fat feminist identity politics. Their struggle raises questions that invite a rethinking of feminist identity and identity politics and are also relevant to broader conceptions of identity in the late twentieth century.

Fat liberation emerged in a period of pervasive fatphobia. In the popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s, the postwar celebration of women’s voluptuous curves was being replaced by fascination with the scrawny image of Twiggy, one of the first supermodels. Thin was in, but Americans, including medical professionals, had little understanding of the relationship among eating, weight, and health, and little experience with what were still called “reducing diets.” Failure to lose weight was assumed to be the consequence of a weak will. Not surprisingly, women of all sizes crammed their bodies into girdles and other restraining undergarments in more or less desperate attempts to meet the basic requirements of physical acceptability. For fat women the problem was grimmer. Compared to today, being fat was relatively unusual. Being really fat was even rarer, making you a likely object of scorn and harassment. To be fat was to engage in an often lonely struggle with daily censure of your body size with little suggestion that that condemnation itself might be the problem. Popular culture offered no explanation for the struggles of fat people other than accusations of weakness and immorality. Fat was ugly, and fat women were to be mocked.

This was the world that Fat Underground, and the movement it started, would challenge. Organized a year before Cass Elliot’s death, Fat Underground called for a war on the presumption of thin superiority, declaring in their Fat Liberation Manifesto, “Fat People of the World Unite! You Have Nothing to Lose!” They took the name Fat Underground, according to Judy Freespirit, because the initials nicely expressed a simmering anger. Fat Underground, or FU, pointedly and provocatively reclaimed the term “fat,” using it as the basis for what would become a complex and powerful political movement. Like the larger women’s movement from which it drew, fat feminism was initially dominated by white, middle-class women with histories of activism in the civil rights and antiwar movements. As fat feminism grew it became more diverse, though it would always confront contentions that its politics spoke primarily to white, middle-class experience. By the early 1980s, fat activists would build a community and a politics that celebrated the con-
tributions of fat women like Cass Elliot. Fat, in this context, was no longer a sign of personal failure; it was an expression of self-affirmation, liberation, and feminist revolt against conventional standards of acceptability.

In fomenting this revolt and developing their politics, fat feminists claimed fat as an identity. Being fat became for them not just an accident of body size; it defined an essential part of who they were. Fat women, they asserted, were an oppressed group in society that deserved rights and recognition. In their attempts to define a fat identity, fat feminists were influenced by the politics of the larger feminist movement. By the time fat feminism emerged around 1973, the women’s movement was developing a politics that has been accused of valorizing an essential female identity. Many feminists, especially in grassroots movements, believed that there were immutable biological, emotional, even cultural differences between men and women. Even as they celebrated women’s contributions to the world, they were often highly dubious about masculinity, associating it with violence, hatred, and destructive competitiveness. It is not surprising then that fat feminists also sought to root fat identity in some kind of essentialist biology. They sought to claim fat as a natural (or essential), biological given.

But this proved difficult. Fat feminism made important claims that challenged the assumption that fat was simply pathology. But an understanding of what fat was and where it came from became increasingly difficult to pin down. Fat feminism also faced the problem of defining the limits of what constituted a fat feminist community or politics. How could you create a movement based on an identity that could change over time? Fat bodies do not necessarily stay fat, and thin bodies become fat. Even deciding how much “extra” weight was required to define a fat person was a fraught issue. The movement thus faced the difficulty of establishing a community around an identity that seemed obviously mutable.

What fat feminism did for the larger cultural understanding of fat and its ways was critically important. The movement challenged basic assumptions and extraordinary ignorance about fat and fat bodies, the relationship of fat to gender, and the harm of fatphobia. But the movement did more than that. Fat women, in trying to claim fat as an identity, exposed some of the problems inherent in a simple understanding of the relationship of bodies to biology, culture, and the self. In struggling with the complicated forces that shaped fat bodies and fat women’s experiences, fat activists raised a host of questions about the nature of fat, the plasticity of bodies, and ultimately the uses and limits of identity politics. The most radical, lesbian feminists, especially, in their assertions of fat identity politics, embraced and simultaneously challenged the whole project of identity politics. Fat itself became powerful as
fat feminist politics forced activists to recognize complexities and instabilities of fat identity. Fat, in the end, was not just something you were, it was something you shaped, embodied, and infused with meaning.

This chapter is organized into five parts, each examining an aspect of fat feminist identity politics. The first section traces the emergence of fat liberation in the Women’s Liberation Movement in Los Angeles; the second explores the somewhat later explosion of fat cultural and identity politics within the grassroots feminist community of San Francisco. The third section explores fat feminist attempts to reject the associations of fat with pathology and to assert a biologically based fat identity. In the fourth, fat women’s determination to reclaim sexuality is revealed as in part a strategy to claim a positive fat identity. The final section examines the movement’s attempts to define the limits of community—that is, who was in and who was out. These conflicts helped shape the emergence of the really fat, a group of radical lesbians who pushed fat identity politics, claiming a furious fat identity with potential to radically transform the understanding and experience of fat.

I. FORGING A FAT LIBERATION POLITICS IN LOS ANGELES

By the early 1970s, Miriam Cantor was eschewing a bra and embracing flannel shirts in her rebellion against “male” standards of feminine beauty. Women’s Liberation gave activists like her a powerful critique of the physically restrictive, infantilizing, and sexualizing effects of women’s fashion. But while miniskirts and heavy makeup had become political issues, for Cantor the problem of fat was entirely personal. Then one day while at Weight Watchers, only ten pounds from her goal weight, she saw a connection between the pressure to be beautiful and the pressure to be thin. She walked out.

As it did for Miriam Cantor, the Women’s Liberation Movement, the radical movement to end sex oppression, gave women much of the language, analytical framework, and organizational support to develop a politics of fat. Though Fat Liberation politicized fat for both men and women, the radical thrust of the movement was tied to its feminist politics. Fat feminists understood fat to be intrinsic to the larger problem of women’s oppression. According to fat feminist analysis, hatred of fat was an effect of patriarchy, which was defined as a social and political system that disfranchises and exploits women while elevating men. Initially, fat feminists challenged the hatred of fat by exposing it as a lie. Fat, they argued, was not bad, despite what women were told.
Women’s Liberation emerged in Los Angeles, as elsewhere, in the late 1960s, as radical women began to center the problem of sex in the context of Civil Rights activism, Black Power, the antiwar movement, and the counterculture. Organized initially through small groups committed to analyzing their oppression as women and challenging that oppression, what they called consciousness-raising, women’s liberationists eventually founded such institutions as women’s centers, women’s bookstores, and women’s health clinics. An emerging women’s press created a feminist public sphere through a flurry of newsletters, journals, newspapers, events calendars, pamphlets, books, and manifestos.6

Fat Underground appeared in this dynamic context. Judy Freespirit, a Civil Rights activist, and scientist Vivian Mayer met in 1972 in a consciousness-raising group at the Los Angeles Women’s Center.7 The two became interested in Radical Therapy, a movement that accused traditional psychiatrists of “cultural mystification,” teaching individuals to adjust to social oppression rather than showing them how to recognize that oppression and even oppose it. In the context of a Radical Feminist Therapy Collective they founded at the Women’s Center, Mayer and Freespirit began linking sexist oppression to fat oppression. They joined the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (NAAFA), a group established in 1969 by a male fat admirer to promote “fat acceptance,” but they soon found that group to be resistant to their increasingly radical and feminist views. At the same time, Radical Therapy groups, including one specifically for fat women, became a means for educating women about fat oppression and bringing emerging fat liberation ideas to the Los Angeles feminist community. In 1973 Freespirit and Mayer, with feminist health activist Ariana Manov, founded Fat Underground.8

