

**Building the FaT GiRL Table: Excavating Cultural Memory of Queer Fat Activism in the
'90s**

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Abstract:

When we recount the histories of social movements, there is a tendency to imagine either a steady, linear march towards progress, or a slow descent from radical ideas into complacency. The feminist movement gets painted in waves, progressing from white to intersectional, while in the LGBTQ+ rights movement the contrast of the Stonewall Riots & ACT UP with late 2010s focus on gay marriage and the corporatization of Pride is understood as a watering down and betrayal of the movement's origins. Cultural memory is a constant process of construction and revision, and of course the truth of movements' trajectories are far more complicated and three dimensional. Thus, it is vital for activists and academics to constantly excavate our political histories, documenting the more nuanced and messy reality. There are very few academic works studying the history of the fat liberation movement. In the only existing book on fat activist history, *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*, Charlotte Cooper stresses that there is evidence of many feminist fat liberation organizations across the world throughout the late 20th century that have gone completely undocumented. She explains that "no one knows how many fat liberation struggles took place in the last decade. We have lacked a way to communicate with each other. Under the triple stresses of fat oppression, isolation, and the disinterest or even hostility with which our pleas for support were often met, fat activists have all too often taken the frustrations out on each other and destroyed our own organizations before they could take root" (Cooper 23). Therefore, retroactive documentation of fat activist history is a vital intervention. This work seeks to document queer fat activism in the 1990s, specifically the workings of the FaT GiRL Collective. In 1994, a collective of queer fat activists in the Bay Area started publishing a zine called FaT GiRL. FaT GiRL was an explicitly queer, anti-racist, class conscious and sexually explicit publication which proudly proclaimed itself as a political act. FaT GiRL was "for fat dykes and the women who want them," and explored a wide variety of experiences of fatness and queerness. While FaT Girl has been severely underdocumented and often excluded from the historical narratives of queer and fat activism, it greatly impacted the trajectory of the fat liberation movement, and thus American body discourse at large. Thus, through interviews with six members of the FaT GiRL collective this thesis will ask: *What did queer fat activist spaces, especially the FaT GiRL collective, look like in the mid 1990s? What wider cultural phenomena did FaT GiRL reflect and what culture did it create? How did the FaT GiRL collective witness the impact of their work at the time, and how do they perceive their legacy given the current state of size politics?* Through a research justice framework, this thesis 1.) co-constructs a queer oral history of the FaT GiRL project 2.) synthesizes how FaT GiRL was a product of its geopolitical context while creating new possibility models for queer fat existence 3.) analyzes how the zine transformed the body politic of its readership and rippled outward, impacting size discourse at large.

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Fat Girl is a zine for and about Fat Dykes. Fat Girl seeks to create a broad-based dialogue that both challenges and informs our notions of Fat-Dyke identity. We encourage dialogue based on our lived experiences as fat women, recognizing that our lives are various and multifaceted. Fat Girl is produced by an eclectic collective of Fat Dykes. We come in all shapes and sizes; from diverse ethnic cultures and different class backgrounds. Fat Girl is a political act; we want your participation. Submit your daily experiences getting from here to there; your fictional explorations; your whimsical reminiscences; your sarcastic diatribes; your songs of laughter and tears of anger and pain; your nonlinear meanderings; your artistic endeavors: wood cuts, drawings, photos, rubber stamps, cartoons; your hard-hitting investigative journalism; your hot sexual forays from the perverse to the sublime; your tales of gender play; news; reviews; announcements; letters; gossip and encouragement -FaT GiRL Collective

I saw a definition of freedom recently that I really really liked.... I think it's Nina Simone. And she was like, freedom is having no fear. I guess I would say fat liberation is a world that doesn't fear fatness. That doesn't vilify fatness. In which, we're totally free to love ourselves, and the world supports us in doing that. So like, that's a tall order, right? That's a fat order. **laughs** That's a fat order. And I feel pretty clear that it includes all oppression, You know, it's like, you can't separate that from all oppression. You can't just erase fat hatred and have people be free because if freedom is having no fear, you know, there's a whole lot of other shit we need to abolish. So to me, fat liberation is actually a big abolition project. That's about abolishing all the things that cause us to have to fear, including all the fat hatred. -Max Airborne

CH 1: INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be a fat person in this world? It *can* mean: your lovers will tell you they are concerned you are “going to die,” your intellect and psyche “at war forever” (FaT GiRL #1 1994:27; FaT GiRL #2 1995:48) It can mean the world dismisses “all the power of [your] words”, denies you “access to health care, to jobs, to transportation” (FaT GiRL #2 1995:32; Bertha)¹. It can mean you “get fucked with by white people a lot” (FaT GiRL #1 1994:20). “Being everybody’s favorite victim, their easiest target, and their worst threat” (FaT GiRL #3 1995:16).

It can equally mean you “feel powerful and immovable” (FaT GiRL #3 1995:41). Like “anarchy as body,” “proud, strong, loving, laughing and alive” (FaT GiRL #4: 1995:39; FaT GiRL #2:57). Revolutionary and sexy as hell.

FaT GiRL was a snapshot of the infinite possibilities of fatness, fat bodies and fat lives, at a singular moment in space, time, and global history. A collective run zine² “for fat dykes and the women who want them,” FaT GiRL published seven, over seventy-page full size (A4) issues between 1994-1997. It was a project created by a friend group of queer fat dykes in the San Francisco Bay Area who wanted to be heard. They were frustrated by the way mainstream queer women’s media did not include their political issues, bodies or lives, and dreamed of the day every type of media “actually just has some fat people in it” (Max). They “wanted it to be everything,” (Max) so they handed out stickers at Pride, designed issues on work computers, gathered their community and wrote. They crafted articles, manifestos, poetry, erotica, shot

¹ I refer to my interviewees throughout my thesis by their first names. All interviews referenced in this format were conducted by me via Zoom. See the interviewee profiles in my methodology section for their full names and demographic information.

² See the last section of this introduction for a definition of zine

editorials and centerfolds, held intersection focused roundtables, organized and platformed community events. They were tired of being invisibilized, so they created a forum for their community to document their multifaceted realities, in public and in their own words. By doing so, they created possibility models for political, joyous, and pleasurable queer fat embodiment which irrevocably transformed the lives of its readers and its creators.

In the burgeoning field of fat studies, few writers have analyzed the content of FaT GiRL, but none have reached beyond the bounds of the publication to document the stories of the collective that produced it. No work has analyzed the broader social conditions which made it possible, nor its impact and legacy on fat liberation politics and the world at large. While FaT GiRL undeniably affected the trajectory of American body size discourse, it is regularly erased from recounted histories of queer and fat activism. Therefore, through interviews with six of the original FaT GiRL collective members this thesis will conduct an oral history of the FaT GiRL project, asking: *What did queer fat activist spaces, especially the FaT GiRL collective, look like in the mid 1990s? What wider cultural phenomena did FaT GiRL reflect and what culture did they create? How did the FaT GiRL collective witness the impact of their work at the time, and how do they perceive their legacy given the current state of size politics?*

History of Size Discourse

The cultural landscape of American size discourse has changed and morphed dramatically throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, but particularly in the last 30 years. While the origins of fat hatred lie in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and rise of Protestantism³, the leading medical and cultural opinions on the relationship between weight, health and beauty fluctuated throughout the

³ See my discussion of *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fatphobia* by Sabrina Strings in my literature review.

1900s. While fatphobia certainly existed in society throughout the second half of the 20th century, the development and popularization of the phrase “obesity epidemic,” and the subsequent “war on obesity” did not begin until the early 1990s. In 1985, the National Institutes of Health revised their definition of “obesity” tying it to individual patients’ BMIs for the first time, “and with that, this perennially imperfect measurement was enshrined in U.S. public policy” (Gordon 2019). By the ‘90s doctors began warning the public that the U.S. was experiencing a huge increase in the percentage of the population being fat, creating a widespread panic that fatness threatened American health, as well as global military, economic and cultural power. Fat people were blamed for every social issue, “including the crisis in health care, higher gas and airline prices and global warming” (Boero 2012:3). The dominant rhetoric became that fat bodies were not only “a social problem, but a crisis and a threat to national security on par with terrorism” (Boero 2012:1). This narrative not only solidified a hegemonic size discourse that paved over all previous understandings, it also brought size to the forefront of global media throughout the 1990s and the first 15 years of the 2000s. As Natalie Boero documents in the book *Killer Fat: Media, Medicine, and Morals in the American "Obesity Epidemic,"* “newspapers, television shows, and magazines are filled with discussions of the ‘expanding American waistline,’” (Boero 2012:2) and whole publications center on picking apart the bodies of female celebrities. Weight became national and global news as policy makers scrambled to contain “the epidemic,” with pharmaceutical companies racing to bring new diet drugs to the market (like Fen Phen which now has over 175,000 lawsuits for ruining people’s heart health and causing many deaths).

Obesity Became a Buzzword

Percentage of New York Times articles with the term



Source: Chronicle (<http://chronicle.nytlabs.com>)



Images from the 2015 New York Times Article “*How Changing Attitudes Went Along With a Drop in Calories*”

In 1998, the National Institutes of Health changed their standard of what was considered “overweight” and “obese,” substantially lowering the threshold to being considered fat in a medical context. As CNN put it at the time, 25 million Americans “became ‘fat’ Wednesday—even if they didn’t gain a pound” (qtd in Gordon 2019). This goal post shift heightened the panic even further, catapulting the epidemic rhetoric into the 21st century, with the use of the word obesity tripling in New York Times articles between 1998 and 2003 (Sanger-Katz 2015). Throughout the early 2000s states enacted laws which sought to eradicate the existence of fat bodies,⁴ and legislators voted to make diet programs like Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers tax deductible. Surgeons and obesity researchers successfully lobbied for

⁴ Natalie Boero analyzes this type of legislature throughout *Killer Fat: Media, Medicine, and Morals in the American “Obesity Epidemic”*, but laws include programs like sending an “obesity report card” home to children’s parents and implementing weight focused exercise and nutrition programs in school, banning junk food, and forcing Alabama state workers to pay an “obesity penalty” of \$25 a month. These programs sought to penalize being fat based on the frequent understanding that individuals choose fatness via neglecting their diet and exercise, and thus if properly incentivized, fat people would “put in the work” to become skinny.

private and public insurance companies to cover weight-loss surgeries, and Michelle Obama made fighting “childhood obesity” the centerpiece of her official agenda as First Lady (Boero 2012:2). This was also intensely racialized, as prominent fat studies scholar Da’Shaun Harrison articulates in their forthcoming book *Belly of the Beast*, “just like with the War on Drugs and the crack epidemic, major institutions falsified evidence about the effects of fatness or obesity as a way to criminalize and profit off fat people—especially the Black fat” (Harrison 2021). Obesity epidemic rhetoric throughout this period has undeniably been a form of Foucauldian biopolitics, “a technique of neoliberal governmentality that not only disciplines people in relation to their bodies but also produces—and reflects— broader anxieties regarding citizenship, nation, and subjectivity” (Guthman 2008:18).

While the legacy of the obesity epidemic framework remains, in the last 5 years (approximately), our widespread public discourse on size has changed dramatically. From a few fat people rising into major celebrity status (Lizzo, Tess Holliday, etc.), to media about fat people’s lives (*Dietland*, *Dumplin’*, *Shrill*, *Hunger* etc.), to an explosion in plus size clothing, both fat and thin public figures criticizing diet culture, and the creation of fat studies— fat bodies and anti-fatphobia sentiments have more visibility than ever. The idea of body positivity has been adopted and promoted by major brands, who advertise their “inclusive” sizing (usually only offering through a 3X). The Overton window⁵ of acceptable bodies has shifted, as small fat and thin body positive influencers become increasingly famous and terms like “midsize”⁶

⁵ The Overton window is a political science model for understanding how ideas in society shift theorized by Joseph P. Overton; the Overton window is the range of ideas that are politically acceptable to the mainstream population at a given moment, which is constantly shifting, shrinking and growing. For example, the Overton window of what is considered acceptable political rhetoric has dramatically shifted towards the extreme right under the presidency of Donald Trump. By “Overton window of acceptable bodies” I mean, straight sized and small fat women’s bodies that used to be considered unacceptable in popular media have now been normalized, while the majority of actual fat people are still considered abject.