While Fat Underground examined the problems of fat for all people, their most radical analysis focused on women. As feminists argued that women’s subordinate role in society was not a natural phenomenon, so too did fat activists assert that hatred of fat was not natural but was historically produced. Within patriarchy, according to feminist analysis, men maintained the exploitation of women through the production of the cultural fiction that women were naturally defined by their cultural status as the objects of male desire and exploitation. Women had little control over their bodies because they were constrained both by a lack of reproductive choices and by the requirement that they act and appear appropriately “feminine.”9 Fat liberationists began to see hatred of fat as a component of this patriarchal oppression of women within what they called “the capitalist, racist, sexist, elitist society in which we live.”10 Women were required to attain the contemporary standard of body size dictated by a patriarchal culture. Radical Therapy’s concept of “cultural
mystification” amplified this analysis. Women internalized their fear of fat and blamed themselves for their supposed failure to be thin. There was evil genius at work in the pervasiveness of fatphobia. Not just fat women but all women were consumed by obsessions with food, body size, and dieting. These obsessions distracted women from recognizing the realities of their oppression, thereby preventing social activism and social change.

These insights, powerful as they were, did not explain the extremity of women’s desperation to be thin. After all, women in a Ladies’ Home Journal survey reported being twice as afraid of getting fat as of “all the hate and killing in the world.” And the weight-loss industry was making billions on fat anxiety. The intensity of women’s fear of fat was fundamental to women’s oppression, Fat Underground theorized. If for women appearance is “the limit of her social esteem under sexism,” as the Women’s Liberation Movement insisted, being fat was an enormous transgression of acceptable femininity that entailed a huge loss of status. It was perhaps even the most significant transgression.

Fat Underground presented their analysis in a series of hugely influential leaflets that outlined a radical approach to thinking about fat women and fat bodies. Beginning in 1973, Mayer (who in this period changed her name to Aldebaran) and new Fat Underground member Lynne McAfee wrote and produced such blistering indictments as “Fat Women and Fear of Fat,” “Stereotype Yourself,” and “Health of Fat People: The Scare Story your Doctor Won’t Tell You.” They challenged the institutions that they believed supported fatphobia and cultural mystification, among them the weight-loss industry, popular media, and the medical professions. They railed against the weight-loss industry’s greed and false promises and the derogatory images of fat women in popular media.

In these analyses, Fat Underground activists were influenced by the Women’s Health Movement, which was interested in the relationship between doctors and patients, critiquing the treatment of women within a male-dominated tradition of western medicine and the failure of research to account for differences between male and female bodies and their health concerns. For example, the group challenged medical professionals for their assumptions about the medical necessity of weight loss for women who did not fit an abstract ideal. They pointed to fatphobia that led to poor health care for fat women and that prevented researchers from asking intelligent questions about the relationship of fat to ill health.

Analyzing the working of patriarchy was not enough for Fat Underground. The Cass Elliott event was an expression of the group’s commitment to open defiance. After all, if fear of fat was so important to women’s position
in patriarchy, then defying it could have a tremendously positive impact for all women. Along with women from the fat therapy groups, Fat Underground performed guerilla theater, picketed, marched, lobbied, and spoke at rallies. In these bold actions, activists challenged the pervasive institutionalization of assumptions about fat in the medical establishment, the diet industry, and popular culture. Some actions were aimed specifically at women whom activists saw as victims of fatphobia. For example, Fat Underground crashed weight-loss groups, lecturing stunned participants about the lies they were being sold. In one action recalled by Freespirit,

There was a behaviorist who was teaching weight loss . . . at UCLA in one of these big lecture halls that had like 400 seats and we took over his class one evening [laughter]. We marched in with our overalls and flannel shirts and whatever it was we were wearing those days and our boots. And took over the podium and read the [Fat Liberation] Manifesto and left.

Fat Underground used the shock of their unapologetic size, their audacity, and their humor to demonstrate a radical alternative embodiment to the thin bodies sought by participants.

Though their ambition was to achieve broad social change, Fat Underground recognized the enormous barriers to such an achievement. Their first, and most seemingly reachable, goal was to convince the women’s movement to take fat politics seriously. As Freespirit remembered, they were afraid they could not “change the whole world” but thought they could start with the women’s community “and hope to expand from that.” Despite the attention Fat Underground received at the Cass Elliott rally, however, feminists through most of the 1970s remained uncomfortable with fat politics. The women’s press and feminist political organizations were largely silent on fat issues. By the middle of the decade, fat feminism still existed very much on the fringes of even feminist politics.

This frustrating situation began to change in the late 1970s, when the fat movement went national. Fat Underground had a lot to do with this. Activists compiled Fat Underground leaflets into a packet that was duplicated, sold at cost in feminist bookstores, and shared among friends in women’s communities across the country. One of the places fat feminist ideas took hold was San Francisco. There, fat politics would shift from a politics of liberation to radical cultural politics. Rather than claiming that fat women should be free from the negative restraints of an oppressive society, cultural feminists sought to empower fat feminists within a fat feminist community and fat positive culture.
II. FAT SAN FRANCISCO

The San Francisco Bay Area became an important incubator of fat feminist politics and community in the late 1970s. Initially, the city saw the emergence of fat politics based on self-acceptance and the Fat Underground critique of a fatphobic culture. By the mid-1970s, the grassroots feminist context for the movement had changed. Women’s Liberation had largely been replaced by a rich array of feminist politics that thrived in burgeoning women’s communities. Many women embraced what is sometimes called cultural feminism, advocating for the development of women’s culture as an alternative to patriarchal culture. Others supported socialist feminism, which tied the oppression of women to capitalist economic exploitation. And many women identified as lesbian feminists. Lesbian feminists argued that lesbianism was more than a sexual identity. It was a challenge to the system of patriarchy and an assertion of the value of women. Within this complex world, fat activism in San Francisco exploded as activists created a thriving fat feminist community and identity politics.

The San Francisco community involved women of diverse political persuasions, and the city was a center of gender radicalism for the West Coast. The area boasted several women’s bookstores and numerous feminist health clinics. Residents founded women’s presses and published feminist newspapers and periodicals. Women even opened an automobile repair shop. They congregated at coffeehouses, bars, and a feminist school. In 1978, a community-owned Women’s Building replaced the old Women’s Centers. Countless activist, service and support groups tied the community together. Thousands of women constructed lives based on the presence of these institutions and the friendship networks they supported. For many fat activists, such as Chaya Gordon, the fat issue was simply one of a host of social issues addressed by this widespread movement. For Laura Bock, among others, fat liberation was paramount. But for all fat activists, the existence of a wider feminist movement was critical to their ability to develop a fat politics.

Fat feminism emerged later in San Francisco than in Los Angeles. In 1975, a staff member at the San Francisco Women’s Center initiated a fat women’s consciousness-raising group. After dieting to give herself confidence, future fat activist Bock came to the first meeting. A support group for fat lesbians splintered off from this first group as did Fat Female and Forty, a group focused on issues specific to older women, led by feminist health activist Marjorie Nelson. These consciousness-raising groups were focused more on self-acceptance than political change. Yet women were aware of and influenced
by the radical critique offered by Fat Underground, which sent speakers to San Francisco a number of times, and the groups began to develop a political critique. As Deeg Gold recalled of the lesbian group, “[it] took us . . . from the personal to the political in a very tender, accepting, gradual journey.”22 Women from these groups, joined by a number of former Fat Underground members who, like Judy Freespirit, relocated to the Bay Area, would go on to form a host of fat cultural and political organizations.

A Fat Underground event became the catalyst for visible fat activism in the Bay Area. One Fat Underground lecture, in 1978 or 1979, inspired a group of women, including Laura Bock, to write their own personal fat liberation manifestos and organize a reading at the Artemis café, a local women’s coffeehouse.23 Energized and excited by this event, women began talking about more formal political organizing, leading Freespirit and Bock to call a meeting of “all the fat activists that we could find around the Bay Area.”24 This group founded Fat Lip Readers’ Theater in 1981. Because actors read from scripts on a minimal set, Fat Lip could easily perform their political theater anywhere, a flexibility that made it ideal for conveying their provocative political message.25 Fat Lip was followed the next year by Life in the Fat Lane, a political action group committed to fighting what they termed “fat oppression.” The impetus for Life in the Fat Lane came from women from the lesbian consciousness-raising group and from the first West Coast lesbian-separatist group, Gorgons. Miriam Cantor, Deni Asnis, and Gorgon women Deeg Gold and Chaya Gordon were founders. There were other, informal groups in this period that sometimes advocated illegal actions, such as defacing offensive billboards. Fat feminists also rediscovered NAAFA (now renamed the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance), challenging it to be both more feminist and more activist.26

Fat feminism in this period was in many ways a cultural politics, both in its focus on community building and in its perception that culture and cultural oppression were critical sources of both fat oppression and women’s oppression. An exceptionally active and visible community sustained cultural fat feminism. By the early 1980s, San Francisco had become a “Mecca for radical fat feminists, lesbians and bisexual women everywhere who are starved for a sense of community and belonging.”27 When writer Elana Dyke-womon visited the city in 1982, she attended a Fat Lip Reader’s Theater production, gave a reading as part of Fat Fridays, an evening of performance and art at the Woman’s Building, and took in an exhibit of photographs of fat lesbians. She later remembered feeling “safer, prouder of my body, than I have any other time in any other public place.” Susan Goldberg came to the
city in part because it was home to “so many fat Jewish girls.” Miriam Cantor, a member of Life in the Fat Lane, recalled a blur of social and political events and overlapping friendship circles, all centering on a fat feminist identity.28

Cultural politics demanded a positive and celebratory culture and community for fat women. They were engaged in prefigurative politics, constructing a community that fostered positive fat identity in anticipation of a future fat-positive society. Thus some of their activism centered on ameliorating daily difficulties and exclusions. Since there was little available in the way of clothing for fat women, certainly nothing stylish, women created clothing swaps and eventually made and sold clothing. They took over swimming pools at designated times so fat women could be comfortable in bathing suits.29 They contributed to feminist publications, and finally in 1984 Oakland’s Alice Ansfield founded Radiance, the first national magazine for fat women. Whatever differences there may have been among activists, “everybody would come to the dances and [the] clothing swaps,” remembered Miriam Cantor, “and everybody would go to the [fat] swims.”30 Along with this emphasis on creating community, some activism in the period followed Fat Underground in targeting fat-oppressive institutions, in particular the weight-loss and insurance industries.31 But feminism was still the core of fat women’s politics. The oppression of fat women stemmed from the oppression of all women, and challenging fatphobia had broad feminist consequences. Visibility became an especially important way for fat activists to assert those feminist politics. Women challenged assumptions and stereotypes about fat women and assaulted the daily inconveniences, humiliations, and exclusions they suffered.

Fat visibility had many manifestations. Laura Bock remembered the fat event at the Artemis café as a “coming out . . . The place was packed . . . there was a lot of excitement, and I remember getting a lot of recognition for bravery.” Fat Lip performances explored such shared issues as sexuality, discrimination in the workplace, and the difficulty fat women had finding clothing. But as the group found, the sheer presence of fat bodies on stage was a way to challenge normative assumptions about body size and to claim proud fat identities. Other activists put together a yearly float in the Gay Day parade. They trained in karate and performed in local martial arts showcases. Deni Asnis recalled how studying martial arts transformed her experience of her large body. Being fat and walking the streets with pride was “striking a blow for fat liberation because I was being an example.” Insisting on shame-free visibility also meant challenging the landscape of discrimination. Activists fought the narrowness of subway turnstiles and their inability to fit comfort-
ably in airplane seats. Some of the problems and restrictions on very large women led women to make legal demands for inclusion that relied on claims of disability. Fat activists were thus at the forefront of the emerging movement for rights for the disabled.  

Despite their hopes for dismembering patriarchy, fat feminism continued to focus most of its attention on convincing other feminists of the justness of the cause. There is some evidence that the women’s community responded. Fat Lip, Laura Bock recalled, was briefly “the darling . . . of the feminist movement,” as feminists recognized similarities among fat oppression and other forms of oppression. Many fat feminists felt, however, that their fat politics were not fully embraced by the broader feminist community. The women’s press and feminist political organizations remained largely silent on fat issues. Freespirit expressed dismay at the hostile response she received when she spoke about fat liberation on a local feminist radio program. A feminist bookstore drew activist ire after they created a table display including “diet books and anti-fat literature.”

Why did feminism have such a difficult time embracing fat liberation? Feminists did recognize, and sometimes applaud, fat feminists’ oppositional politics of appearance, their attacks on the weight-loss industry, and the connections they made between fat oppression and sexism. But one issue that continued to trouble was health. The Women’s Health Movement was a thriving aspect of feminist activism, especially in the early to mid 1970s, and health activists were especially concerned about the associations of fat with illness. Fat feminists recognized this. In fact, it was through questioning the association of fat with disease that fat feminists initially asserted a positive fat feminist identity.

III. NATURE AND NURTURE: FAT AND HEALTH

In a modern society that still celebrated Victorian ideals of self-restraint, self-denial, and hard work, fat operated as a sign of lack of self-control. Fat people were presumed to be gluttonous overeaters, lazy slobs whose moral failures were made visible in their bloated flesh, evidence of a pathological failure to attain proper maturity. Spiritual sickness connected to bodily illness, as medical science assumed fat to be a cause of a host of diseases, critically heart disease, a growing concern in the 1970s, and diabetes. Fat also operated as a sign of an unhealthy society; fat people were chided by social activists for their supposed waste of world resources and by conservatives for an apparent embodiment of what they saw as youth culture’s celebration
of self-indulgence. Fat symbolized disease and disorder, a sickness almost always the responsibility of the incompetent individual. In order to claim a positive fat identity, fat activists quickly recognized the importance of challenging this ubiquitous pathologizing of fat bodies. A seemingly simple way to accomplish this was to assert the healthy naturalness of fat bodies. What if fat bodies could be established as a natural function, the product of genetic determination, no more or less healthy than any other bodies? Nature created fat, so society would have to accept it.

In making such claims, fat feminists built on the insights of both feminism and gay liberation. Feminist health activists asserted that women’s bodies were natural and normal in defiance of a medical community that equated reproduction with sickness and tended to see the female body as an imperfect reflection of a male norm. Gay men and lesbians sought to reject the depiction of homosexuality as either a disease or a moral failing, asserting the naturalness of homosexual desire and the normalcy of gay bodies. Both movements worked on the premise that achieving social equality depended on the ability to reject claims of biological deviance, degeneracy, and immorality. Similarly, fat feminists claimed that fat bodies were natural and thus by definition healthy. Any illness medical science associated with fat must have other causes. Like many in the gay liberation movement, fat women insisted that they were born fat. Indeed, by 1975 feminist Laurie Anne Lepoff castigated the women’s community for continuing to assume being fat was a “choice.”