⁶ “Midsize” is a term some women who are not plus size but are not a size 0 are now using to identify themselves to make claims about their bodily experience. It has been regularly critiqued by fat activists because it is often used to

become popular in online communities. With the increase in visibility for fat athletes and artists, it is now harder to argue that all fat people are inherently lazy slobs who don't take care of their health⁷ and multi-billion dollar weight loss corporations like Weight Watchers are losing so much money (Team 2019) that they are rebranding, changing their name to WW (still urging you to lose weight but now proclaiming that they center lifestyle wellness with a “NEW holistic approach” (Weight Watchers 2021)). While the diet and weight loss industry is facing major backlash for its unrealistic and harmful practices, much of the life threatening infrastructure of antifatness remains— medical discrimination is still rampant, architecture remains unchanged and fat people, especially fat Black working class people, are still blamed for their own deaths. How did we get here? How did the story about fatness that was incessantly hammered into every facet of American culture for 30+ years get disrupted? Who came up with these counter-hegemonic narratives? How did their ideas get reabsorbed by capitalism and beget the jumbled framework we have today? This thesis will certainly not be able to answer all of these questions, but by documenting and analyzing the work of queer fat activists in the '90s and asking them to reflect on the legacy of their work in the context of today's climate, I hope to provide and visibilize a piece of the puzzle.

A Brief History of Documented⁸ Fat Liberation Activism

Fat liberation activism in its modern context is generally understood to have begun with a “Fat-In” in New York City, June 3rd, 1967. It was initiated by a radio host named Steve Post

make claims about experiencing harm from diet culture/issues with clothing, without actually recognizing how systemic anti fatness first and foremost harms actual fat people.

⁷ Major discourse has surrounded videos of Lizzo singing as she runs on a treadmill, as skinny people reckon with the fact that they are somehow less fit than someone much larger than them.

⁸ This is a project which seeks to explore the holes in the cultural memory of fat activism, and so to do so we must begin with what is known. In my literature review I will complicate this understanding, but for the sake of context, I will now recount the history of fat activism that has been preserved within the fat studies canon (which undoubtedly has privileged the fat activism of white people and people from the US).

(who was a thin adult but former fat kid) who had read an article in The New York Times “about the social struggles of fat children, bordered with advertisements for chocolate cake and weight loss” and felt “this juxtaposition illustrated the impossible social positioning of fat children and of fat people, as well as the contradictory ways in which consumption and weight loss were sold” (Cooper 2016:121). He started to talk on his radio show about the idea of a group coming together to rid themselves of fat hatred and “come out as fat” (Cooper 2016:121) and eventually held such an event, reporting that about 500 people of all sizes came. Due to the way the event was reported on in the media, some fat activists have debated if Post’s Fat-In was an attempt at subversive humor/“an elaborate prank” (Cooper 2016:120) and thus not truly fat activism, but regardless it is regarded as an important moment in this historical lineage. NAAFA (the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance) was soon founded in 1969 by thin men who were sexually attracted to fat women and thus were “interested in developing activism that benefitted them” (Cooper 2016:126). Its membership primarily consisted of fat straight white women and thin white men who were attracted to them, a fact which created a culture of heterosexuality with strong power dynamics, sexual harassment, and homophobia that many of my interviewees mentioned and lamented (it has since been taken over by actual fat people and still exists, doing more political work).

In the early 1970s, The Fat Underground was founded by Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran, two fat Jewish lesbians who were NAAFA members and part of the Radical Feminist Therapy Collective. The Radical Feminist Therapy collective was one of the most “powerful, prestigious and visible groups in the radical fringe in Los Angeles at the time” (Cooper 2016:127). It was an organization which was critical of medicalization of ordinary human experiences and oppression and sought systemic change through a Marxist framework. Freespirit and Aldebaran applied this

critique to the medicalization of fatness, originally founding an LA chapter of NAAFA but eventually splitting from the organization when leaders told them to tone down their feminist ideology. In November 1973, The Radical Feminist Therapy Collective began a Fat Women's Problem Solving Group at the Westside Women's Centre, which morphed into the Fat Underground and produced the Fat Liberation Manifesto⁹. Charlotte Cooper argues in *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* that the Fat Liberation Manifesto "locates fat embodiment within a wider social context, identifies the humanity of fat people, and encourages them to claim rights, autonomy and collective power" (Cooper 2016:130). The Fat Liberation Manifesto asserted that fat was no longer a "site for personal failing and redemption but was reconfigured and aligned within a political landscape" (Cooper 2016:130), declaring that the personal was political, and that the fight against anti-fatness was in inherent relationship and alliance to the struggles of "other oppressed groups against classism, racism, sexism, ageism, financial exploitation, imperialism and the like" (Freespirit and Aldebaran 1973). The Fat Underground configured analysis of fat oppression based on feminist and radical lesbian identity. They utilized the frameworks of the 1960s-70s activists fighting racial, sexual and gender based oppression to conceptualize their form of fat activism.