Ironically, and powerfully, by asserting that they had no personal control over the size of their bodies, fat feminists sought to wrest control of those bodies for themselves. This would prove complicated, however, as fat exceeded a simple explanation of genetics and nature.

The idea that body size was a natural, biologically given variant and thus not subject to personal control emerged in one of the most significant moments in the formation of Fat Underground. Vivian Mayer, searching for a medically sound diet to “cure” what she then considered a lifelong weight problem, happened on Llewellyn Louderback’s 1970 book Fat Power. Louderback challenged the association between food consumption and body size, arguing that on average fat and thin people ate about the same. Intrigued but wanting to corroborate his conclusions, Aldebaran did her own search of the existing medical literature only to confirm that, indeed, fat people and thin people tended to have a similar caloric intake. Relatedly, food intake did not necessarily bear a relationship to body size; thus there were fat people who ate very little and thin people who consumed many calories. Personal histories confirmed the medical science and attendant obliviousness of medical practitioners. For instance, a doctor put a fat activist in the hospital on
a 700-calorie diet. When she failed to lose weight, he insisted that she must have been cheating. Thus, Fat Underground claimed in a flyer, “fat people don’t eat any more than most slim people.” Body size was not related to behavior.

Another revelation compounded activists’ growing sense of the depth of medical misinformation about fat. In 1970, before joining Fat Underground, Lynne McAfee worked in a medical library, “fetching books for doctors.” Conducting her own research on the side, she discovered evidence that the long-term failure rate of diets was as high as 95 percent. It is common knowledge today that dieters generally do not maintain weight loss, but for McAfee in the 1970s this was a bombshell. When she asked a physician why women were not being told that they were effectively being set up for inevitable failure, she was informed that physicians did not want to discourage dieters.

In another Fat Underground flyer, the group revealed the callous absurdity of doctors’ assumptions, quoting a physician’s claim that “those who lose and maintain a normal weight must accept some degree of hunger and unsatisfied appetite as a way of life.” Though these revelatory sets of findings were ambiguous on the relationship between caloric intake and body size (with one set of data challenging a correlation and the other affirming it) they did both lead to the conclusion that individuals had very little control over their body size. Thus activists could use the existing medical literature to challenge the associations of fat with lack of self-control and immorality.

The argument that fat caused health problems received a similar critique. Fat women, Fat Underground argued, received poor health care in part because physicians, when they were even willing to treat fat patients, provided humiliation and poor care. In a leaflet Fat Underground described a woman who, when seeking prenatal care, was asked by the physician, “Who in his right mind would make you pregnant?” Physicians were accused of abusing and torturing fat bodies because they were more determined to see their patients become thin than they were to address their basic and immediate health concerns. Activists recalled, for instance, how even as young children they were prescribed diet pills (often amphetamines), which made them frantic with manic energy. Social pressure to be thin exacerbated these assaults on fat women’s health. According to a Fat Underground pamphlet, fat women

risk pregnancy rather than take birth control pills [which could lead to weight gain]; we refuse to take hormones after hysterectomy; we go on reducing diets while pregnant . . . we choose not to stop smoking cigarettes; we try a new and dangerous diet every six months; we live on the edge of
starvation year in and year out; we despair over every mouthful as if eating were an unnatural act.

Would it not make sense to consider how fat oppression in its various manifestations caused fat women’s health problems? Add to that the emotional strain on fat women of living in a fat-hating culture and there seemed sufficient cause to believe that the cause for negative health effects were broadly related to fat oppression. Extant medical research charted correlation and even causation between fat and ill health without taking into consideration these other social factors. As Fat Underground commented, “Fat people who don’t diet and don’t hate themselves are as healthy as anyone else.”41 Fat was not making women sick; social intolerance and bad medicine were.

In the face of this carefully catalogued abuse, fat feminists declared an insurrection. “We fully intend to reclaim power over our bodies and our lives.”42 Throwing off the shackles of medically sanctioned diet advice that trapped fat women in endless cycles of self-denial and despair and rejecting associations of ill-health and overeating with body size, the movement sought to liberate their naturally fat bodies. A politics of liberation declared that women could find freedom by rejecting their shackles, which in this case meant dieting and the attendant guilt and shame surrounding food that fat women were taught to feel. Challenging years of shamed public eating, for instance, Fat Lip women turned eating in a restaurant into political theater. As Laura Bock remembered, “you can not imagine . . . 6 or 8 fat women going to a restaurant . . . not trying to hide, eating with gusto . . . having permission to relish and to savor.” At fat feminist meetings, women brought potato chips, pies and cakes.43 Dieting was dismissed, and women, perhaps for the first time in their memories, experienced the pleasure of eating without shame.

Liberationist body politics were, however, complicated for fat women. Fat feminists recognized that although each woman might have a biologically determined weight that could be considered “natural,” cultural factors tended to alter women’s bodies in ways that made it impossible to recover that natural body. Diets, according to Fat Underground findings, were the worst culprits. They required women literally to starve. In response to an apparent mortal threat, a powerful survival mechanism led the body to demand food. In a battle between individual willpower and the body’s survival instinct, the latter almost always won. The body then raised its weight set point, the body’s predetermined weight, so that, when the next period of starvation came, the fatter body would be more likely to survive. In the wake of a “failed” diet, women thus found themselves gaining weight to reach that
new set point. Dieting had other long-term consequences as well, as Aldeban ran suggested in her scathing “recipe” for compulsive eating. “Teach [a child] to eat what the diet book says she should eat, rather than what her body says she needs,” and you will have a woman whose eating is dysfunctional. Despite what was claimed elsewhere, fat bodies were not always, then, the product of genetics. Years of dieting could leave a woman far larger than she might have been had she never been encouraged to make herself less.

Women in the San Francisco community thus discovered that the consequences of seizing liberation were sometimes ambivalent. Fat women who had been chubby as children believed that, if they had never dieted, they would have grown into only moderately fat adults. Others hoped that, if they abandoned dieting in the present, they would readjust to the set point they were born with. In practice, even as some women claimed that their weight stabilized when they ceased dieting, others found that this was not the case. Having stopped dieting because she felt she was “ruining my health,” Marjorie Nelson “gained weight like crazy.” The choice for fat women was not therefore simply be oppressed or reject dieting and return to a natural weight, but rather a more complicated struggle between the negative effects of dieting and an uncertain future of possible continued weight-gain.

Liberationist claims about health and illness were also made more complicated, because of physical changes women experienced as they were aging, and because of the rise of new political movements, such as the disability rights movement. By the 1980s, for example, some women in the movement began being diagnosed with diabetes. Initially, some activists refused to accept a connection between diabetes and fat, even going so far as to deny that diabetic women were ill. Though this may seem a somewhat callous and extreme response, it made sense given their beliefs. Accepting that weight could make one vulnerable to diabetes challenged the liberationist argument at its core. It suggested that there was, in fact, something “wrong” with being fat.

At the same time, the fat feminist movement began to see the benefits of asserting their rights based on a disability status. Claiming disability was a powerful way for fat activists to challenge problems of access and equal treatment. But it also suggested a deficiency in fat bodies. As Life in the Fat Lane member Marilyn Calman put it, “you want to say I’m fat and I’m fit. [But] the only way I can go after you legally is by saying you’re discriminating against me because of a disability I have. That’s a bit of a contradiction.”

The emergence of illnesses like diabetes among the group as well as their desire to assert their legal rights by claiming disability threatened a simple liberationist paradigm. It became difficult to claim that fat bodies were a product of nature, healthy and normal, to be accepted and respected. Instead,
fat bodies seemed to be produced through a complicated mix of genetics and cultural and social factors. While not in and of itself an illness, obesity, some reluctantly admitted, could make women vulnerable to some diseases. Thus women within the fat lesbian community in San Francisco shifted their approach. They called for women to embrace self-care, and demanded decent and responsible health care for fat women.

Activists in Life in the Fat Lane, Fat Lip, and other groups advocated an active lifestyle. Though initially some women, in particular the Gorgon women, were dubious about exercise because they saw it as a thinly veiled weight-loss strategy, eventually even they actively supported fat swims, fat women participating in karate, walking, biking, and aerobics.50 Fat activists asserted the rights of fat women to decent medical care. Women in Fat Lip encouraged fat women to seek out medical treatment, recommending that they take an advocate with them to their medical appointments. Other activists challenged the medical community, and especially the feminist medical community, to treat fat women more respectfully and knowledgeably.51

Fat women’s critique of the health-care industry was based on important insights. In their activism, they asserted a fundamentally important point—namely, not all women are born to be thin. Fat could not be dismissed as a moral failing, but must be seen in all its complexity. Society’s prejudicial responses to fat, evident in the recommendation of abusive diets and the mistreatment of fat patients, were destructive and inadequate. Fat feminist challenges to medical assumptions gave women the ability to think critically about fat, reject personal shame, and find ways to be healthy and comfortable in bodies that did not conform to the thin ideal.

The movements’ attempt to claim fat as a biologically determined identity category was less successful. Fat proved hard to pin down. Despite the context of cultural feminism, with its interest in celebrating women as fundamentally, and biologically, different from men, it was hard for feminists to make similar claims about fat. Women were torn between claiming fat as their biological destiny and their critique of the ways a fatphobic culture in fact produced increasingly fat bodies. Fat feminists in San Francisco came to recognize the degree to which fat bodies could be shaped and altered by such influences as dieting, surgery, pills, diseases, exercise, and the cultural images and messages that taught women what they should eat and what they should look like. Fat was not a natural condition; it was a cultural construction. It could be seen to signify the abuse of women in a woman-hating culture. But if external culture could create fat, so could feminists themselves. Fat could thus become a sign of beauty, sensuality, and pride.
Even after she became an impassioned fat advocate, Judy Freespirit struggled to accept the idea that she would never be thin, that fatness was part of her identity.\textsuperscript{52} She was not alone. For many fat activists, public declarations of defiance existed in tandem with personal doubts. Whether fat was dictated by nature or by culture, rejecting the vilification of fat was one thing, embracing fat as part of who you were was another. For many fat women, claiming a right to sexuality, desire, and desirability became crucial to embracing their fat selves. If, as theorists have argued, we understand modern identity to be based on an assumption that the “truth” about the self, the core of identity, is sexuality, then for fat women claiming the “truth” of their desire, and desirability, anchored a claim to identity.\textsuperscript{53} Put more directly, embracing fat women’s sexuality was critical to claiming a positive fat identity. Fat feminists took a radical approach to claiming that sexuality, insisting on their right to determine the shape and expression of their own desire.

Initially, Fat Underground asserted a politics of sexuality that drew from Women’s Liberation. Feminists castigated a patriarchal culture of sexual objectification and sexual exploitation, rebelling against women’s position as sexual objects by rejecting the trappings of conventional femininity and desirability. At women’s centers in Los Angeles and San Francisco, for example, women sported flannel shirts and short haircuts that directly defied such structures of femininity. Fat women echoed this discomfort with objectification, including the objectification they felt from straight fat admirers. Before forming Fat Underground, Freespirit, Aldebaran, and Manov attended NAAFA dances where thin male participants admired sexy fat women. Within this context the usual hierarchy was inverted, and the fattest women found themselves the most sought after. Though this scenario may have been positive for some women, the Fat Underground women were uncomfortable with male fetishization of their fat bodies. In Manov’s terse explication: “we checked out NAAFA where the prevailing emphasis was that fat is beautiful and therefore we can date each other. We didn’t like that so we formed the Fat Underground.”\textsuperscript{54} NAAFA was doubly problematic for feminists, vaunting male objectification of women on the basis of their bodies, and rejecting political activism in favor of socializing. Asserting fat women’s right to traditional heterosexuality and objectification was not appealing to a group that wanted to change the world.

Fat Underground sexual politics were in other ways unique. NAAFA dances notwithstanding, fat women argued that they, unlike their thinner
counterparts, were not seen as sexual beings because in their fatness they violated patriarchal standards of desirability. Thus, Fat Underground declared, fat women were “denied our very sexuality.” And because women were defined by their sex, fat women literally had “no place” in society. The challenge for fat women was to find a way to reclaim sexuality and self without repositioning themselves as the objects of a problematic male gaze. By 1973, when Fat Underground was newly in action, lesbianism had become an important option. Lesbian feminism offered a passionate critique of the politics of appearance, rejecting sexual objectification and affirming the importance of mutuality in sexual relationships. Critically, lesbian feminism also asserted that desire was to a degree a choice. Women could choose to turn to female partners, rejecting ties with men and dominant (male) culture, as a way to claim feminist nationalism and a liberated female identity.

Fat feminists would use a similar logic in their construction of fat identity. One Saturday in 1974 Ariana Manov called an emergency meeting of Fat Underground for the next day. When the group assembled, Manov announced that she had read a book about stigma that led her to a stunning realization. As Freespirit recalled,

. . . there were a number of us who were either on the edge of or had just come out . . . maybe three or four . . . and none of us were being lovers with each other. And it occurred to her that somehow we were stigmatizing each other and why weren’t we sleeping with each other? . . . Why are we all celibate lesbians? And it was very quickly after that that a whole bunch of fat activists . . . were starting to take fat lovers, either thin women or fat women take lovers with other fat women. And for a while the sexuality thing took a really big focus.

If women could choose to be lovers with other women, why not choose fat lovers? Claiming a fat lover became a political act, a defiance of the stigma that marked fat women, and an affirmation of fat identity.

By the late 1970s, lesbian culture and grassroots feminist culture became difficult to disentangle, as so many women in the larger grassroots feminist community were calling themselves lesbians. Even given this context, the centrality of lesbianism to fat feminism nationally is startling. Fat lesbian identity seemed to follow the diffusion of Fat Underground radicalism. The lesbian-separatist group Gorgons got involved in fat activism after reading Fat Underground literature. It “was like a ton of bricks dropping on us,” recalled member Chaya Gordon. Lesbian groups in the Midwest, Pennsylvania, and Atlanta, adopted and adapted Fat Underground analysis. Each
summer, beginning in the late 1970s, fat lesbians from across the country gathered to socialize and organize at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. Similarly, the attendees of the First National Fat Feminist Conference in 1980 were, in Freespirit’s memory, about half lesbians.59

As fat feminist politics heated up in San Francisco in the 1970s, fat feminists initially had a difficult time addressing sexuality. Laura Bock remembered it taking years for women in her consciousness-raising group to be comfortable discussing sex. But as more fat activists came out, they embraced Fat Underground’s assertion that fat women had the right to be and feel sexual and desirable and that turning to other fat women like themselves was an important part of developing a positive fat identity. “It is an amazing experience to have a fat lover as a fat woman,” Miriam Cantor explained in describing her decision to do so. “Brings up all your shit, but also feels great, and there is a wonder in the sensuality of fat women’s bodies . . . There is a way of developing your identity through that.” Discovering sexuality with other fat women did not just personally astonish but was also politically “really revolutionary.”60 By the early 1980s, most of the visible fat activists in San Francisco were lesbians. The prominent Life in the Fat Lane was a lesbian group. Fat Lip was not, but almost all of the group’s members were in fact dykes.61