Freespirit and Aldebaran's version of fat feminism traveled from Los Angeles and began to centrally root in the Bay Area in the mid 1970s. A woman at The San Francisco Women's Centre began a consciousness-raising group for fat women in 1975, which spawned a group for fat lesbians and one for older fat women, all of which were visited and further politicized by members of The Fat Underground. Charlotte Cooper explains that "diverse fat feminist culture in

⁹ I encourage all readers to go read the original text. It is publicly accessible and reproduced here: <https://laurietobyedison.com/body-impolitic-blog/tag/fat-liberation-manifesto/>

the Bay Area was able to flourish in the decade after The Fat Underground came to town because the conditions were ripe: there was already a welcoming community, primarily lesbian, that had access to particular resources” (Cooper 2016:146). Judy Freespirit moved to Northern California, eventually settling in Oakland, co-founding the Fat Chance Dance Troupe and then establishing the Fat Lip Reader’s Theatre in 1981. Notable local community formations which followed include a fat swim at Richmond Plunge, the Robust and Rowdy dances, Oakland’s We Dance classes, the Let It All Hang Out block parties at Pride, and Cynthia Riggs’ Making It Big clothing store, as well as regular fat lesbian feminist readings, exhibitions, performances, and clothing swaps (Cooper 2016:146). Fat feminists certainly did not only exist in the Bay Area (for example, Judith Stein and her partner Meridith Lawrence were central to the fat feminism blossoming in New England at the time), but given the radical political history of the area and established queer community networks, it thrived.

Throughout this period, lesbian periodicals and small-run newspapers were central to the circulation of fat feminist ideas. In 1983, Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser published *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*, an anthology of personal essays, articles and stories which is understood as the first published work of the fat liberation movement. It was originally conceived by the Fat Underground (Cooper 2016:149) and included writing by Freespirit and Aldebaran on their work. *Shadow on a Tightrope* was “crucial to the development of fat activism as a national and transnational affair” (Cooper 2016:149) because it allowed fat liberationist ideology to permeate beyond the bounds of physical community to those isolated and far reaching. Multiple of my interviewees cited it as influential in how they came to understand their bodies and become radicalized around fatness.

FaT GiRL came on the heels of all of this organizing work, both in person in the Bay Area and through the circulation of lesbian media. My interviewees frequently conceptualized themselves as the next generation after this era of activists and often attempted to utilize the magazine to engage in intergenerational activist dialogue. One of the first pieces in the very first issue of FaT GiRL is an interview with Judy Freespirit on her work and the second issue includes a roundtable on Fat & Age, of which she is a participant. According to all of my interviewees, the previous generation of fat activists had varying opinions on the presentation of sex and particularly portrayal of BDSM within FaT GiRL, but all were excited to connect intergenerationally and see the work continue and expand.

Why FaT GiRL?

There are several reasons why it is useful to document and analyze the history of fat liberation activism and FaT GiRL specifically. As body positivity has gone increasingly mainstream, many thin people have begun to make claims that body positivity is not “for” fat people, causing a huge wave of reactionary discourse which attempts to trace “who really started” body acceptance or liberation movements, as a way to make claims about co-option and appropriation. When high profile fat liberationists critique body positivity they often get thousands of comments from skinny people claiming that the movement was never “for them,”— it was for people in normative healthy bodies to accept their flaws. Fatphobia on the internet now often starts with “I am body positive BUT...” and then proceeds into some argument about how fat people are gross/unhealthy/deserve to die. The reactionary discourse attempting to prove “who really started” body positivity is an intervention resisting this, fighting

how body liberation activism has been reabsorbed by neoliberal capitalism. It is one of the primary reasons why the preservation of fat liberationist history is so vital.

However, constructing an accurate history of fat liberation activism can prove to be quite difficult, as there are very few academic works specifically studying it. In the only existing book on fat activist history, *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*, Charlotte Cooper stresses that there is evidence of many feminist fat liberation organizations across the world throughout the late 20th century that have gone completely undocumented, writing:

No one knows how many fat liberation struggles took place in the last decade. We have lacked a way to communicate with each other. Under the triple stresses of fat oppression, isolation, and the disinterest or even hostility with which our pleas for support were often met, fat activists have all too often taken the frustrations out on each other and destroyed our own organizations before they could take root. (Cooper 2016:23)

Beyond the desire to use history to make a point, the lack of documentation of fat liberation struggles leaves present and future day activists without an ability to access the interventions made by the previous generations; we must reinvent the wheel to make sense of our world. We also lack the ability to see our bodies and our lives reflected in history and thus feel more alone in this struggle. Therefore, retroactive documentation of fat activist history is a vital intervention.

Furthermore, FaT GiRL is particularly under documented and frequently erased from the story fat and queer activists tell of how their movements came to be. Across the burgeoning field of fat studies, authors often cite the history I have just recounted—the Fat-In, NAAFA, Judy Freespirit and the Fat Underground. Some of these histories mention the centrality of fat zines in the ‘90s (often without explicitly naming the publications), and others completely omit this crucial period¹⁰. If anything is explicitly named it is Fat!So? by Marilyn Wann, a zine from 1994

¹⁰ In *The Fat Zine*, a popular UK based zine which came out in 2020, in the article “Ok Let’s Get This Straight Once and For All: Who ‘Created’ Body Positivity, (A preview from the widely popular book *Fattily Ever After*) Stephanie Yeboah writes that “the movement-- as well as the general ideology of ‘body positivity’ -- experienced a quiet

which became a book in 1998. Completely by coincidence, Fat!So? began on the exact same street at the exact same time as FaT GiRL. Collective members Candida and Max both recounted to me that they were meeting in a cafe on McAllister St. right next to Candida's apartment to look over the first printed issue of FaT GiRL when they overheard and met Marilyn Wann. Almost all interviewees mentioned Wann's work and were clear that the relationship that they had with Fat!So? was positive (there are frequent ads for Fat!So? in FaT GiRL, they would work together, some FaT GiRL collective members contributed to Fat!So? etc.) but FaT GiRL is often erased in conversations where Fat!So? is praised. As FaT GiRL collective member Max explained to me:

Marilyn's zine had this whole other trajectory, basically, because it was not queer. And there was no sex in it really. And it was so nice and funny. ... You know, I mean, the fact that Marilyn and I were friends and neighbors meant that that was a good relationship. But there have been times where Marilyn gets referred to, there's actually, lots of times where Fat!So? and Marilyn get referred to, and FaT GiRL is just invisibilized completely. It's like, Huh, I wonder what that's about? You know, and you know what it's about.

This analysis is extended by Charlotte Cooper who explains how Fat!So?'s visibility led to our predominant cultural understanding of fat activism as body positivity. She writes that “contrasting with earlier books, Wann makes fat activism a compelling and amusing proposition through peppy language, personal anecdotes, craft activities and quizzes presented with a cut and paste pop art visual style” (Cooper 2016:23). The widespread popularity of Fat!So? and simultaneous erasure of FaT GiRL has led to many popular media sources perpetuating an ahistorical or incomplete picture of what fat activism looked like in the 1990s, ignoring the deeply political and subversive cultural work that was happening. Particularly, these accounts completely invisibilize the centrality of unapologetic BDSM-centered dyke sexuality and

period throughout the Seventies to the early '90s as we entered the era of the ‘Supermodel’” (Yeboah 2020:7). She then says the movement didn't return until early internet activism in the late '90s. If our own zine sources claiming to be experts on this history completely erase FaT GiRL, clearly this information has not been documented enough.

intersectional political analysis (anti-capitalist, race & class conscious, queer etc.) to the fat activism of the time.

Furthermore, FaT GiRL is often ignored in retellings of queer history due to its fatness, even those which focus on the Bay Area or attempt to nuance cultural record. For example, the 2019 Oakland Museum Exhibit “Queer California: Untold Stories” excluded FaT GiRL, despite including an archive of queer periodicals and “being told about this revolutionary work.”¹¹ This thesis seeks to document and analyze the work of the FaT GiRL collective in order to provide a more complete picture of what queer and fat activism looked like in the 1990s and thus how the work of activists in that era shaped the body discourse of today.

A Couple Definitions & A Roadmap

Before we go any further, I want to define a couple key concepts and give a sense of the structure of this thesis. This work begins with this introductory chapter and then a literature review on the existing work on FaT GiRL, the complications of reconstructing fat liberationist history in terms of race, cultural memory of third wave feminism and the geopolitical context of 1990s queer San Francisco. Then I will discuss my methodology, including information on my positionality, the sociological frameworks I am utilizing, my interview procedures and zine content analysis. My fourth chapter synthesizes the queer oral history of FaT GiRL as retold by my participants. My fifth chapter “*Of It's Time*” analyzes how FaT GiRL reflected larger political and economic phenomena of the time period. My sixth chapter “*Don't Dream It, Be It*” reflects on the impact of FaT GiRL at its time of publication, as well as the FaT GiRL Collective's understanding of the legacy of their work on the world and reflections on present

¹¹ Sondra Solovay, e-mail message to author, May 2nd 2021.

day fat liberation and body positivity movements. I finish with a conclusion on the importance of fat history projects as a mode of subverting antifat hegemony and the wide range of future research projects that could nuance our cultural memory of fat activism.

Finally, some useful definitions:

Zine: A zine is generally defined as “an independent, not-for-profit, self publication ... The name ‘zine’ comes from an abbreviation of the punk-era ‘fanzine’ (itself a corruption of ‘magazine which dates itself from post war Hollywood)” (cited in V Vale 1996: 4). During the DIY punk culture of the ‘70s, thousands of artists and writers began creating zines, small self published xeroxed magazines which were the cheapest form of print possible. In the book *Zines! Vol 1* (in which the FaT GiRL collective was interviewed), editor V Vale asserts that zines were “a grassroots reaction to a crisis in the media landscape” (V Vale 1996:4). They are often associated with techniques of collage and left-wing activism.

Cultural Memory: As Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning define in *Cultural Memory Studies : An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, cultural memory is the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts. (Erll, Nünning, and Young 2008:2) It “refers to the symbolic order, the media, institutions, and practices by which social groups construct a shared past.” While cultural memory is a metaphor, not literal memory, it “bears some resemblance to the processes of individual memory, such as the selectivity and perspectivity inherent in the creation of versions of the past according to present knowledge and needs” (Erll, Nünning, and Young 2008:5).

Dyke: There are many theories on the etymology of dyke as a slur for queer women, but regardless it was used throughout the 20th century as a derogatory term. Dyke was reclaimed by WLW (women loving women) as a political identity in the 1970s, one which does not have a 1:1 relationship with the word lesbian (some people identify as a lesbian but not a dyke and vice versa). Depending on who you ask/throughout history it has connotations of gender performance, working class experience, racialization, relationship to kink etc. There is discourse on whether the term dyke includes bi women; FaT GiRL explicitly includes bi and trans women in its

definition of dyke identity, but many bi individuals wrestle with their thoughts on identifying with the term throughout the zine. Some queer nonbinary and trans folks identify with the term dyke even though they are not women. The reflections FaT GiRL collective members made about how and why dyke identity was central to the work will be explored in CH 5. It is still a slur, and so is not to be used casually by men/straight people etc.

BDSM/Kink: BDSM and kink both refer to a wide variety of sexual practices and preferences that are considered deviant by dominant culture. Some individuals solely practice kink within the sphere of their sex life, and others consider participation in BDSM subcultures a lifestyle, such as the leather community. BDSM practitioners come in all sexualities, but BDSM community spaces tend to orient to a particular sexual preference (especially in the 20th century when engaging in queer sex was so heavily stigmatized). As I will discuss, the most prominent backlash to FaT GiRL came from lesbians who disapproved of the depiction of BDSM practices because they felt that inflicting pain during sex was a form of reenacting patriarchal violence. My participants used the terms BDSM, SM, kink, fetish and pervert interchangeably.

Fat/Fat Spectrum: It may sound like a silly question, but who even is fat? Is it defined by other people calling you fat? Is it defined by the clothing size you wear? This question is regularly explored by the writers of FaT GiRL who struggled themselves with defining who “counts” as fat community (especially given the context that the goal posts of a “normal” weight have been arbitrarily redefined). Today generally, one is considered fat if you wear plus size clothing, often delineated as a (women’s) size 14 and above. Fatness is a spectrum of experiences, with the fattest people experiencing the most oppression. A 200 pound person and a 400 pound person may both label themselves as fat, but their experiences of the world are profoundly different. The often cited “Fatness Spectrum Chart” was an attempt by Ash of the Fat Lip podcast to quantify the ranges of size experiences into “small-fat,” “mid-fat,” “super-fat” and “inifini-fat” in order to reprioritize and center the needs of those most marginalized. There is criticism that the chart relies and focuses solely on women’s clothing sizes and puts a cap on the term super-fat at size 5X when the originators of the term did not intend for it to have an upper limit. For more context read: “Fategories – Understanding “Smallfat Fragility” & the Fat Spectrum” by blogger Fluffy Kitten Party and “Community origins of the term “Superfat”” by Cherry Midnight & Max Airborne which nuances the chart with an oral history of the term.