Despite the importance of lesbian feminism to fat feminist activism, not all lesbians were supportive of fat women’s sexual politics. As Freespirit commented, lesbian feminism challenged “looksism” only “up to a point.” In an article that ran in the San Francisco Bay Area feminist newspaper Plexus in 1975, Laurie Ann Lepoff called the lesbian community to task for refusing to see fat women as potential lovers. Lynne McAfee wrote an article titled “I Came Out and Nobody Cared.” Life in the Fat Lane discussions circulated around their frustration with fatphobia in the lesbian community, and this theme also resounded in Fat Lip performances.62 In part the conflict had to do with the body politics of the lesbian feminist community. As Marilyn Calman explained, “dykes were I think on the forefront of redefining women’s roles. . . . You know this being strong and building your body and being energetic,” which fatness seemed to contradict.63 More emphatically, fat activist Judith Stein explained lesbian “fat hatred” as in part an effect of the “development of the ‘strong amazon’ (never fat!) as the Lesbian cultural ideal.”64

Fat activists countered with celebrations of fat women’s sensuality. Fat Lip included evocations of sensuality and sexuality in their scripts. Seeking images of beautiful fat women, feminists turned to reproductions of ancient goddess statues, which were powerful in their associations of fat, sensuality,
and power. As the feminist “pro-sex” movement emerged at the end of the 1970s, some fat activists embraced its irreverent attitude toward sexuality and its emphasis on free sexual expression. Women thus produced erotica featuring fat women, and put together art shows of photographs of community women. Sexuality became a way that fat lesbians defined a community within a community, within which they sought total acceptance.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given how important sexuality and intimacy were to the movement, this focus also had destructive aspects. When Fat Underground came apart just a few years after it was founded, some members saw the breakup as in part a reaction to the invocation of sexuality. As was true in other lesbian feminist groups, the strain of working with lovers, ex-lovers and their new lovers created complicated dynamics. By the end of the decade, Fat Underground members had spread across the country, with one former member commenting that it was too hard even to stay in the same city. None of this was unusual. Other lesbian groups in the period also struggled with the fallout of intimacy. But this crisis over sexual relationships may have been especially fraught for fat feminists, for whom sexual expression and acceptance were so important to the struggle against a persistently fatphobic culture.

The exploration of sexuality and personal relationships was a significant aspect of fat feminist organizing, one that was transformative for many women. For fat women to assert that they were sexual beings was to refute the patriarchal judgment that seemed to erase them. Claiming sex meant claiming the right to exist, and the right to exist on their own terms. Sexuality was also an important basis for ties of intimacy and community. But fat feminist politics of sexuality were also important for what they were not. Activists did not speak in terms of discovering their “true” sexual nature, a biological predisposition to desire other fat women. Rather, they assumed that they could refute the stigma against them by encouraging their desire for one another. Shaping their sexual desire became an important way to define what it meant to be a fat woman.

Fat was a slippery category, and part of the power and significance of fat feminist politics was their creativity and bravery in insisting there was a way to claim fat as an identity, and fat politics as identity politics, despite the fact that it was so hard to define what fat “really” was. Rejecting, or at least complicating, associations of fat with ill-health, claiming sexual desirability, were all positive ways fat women could shape an identity that made sense to them. But it was one thing to reject negative stereotypes and quite another to assert a positive identity. Identity politics demands some sense of whom it speaks for. It was in the fight to decide who was fat that fat activists would both
make their most radical claims and confront their greatest contradictions and conflicts.

V. WHO'S FAT?

In many ways, the struggles fat women had in developing identity politics reflected the problems confronting other groups. The extent to which nature and nurture defined identity categories, the degree to which political movements, or medical intervention, could shape and define experience, desire, even identity, also plagued feminist and gay and lesbian movements. Fat did not work in the same way, in part because, unlike devalued categories like “woman” or “African American,” fat women were eternally confronted with the tantalizing possibility that, if they just did what the doctor told them to do, they could step across the line of demarcation and become “normal.” Thinness always beckoned. Of course a similar temptation existed for lesbians and gay men in the period as well. Many conservatives insisted that homosexuals should deny perverse desires and redirect them “appropriately.” Gay people should become straight, some thought, but that was far from a universal sentiment, and a growing number of people did, in fact, believe that homosexuality was an inherited identity in no need of a cure (the American Psychological Association formally withdrew homosexuality from its diagnostic manual in 1973). In the same period, fat was almost unilaterally assumed to be a changeable condition, not an identity. There were other differences too. Unlike queerness, which could, at least apparently, be easily defined by acts (you were queer if you slept with someone of the same sex), fatness was, at least apparently, a physical state. And not a clearly defined one. Who, after all, counted as fat? Body size could change throughout a lifetime. How big did you have to be? It was in attempting to define the limits of who was included in their community that fat activists hit on their most radical assertion. Being fat became in itself a radical statement, a political assertion of defiance that far transcended mere demands for tolerance.

In the early years of Fat Underground, activists seemed unconcerned with defining who counted as fat. Fat appeared to be a relatively self-evident category. Since their liberationist politics was most concerned with the significance of body size for all women (or even all people), defining the limits of the community was perhaps a less immediate problem. This was not so in the cultural feminist world of San Francisco. Activists asserted that affirming a positive fat self required “safe spaces,” where women could be among other fat women. The importance of creating such spaces, and of
the community they fostered, led the movement to draw lines of inclusion and exclusion.

Defining who counted as fat happened through a series of community conflicts. Fat Lip, in an episode that garnered the attention of the feminist press, restricted some of their performances to fat-only audiences. Like Betty Dudley, who expressed her joy at being “among ‘my’ own,” many fat women were very happy with this decision.67 As Fat Lip member Laura Bock recalled, however, fat-only performances were controversial. “I mean it was hard because we wanted a place where there was safety to speak and to experience without having women who would be considered acceptable there.”68 Fat women shared experiences that were easier to discuss without the presence of thinner women, whose lack of similar experiences might lead to insensitive comments or misunderstanding. Conflict erupted when some fat women expressed frustration that thin women were not being kept out. In the words of one, a few “not very big womyn” gained entrance, making the performance she attended “not a safe place for every fat womon there.” Other women complained about being turned away at the door because they were considered not fat enough.69 A similar problem emerged at open performances as well, when Fat Lip asked that the audience divide themselves into groups defined by size. “Women didn’t know where to put themselves,” Bock recalled. “Here came women who might be considered ‘overweight’ by cultural standards, and have to deal with that in life, and come to a Fat Lip meeting and we say you’re not fat. And you need to go into that group.”70 These conflicts pushed activists to find some way to define the boundaries of community and identity.

One way that fat activists sought to monitor inclusion and exclusion was through a diffuse effort to set behavioral requirements on community members. If fat was difficult to define in an objective and bodily sense, then perhaps it made sense to examine attitudes toward fat as expressed through behavior. For instance, by the beginning of the 1980s the idea that fat women could take each other as lovers was, in the view of some activists, hardening into almost a requirement. Women who had thin lovers were looked at askance, their loyalty to the movement and their affirmation of fatness in question.71 Similarly, by the late 1970s, many fat liberationists argued that dieting was never an acceptable option. Some fat activists ostracized women in the consciousness-raising group for older fat women because of their “liberal” (as opposed to radical) decision that dieting should be a choice for women. Before 1981, Miriam Cantor recalled, it was possible to be unsure about dieting. After that year, it was not.72 Dieting to lose weight appeared to be just a way that fat women could betray one another and the movement.
Though these behavioral strategies helped define inclusion among activists, women sought more concrete delimitations to deal with the popular uproar over “fat-only” events. In 1983, the lesbian feminist journal *Lesbian Contradiction* printed a highly charged debate among fat activists that resulted in a general rule that to be considered fat a woman had to be over 200 pounds. This somewhat arbitrary standard remained contested and debated for years afterward. It was also difficult to implement. During the fat swims, for example, one fat activist took it upon herself to walk around the pool and to interrogate the less-fat women about their weight and thus their right to attend. Many women were unhappy with this sort of policing. Fat remained a conflicted and contested category. While some women were clear about where the lines were drawn, many others remained confused.