Body Positivity: The idea of body positivity is ill-defined and amorphous, but it is roughly understood as the belief that you should not hate your body for its “imperfections;” that you should make peace with your body, including your size, as it is. The organization The Body Positive, an anti-eating disorder organization founded in 1996, claims on its website that they popularized the term “along with Deb Burgard in the mid 90’s.” According to them at that time, several HIV/AIDS organizations “were using the term ‘body positive’ to support people who were HIV positive” and that in recent years, “it has taken on a life of its own!” (The Body Positive, undated). More specifically, many argue that in the very early stages of internet blog culture it was Black women who popularized the term on platforms like Tumblr, Livejournal, Yahoo! Messageboards, Blackplanet and Instagram (will return to this in my lit review) before it became incredibly popular as a buzzword, especially with smaller fat/midsize white women. In her book “You Have the Right to Remain Fat,” Virgie Tovar documents her firsthand experience witnessing the shift from fat liberation to body positivity movement spaces and how a primary difference in her experience was going from being the only straight woman in a room full of queer people to being surrounded by straight women with a much less politically oriented or focused agenda (I will return to this in Chapter 6).

Fat Liberation/Fat Activism: Fat liberation has different definitions for everyone. Some of the ways my interviewees defined fat liberation were: “socioeconomic and body sovereign freedom to just be the size that you are. And specifically for fat people to have the right to exist” (Candida). “Having the freedom, whatever size your body is to live the kind of life that you want to live” with “fundamental civil and human rights” (Sondra). “Undoing the control [that] societal assumptions have on who you can be” (April) which is the undoing of “institutionalized and internalized weight bias, class bias, race bias, and disability bias” (Barbarism) because “fat liberation is about access” (Bertha). “Abolishing all the things that cause us to have to fear, including all the fat hatred” (Max). As is evident, my interviewees' definitions all heavily stressed access to physical space, as well as the intersectional nature of fat liberation work. Fat people exist in every marginalized group, and thus a fat liberationist future requires Black liberation, land sovereignty for Indigenous people, the dismantling of capitalism, disability justice, queer & trans liberation etc. Fat activism is any organizing, artistic or personal work with the goal of fat liberation.

CH 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

To ground my analysis of *FaT GiRL*, I will first write about the budding field of fat studies, why it regularly discusses sex and the pre-existing work which analyzes the zine. Next I will analyze the major holes in the literature in regards to race and the origins of fat activism, and then the cultural memory of third wave queer feminisms. Finally, I will provide some relevant context on the geo-political state of the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1990s.

Fat Studies, Fat Sex, FaT GiRL

Fat studies is a discipline founded by fat activists bringing their work into the realm of academia. The publishing of the *Fat Studies Reader* in 2009 (co-edited by my interviewee Sondra) cemented fat studies as a legitimate academic subfield which is usually placed within the realm of gender and women's studies programs/feminist and queer theory. Fat studies writing often focuses on the discursive and theorizes fat embodiment in various contexts of race, gender, sexuality etc. While most canonical fat studies texts acknowledge that the roots of the field lie in the work of fat activists, it is "stigma and prejudice (and their consequences) that inspire much of the extensive research in the field" (Solovay and Rothblum 2009:5). Both fat activists and fat studies academics frequently explore the intersection of fatness and sexuality in their work, excavating how capitalism and neoliberalism "place value on discipline, conformity, and fulfilling the fantasies of the dominant subject (heterosexual men in power)," and how under these systems fatness is not desirable or valued (Pausé 2015:38). As K Harding articulates, "when you're a fat woman in this culture, everyone—from journalists you'll never meet to your own mother, sister, and best friend—works together to constantly reinforce the message that you are not good enough to be fucked" (cited in Pausé 2015:38). In the public eye, fat people are

often objects of sexual disgust, as the fat body “stands as a symbol of a body that is uncared for”-- “a symbol of gluttonous obsessions and unmanaged desire” which has “failed as the subject of aesthetics” (Murray 2008:237). Simply put, in the mainstream sexual marketplace, “fat bodies are not marketable commodities” (Murray 2008:239). The fat person, and especially fat woman, is desexualized or hypersexualized as a fetish, “not permitted to experience sexual desire at all, let alone sexual pleasure” (Murray 2008:239). Furthermore, in the context of the obesity epidemic, “fat people’s sex lives are cast as sterile, sexually dysfunctional or just plain non-existent (Ray White 2016: 962), pathologized and “produced as a public health concern” which “in turn intensifies both the surveillance and stigmatization of fat people” (Ray White 2016:976). Thus, the ways in which fat people navigate and reclaim their sexuality is a central investigation of the field.

While a few fat studies theorists have examined the texts written by early fat activists, including FaT GiRL, very little research has been done documenting the conditions under which these texts were created. The only existing book to do so is *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* by Charlotte Cooper. In the book Cooper, a British fat feminist who was an active contributor to the FaT GiRL zines (and is on the cover of issue #6), utilizes interviews with 31 fat activists across the UK, Germany, the US, Canada, and Australia to attempt to document a global lineage of fat activism (albeit clearly, a Western one). Cooper has also attempted to catalogue this history in her other work like the *Queer and Trans Fat Activist Timeline*. Cooper does write about FaT GiRL, situating it in the legacy of queer and fat activism in the Bay Area, as well as what she defines as the branches of “less mainstream queer and third wave feminisms” (Cooper 2016:157). Cooper articulates that FaT GiRL “queered notions of lesbian sexuality and revelled in sexual diversity, especially SM, that would have been taboo in other

feminisms.” and that “these raw representations of fat queer sexuality and culture reflected the milieu from which the zine was produced” (Cooper 2016: 158).