Drawing a weight line also left unanswered growing questions about differences in size among women in the movement. A vocal group, which Bock referred to as “really fat,” created a radical subgroup within the larger fat feminist community. On the surface this group was defined by accessibility, or lack thereof. A really fat woman, according to Freespirit (using the more current term “super-size”), “can’t get through a turnstile, you can’t sit in a movie seat, you can’t go to the theater. . . . You have to buy 2 tickets for an airplane. That’s super-size. You can’t buy clothes at a fat women’s store. That’s super-size. . . . It’s not a matter of pounds, it’s access.”

But being really fat was also more than that. In the early 1980s, a group of these women, many of them activists in *Life in the Fat Lane*, all of them lesbians, and most of them Jewish, positioned themselves as the most radical edge of the fat feminist movement. For these women, really fat became a celebration of size and especially of the power of fat itself to confront and alter the world. Really fat embraced a radical, lesbian feminist politics that used fat as a weapon against patriarchy.

Really fat women tended to be the most vehement about the importance of rejecting all aspects of the war on fat and assumed for themselves the task of community policing. Miriam Cantor recalled that she was one of the most strident in asserting what she called a “hard line.” Rejecting dieting, claiming a fat identity, and seeing herself as “an oppressed minority,” were “so much the fabric of our lives and our identities. The thin people became the enemy.” Within the community, she believed that the really fat “were feared.” At the same time, they were also seen as the radical edge of the movement. Indeed, a fat activist wrote in frustration to a local paper about a conflict with women from *Life in the Fat Lane*, claiming that her opinions were not respected because she was “not fat enough, or angry enough, in their eyes.”

Despite their sometimes heavy-handed approach to politics, women in
the group had the sense they were respected because they were willing to put themselves on the line. In their refusal to diet, their assumption of great size, and their defiance in the face of a fatphobic culture, really fat women seemed to use their own bodies as a place on which to write their radical politics. It was not just okay to be fat; it was radical, transgressive, and positive. Being really fat could not be understood as a biological condition, or even just as the result of a culture that abused fat women. Being really fat seemed almost a visual, bodily refusal to play by the rules of patriarchy. At her first Life in the Fat Lane meeting, Marilyn Calman recalled, “I remember being really blown out by the women . . . [They were] talking about how it was cool to be fat, and you know fuck everything and fuck everybody and if they can’t handle us or deal with us then it’s their problem.” Reveling in their anger, fat lesbians turned the tables. Fat wasn’t their problem at all. They did their best, however, to make it a problem for a fatphobic and sexist culture in which they lived.

The limitations of a celebratory fat politics were also pointedly confronted in this same group of very radical activists. Deni Asnis recalled that women in Life in the Fat Lane continued to gain weight. The group did not discuss this increasingly visible reality, even though women recognized that continued weight gain came at a personal cost. Eating disorders also went largely unnoticed. As Marge Nelson recalled of her politics at the time, “If you’re hungry eat. If you’re throwing up don’t talk about it. I mean a lot of stuff got swept under the carpet.” The rejection of dieting led to suspicion of natural foods, vegetarianism, and other popular alternative diets that could be covers for a subconscious or hidden desire to lose weight. In a 1983 incident that caused much later anguish, Life in the Fat Lane ostracized a woman, a former lover of Miriam Cantor, who lost weight when she became ill with diabetes. “I didn’t trust her and I didn’t talk to her anymore,” Cantor recalled, “I said now you have privilege over me. She had fucking diabetes. No compassion. I had no compassion.” Deni Asnis recalled assuming “oh diabetes, that’s just . . . an anti-fat thing.” There was no other way to understand their friend’s illness. And they found it difficult to deal with such gray areas because they felt a duty to be models of defiance. Asnis was not alone in suggesting that the pride she demonstrated in public often belied a more complicated internal struggle. As Cantor has said about this radical moment, “When I look back on it now I understand why it happened but it was at a pretty big cost.” The importance of prioritizing their radical vision and their sense of themselves as a vanguard of the movement sometimes overshadowed the complexities of their personal experiences of their bodies and their lives as fat women.
The radical identity politics of these really fat women did not survive the growing recognition of the complexity of fat politics; consequently, by the 1990s the fat community in San Francisco had moved onto a more inclusive political vision. Despite the personal and community strife it fostered, what radical fat feminism did was crucial for the movement. These women took fat feminist identity politics to a logical extreme. Stripping fat of all negative associations and assigning it a powerful and exclusively positive role gave fat feminists an important tool in their battle against fat oppression. And that was their fat feminist identity itself. Radical fat feminism constructed a body that was full, lush, sensuous, and powerful in its refusal to be contained. It was itself a direct assault on mainstream American culture, daring observers to dismiss or find monstrous an unrestrained female body.

Fat feminism continued to challenge assumptions about fat and gender after the height of activism in the early 1980s. Fat Lip performed into the new century. In the 1980s and 1990s, Bay Area women formed a number of new organizations, such as the lesbian action group Let it All Hang Out. The context was, however, altered. These groups operated without the embracing context of the feminist community, which had largely dissipated by the middle of the 1980s. Fat feminism continues to flourish nationally in publications and on the Internet. And the impact of fat feminism is undeniable. Fat feminist identity and community formed a crucial basis on which fat women challenged deeply ingrained self-hatred and a culture of intense fatphobia. The questions the movement raised have transformed how Americans think about fat. We as a society are no longer simply prescriptive in our understanding of the difficulties of dieting and the misery of being fat in a culture that worships thin. Many more people accept the possibility that fat people can be healthy and fit. Fat no longer always signals asexuality. Fat feminists insisted that they had the right to define the interpretation of fat bodies, and to an impressive extent, their vision still holds sway.

Fat feminism was not just about reshaping attitudes toward fat. In some ways, the most significant aspect of fat feminist politics stems from women’s struggle to define fat identity. The movement found that it could not claim an already existing category, fat women, for which it could speak. Such an identity would have to be constructed as the basis of their politics. Their efforts to define fat as a biological given, to assert its naturalness, to divest it of associations with ill health, to claim fat as an entirely positive good, to construct boundaries between who was fat and who was not, were to a large degree failures. The failure to claim fat as a biologically predetermined category proved to be most productive precisely because it challenged activists to look more deeply at the complex workings of culture in the construction of fat.
bodies didn’t have to come from nature to be a significant identity category. They may have been unable, finally, to entirely disassociate overeating from weight gain, but such failure led them to explore the power they had in shaping their bodies. Food and eating became almost a weapon in their increasingly radical politics. True, they proved unable to recover a natural body by countering the effects of culture on their bodies, and true, they were unable to assert an unproblematically beautiful and positive fat identity. Such failures forced them to examine the complexities of living in a stigmatized body, and a body that was especially understood by many people to be mutable. Even the failure to set clear lines of inclusion and exclusion pointed out the ultimate impossibility of a clear definition of who was included in the fat identity category. As Judy Freespirit concluded about fat identity politics, “it’s just too complicated, it’s just way complicated.”