Cooper’s central focus on FaT GiRL’s “raw representations of fat queer sexuality” (Cooper 2016:158) as the characteristic distinguishing the zine from the fat activism of past is congruent with the few works which have investigated desirability politics via analyzing the text. The most extensive analysis of the work has come in Stefanie Snider’s chapter in the *Fat Studies Reader* entitled “Fat Girls and Size Queens: Alternative Publications and the Visualizing of Fat and Queer Eroto-politics in Contemporary American Culture.” In the chapter Snider argues that FaT GiRL is unique because of its “use of explicit sexual imagery to define a politics of the erotic” by and for fat dykes (Snider 2009:223). To Snider, examining the zines is necessary to understand how “fatness, gender, and sexuality inform each other and are mapped onto bodily artifacts and politics in contemporary American (sub)cultures” because they “simultaneously use and reject conventional ideas and ideals of deviant bodies to reinvent marginalized fat and queer identities” (Snider 2009:223-224). She analyzes specific content from issue #1 to articulate how FaT GiRL formulates its politic through imagery. She notes how it visibilizes the bodies of varied queer fat subjects in various states of dress and undress, eating and engaged in explicit sex. Snider argues that the people pictured in FaT GiRL create new ways of being by simultaneously bringing “themselves pleasure, bring[ing] the zine’s readers pleasure” and exploding “the boundaries of normative ideals of how fat women should behave sexually and politically” (Snider 2009:227). Snider notes that the zine “might be critiqued for its reliance on identitarian tactics to formulate its resistances to hegemonic bodily and sexual ideals” (Snider 2009:227). However, she argues that this is a product of the time period and that while aligning oneself along particular identity markers “might in fact reinscribe exclusions that subcultural

communities seek to transgress,” forming communities which center on fat and queer positions in relationship to other identities (classed, racialized, gendered etc.), “can locate individuals within more complex systems of culture and provide the beginnings of coalitional social structures” (Snider 2009:227).

Snider’s seven page chapter is the most in depth analysis of the zines currently present in academia, but a few other authors have briefly discussed the textual implication of FaT GiRL, similarly focused on its politic of the erotic. In the book *Fat Sex: New Directions in Theory and Activism*, editors Helen Hester and Caroline Waters argue that while fat studies has broken major ground in theorizing fat embodiment and has been ahead of the curve in its understanding of intersectionality, “there appears to be a gap within the literature when it comes to theorizing fat sex” (Hester and Walters 2015:1). The authors stress that studying this intersection is crucial because of the particular ways fat oppression involves sexual disgust/stripping fat people of desire and sexual agency. They acknowledge that the majority of writing that has done on the intersection of fatness & sex has come not from academics but zines like FaT GiRL and Nomy Lamm’s *I’m So Fucking Beautiful*, as well as books from activists like Virgie Tovar, Hanne Blank, and Rebecca Jane Weinstein. In chapter two “Fat As A Feminist Issue: A History,” Zora Simic quotes Snider’s analysis of FaT GiRL, using FaT GiRL’s sexuality centered politic combined with the clear & intentional embrace of earlier fat liberation activism (citing the first issues interview with Judy Freespirit) to argue that fat feminism has not been marked by “the sometimes exaggerated but nevertheless discernible generational divide that marked out second from third wave feminism” (Simic 2015: 24). This notion of waves is central to the question of cultural memory of fat activism and one I will return to later in this literature review. Simic also notes that by the turn of the millennium “fat feminism had its own celebrities, including Nomy

Lamm and Marilyn Wann” (Simic 2015: 24) which is relevant to my discussion of the erasure of FaT GiRL from predominant narratives of fat activist history and the individualization of fat activism throughout the 2000s.

Both the *Fat Studies Reader* and *Fat Sex: New Directions in Theory and Activism* were written by fat people theorizing their own experiences, but outsiders have also attempted to understand the fat experience and the work of FaT GiRL. In the 1996 book *Eat Fat*, a researcher named Richard Klein attempted to examine fatness and engage in a “keen cultural dissection of a major American obsession” (Google Scholar). His chapters include one on fat sex in which he examines FaT GiRL, as well as a chapter on the relation of fat to power. While attempting to be critical of hegemonic body size narratives and more sympathetic to fat people than most outsider researchers, Klein explicitly states that the inquiry comes from a place of “fascination/repulsion” and that while he respects fat acceptance movements, he does not wish to promote them (Klein 1996:209). He engages in a fetishistic and external male gaze of the zines which, as Charlotte Cooper puts it, are smug and “drip with his own unexamined power in relation to gender and class” (Cooper 2016:33). This projection of a male gaze, despite the zines explicit rejection of such was present throughout my interviews, with many participants mentioning the uncomfortable experiences they had with feeders¹² and male fat fetishists over the course of publication. From creepy fan letters, to bookstores returning the covers of straight fat fetishist magazines instead of FaT GiRL’s, to the work of Klein, the FaT GiRL collected navigated the imposition of a fetishistic straight male gaze, despite their explicit rejection of such. Klein’s lack of criticality of his own positionality as a researcher is especially relevant, and part of why I will dive heavily into mine in my methods section.

¹² Men who experience sexual pleasure from the act of continually feeding/fattening their female partner, sometimes “to the point of extreme fullness and discomfort” (Nicole, 2017).