Despite, indeed because of, these failures and complexities, what fat feminist did do was brilliantly construct a flexible and dynamic identity for fat women.

In some ways this evocation of fat feminist activism highlights the ways that fat as an identity works differently from more conventional identity categories like race and gender. Those dissimilarities are perhaps more in degree than in kind. Fat feminists’ efforts to define identity suggest at least a way of thinking about especially grassroots feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. Rather than focusing on that movement’s claims for the essential nature of gender difference, it suggests an approach examining struggles and failures to define gender difference. Through the lens of fat politics, identity politics appears less a politics about who one is, and more about who one is trying to be. And in what kind of world one wants to live.

NOTES


3. For a few important examples of the growing fat history literature and western preoccupations with fat and gender, see Susan Bordo, Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); for a comparison of American and French cultural constructions of fat, see Peter N. Stearns,

4. Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran, “Fat Liberation Manifesto” (November 1973, folder “Fat Underground Literature,” Judy Freespirit Papers. The name was also an homage to the Weather Underground and thus an assertion of radicalism, though as Freespirit laughingly recalled they were always quite “over-ground” (Freespirit, interviewed). Aldebaran remembered the name being Freespirit’s idea in “Life in the Fat Underground.”


7. Aldebaran’s earliest work was published under the name Vivan F. Mayer, and she has more recently published as Sara Golda Bracha Fishman.


13. All three flyers can be found in the folder “Fat Underground Literature,” Judy Freespirit Papers.

14. Freespirit remembered the Feminist Women’s Health Center being unresponsive to FU efforts to work with them (Freespirit, interviewed). See also Fat Underground, “Health of Fat Women”; Fat Underground, “Health of Fat People.”

15. On their liberationist politics, see Aldebaran, “We Are Not Our Enemies,” Sis-
10: Fat’s No Four-Letter Word


17. Freespirit remembered that “fat oppression was very prevalent” in the women’s press (Freespirit, interviewed).
20. Laura Bock, interviewed.
22. Deeg Gold, interviewed.
24. Judy Freespirit, interviewed.
29. Women from this group had been going to a fat swim in Richmond that was organized by straight, fairly conservative working-class women from that community. The Gorgon women especially remember the work they put into reaching out to those women, and their sorrow when some of them stopped coming because they were uncomfortable with the presence of dykes from the city (Deeg Gold and Chaya Gordon, interviewed; Miriam Cantor, interviewed).
30. Miriam Cantor, interviewed.
32. Laura Bock, interviewed; Deni Asnis, interviewed.
33. Laura Bock, interviewed; Judy Freespirit, interviewed.
34. Freespirit and Miriam Cantor recalled poor coverage, and indeed *Plexus*, the primary feminist newspaper in the area, had minimal coverage of fat feminist activities. Martha Courtot wrote to *Plexus* that she was distressed to find negative images from mainstream media being replicated in their paper in “Fat Feminism: Critique of Fat Politics in *Plexus*,” *Plexus* 8 (March 1981): 10. See also Martha Courtot, “A Spoiled Identity,” in *Shadow on a Tightrope*, 200–201. Freespirit discussed the radio event in “A Day in My Life.” The bookstore collective responded with apologies, pointing out there wasn’t much that was fat-positive to put on display and they did not want to ignore the issue of food as an addiction. Letter to Old Wives Tales Bookstore from Miriam and Silvia of Life in the Fat Lane, 6 April 1982, box 1, folder “Correspondence,” Old Wives Tales Collection, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society of Northern California, San Francisco.


38. Shanewood, “Discovering the Truth,” 3. McAfee, a registered nurse, was not alone among FU activists in her medical and scientific interests. Manov was influenced by the women’s self-health movement; Aldebaran had been trained as a chemist; Freespirit had worked in a psychiatric hospital. FU asserted that the failure rate of diets was over 99 percent, in Freespirit and Aldebaran, “Fat Liberation Manifesto.”


42. Freespirit and Aldebaran, “Fat Liberation Manifesto.”

43. Laura Bock, interviewed. Judy Freespirit and Denis Asnis both also mentioned this phenomenon when I interviewed them.


46. Author interviews with Marjorie Nelson, San Francisco, CA, February 13, 1999, and January 21, 2001. Nelson discussed her surprise at how relatively not fat she was in childhood photos. Other women made similar observations: Lynne Mabel-Lois, “We’ll Worry about That When You’re Thin,” *Shadow on a Tightrope*, 62–66; Laura Bock, interviewed; Deni Asnis, interviewed; and Judy Freespirit, interviewed.

47. Miriam Cantor, interviewed; Deni Asnis, interviewed.

48. Marilyn Calman, interviewed.

49. Miriam Cantor noted that although Life in the Fat Lane asserted that fat women
were just as healthy as thin women, “whether we believed it or not I don’t know” (Cantor, interviewed).

50. Deeg Gold and Chaya Gordon, interviewed.
51. Laura Bock, interviewed.
52. Judy Freespirit, interviewed.
54. Judy Freespirit, “Notes for an Article.”
56. Freespirit remembered that about 75 percent of the women involved in fat feminism in the FU period came out at least temporarily. Many women discussed the connection between fat sexuality and lesbianism, including Deeg Gold and Chaya Gordon, interviewed; Judy Freespirit, interviewed; and Laura Bock, interviewed.
59. Chaya Gordon, interviewed; Stimson, 1; Judy Freespirit, “Notes for An Article”; Freespirit, “Brief, Partial.”
60. Miriam Cantor, interviewed. Sexuality was also a focus of the annual fat feminist gathering at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, which, according to Freespirit, included a night of group sex. Judy Freespirit, interviewed.
61. Bock recalled there being only two straight women in the group, “and then I came out.” Laura Bock, interviewed.
62. Judy Freespirit, interviewed; Laurie Ann Lepoff, “Fat Politics,” in Shadow on a Tightrope, was originally published in the Bay Area feminist paper Plexus in 1975. Freespirit remembered this article in Lesbian Tide. Laura Bock and Miriam Cantor recalled discussions of fatphobia in the lesbian community in interviews.
65. Marilyn Calman, interviewed.
66. Judy Freespirit, interviewed.
68. Laura Bock, interviewed.
70. Laura Bock, interviewed. The Gorgons tried a similar division in their fat activism in Seattle, also with unhappy results (Deeg Gold and Chaya Gordon, interviewed).
71. Freespirit, “Brief, Partial”; author interview with Miriam Cantor.
72. Marjorie Nelson, interviewed; Miriam Cantor, interviewed.
73. When I asked Judy Freespirit about when this issue heated up, she noted, laugh-

74. Freespirit recalled that “there was one woman in particular who came to the swims who was a larger woman, more in the 250 to 300 pound woman who would walk up to anyone she didn’t think was fat enough to be there and tell them to get out” (Freespirit, interviewed).

75. Judy Freespirit, interviewed.

76. Many of these women defined themselves as lesbian separatists, rejecting all ties with men, and in fact rejected the term feminism as a category meant for straight women. They were more likely to call themselves dyke separatists than lesbian feminists.


78. Marilyn Calman, interviewed.

79. Marjorie Nelson, interviewed. Aldebaran did address the issue of eating disorders. Drawing from Radical Therapy, she argued that eating disorders were caused by psychiatrists, whose “persecution turns some of us into secret compulsive eaters who ‘need their help’” (“Health of Fat Women”). But Freespirit noted that the movement did not pick up on this insight (Freespirit, interviewed).

80. Miriam Cantor, interviewed; Deni Asnis, interviewed.

81. Freespirit interview with Susan McAllister, in “Notes for an Article.”

82. Judy Freespirit, interviewed.