Finally, one work has analyzed FaT GiRL beyond its portrayal of sex, primarily focusing on its strategies of direct action. In the 2001 book *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* Le'A Kent utilizes her chapter to analyze how “the non-S/M eroticism in FaT GiRL is just as crucial for rewriting the body and the self” (Kent 2001:144). Kent looks at the use of humor and the prompts for political action throughout the text, arguing that FaT GiRL destabilizes understandings of fatness “through recipes for counter abjection—political acts in which the fat girl performs a literal abjection in order to make fun of mainstream culture’s obsession with abjecting fat bodies” (Kent 2001:141) Kent gives the example of a recipe for a “Fat Girl Revenge Cocktail,” in which the reader is instructed to drink a brightly colored yogurt drink and a vomiting agent to throw up on spaces which propagate fat oppression like a diet center. Kent articulates that instead of simply asserting that dieting is unhealthy, “here FaT GiRL does to the diet center what the diet center would do to fat girls (or would have fat girls do to themselves),” utilizing the fat body as a political agent to engage in a parodic strategy which reverses the onus of disgust (Kent 2001:140-141). She notes how this strategy of turning the rhetoric of fat oppression back onto itself appears regularly through the zines— from making jokes about sitting on a bully to pretending to give birth if you are asked if you are pregnant. In doing so, FaT GiRL attributes lack of power “not to the fat body itself but to the shame that the fat person is made to feel” and asserts that “the taunt— an accusation of powerlessness” becomes useless against a person whose body is now “not a symptom but a weapon” (Kent 2001:142). Through Kent we can understand how all the content in FaT GiRL, not just the sex, rewrites the fat body as “a weapon, a site of political comedy and an erotic object all in one.” FaT GiRL not only puts “a fat self in the fat body,” it also offers strategies to directly combat “the denigration of the body itself” (Kent 2001:145).

Race & Contested Understandings of the History of Fat Activism

Since this is a project exploring the gaps in the cultural memory of fat activism, it is important to note what is unknown and contested. I first want to note the undeniable truth that across the board there is an extreme lack of documentation of fat activism, but especially the fat activism of Black women and other women of color. As previously stressed, there is evidence of many feminist fat liberation organizations across the world that have gone completely undocumented. There is the often recounted story of fat liberation activist history I recapped in my introduction— that fat activism began with a fat-in in New York and was catalyzed by NAAFA and the queer Jewish lesbians of the Fat Underground. Some present day fat liberationists and body positive organizers of color have publicly wrestled with this white history, notably in the 2012 open letter “A Response to Fat White Activism From People of Color in the Fat Justice Movement” written by nine BIPOC fat activists. The letter notes that “while fat activism in the United States continues to be predominantly white, there is an emerging wave of fat People of Color (POC) activists moving out into all aspects of our communities.” It then critiques a campaign created by Marilyn Wann and argues that “the time has been long in the coming to again address the prevalent attitudes of socio-economic privilege and white-centric thought in fat activism” (Shuai, Tara et al. 2012).

This framing would lead one to believe that the recounted story of fat liberationist history is correct; that it was started in predominantly white circles/by white Jewish lesbians like Freespirit and Aldebaran but has grown enormously since, via the contributions of fat activists of color. However, concurrently many popular media think pieces like “*The Black History of the Body Positive Movement*,” “*It’s Time #BodyPositivity Got an Intervention*,” and “*There is No Liberation for All Bodies Without the Liberation of Fat Black Women And Femmes*” argue that

the earliest fat acceptance movement was started by the labor of Black women and femmes. They do so to make an argument about how the present day body positivity movement needs to recenter on the needs and contributions of today's fat Black activists. Other books like *Fattily Ever After* by Black feminist Stephanie Yeboah credit Freespirit & the Fat Underground as starting the movement in the 60s, but name Black women as the pioneers of online body positivity in the late 90s "as an increasing number of Black and non-white plus size users, bloggers, and activists began to use online social media platforms such as Tumblr, Livejournal, Yahoo! Messageboards, and Blackplanet to create safe online mini communities for fat womxn to celebrate and appreciate their bodies" (Yeboah 2020:12). While I believe this is true, I spent hours searching both academic and nonacademic sources for names and specific examples of Black women in both the early days of fat acceptance and the turn to online body positivity. To my dismay, I only found work which vaguely gestured at this history without specifics, and then pointed out how credit for the last 10 years of body positivity/fat activism is often given to white fat women like Tess Holiday over Black fat activists like Stephanie Yaboah, Gabi Fresh, Sonya Renee Taylor and Hunter Shackelford. All of these articles rightfully critique the commodified and whitewashed body positivity of today by attempting to make claims of historical origin, but virtually none could offer me the specific names or examples I hoped for, as I attempt to visibilize and honor those who've been marginalized and forgotten from the history of fat activism. Tigress Osborn, the current NAAFA board chair who is the second Black woman to ever occupy the role, notes this tension in the blog post "Black Women and Femmes in NAAFA's History," contending with being named in an Instagram post of Black women who "started" fat liberation (despite not being introduced to the movement until the early '90s) and being asked by a journalist if someone could write about "the Black and Jewish women who founded NAAFA"

(Osborn 2021), when in reality NAAFA was started by a white thin man. Of the popular media think pieces I read, the only article to credit a specific instance was “The *Black History of the Body Positive Movement*,” by Briana Dominici, where she shares a quote from the 1972 *Ms Magazine* article “Welfare is a Women’s Issue.” This article, written by a Black woman welfare activist named Johnnie Tillmon, begins, “I’m a woman. I’m a Black woman. I’m a poor woman. I’m a fat woman. I’m a middle-aged woman. In this country, if you’re any one of those things you count less as a human being” (Tillmon 1972 cited in Dominici 2020). Dominici places Tillmon in the history of fat activism by pointing out that she mentions her fatness alongside her race, gender, class and age.

How do we account for this tension in the story of fat liberation activism? One possible explanation from fat studies academic Kivan Bay, which aligns with the example of Tillmon, is that beyond the general lack of documentation of all fat liberation movements, a major contributor to this erasure is that Black fat women’s critiques of anti fatness were often housed within their larger civil rights critiques. Because the work of Black fat women centered race and class primarily, it has not been recognized as “fat liberation activism” even if it fought for what my participants defined as fat liberation: “socioeconomic and body sovereign freedom,” (Candida) access, civil & human rights for fat people, and abolishing “all the things that cause us to have to fear” (Max).¹³ Another major component of this issue is that the record of fat activism has been largely defined by white fat archivists who are usually analogizing the fat activism they have directly witnessed; Cooper’s methodology was interviewing 31 fat activists from her

¹³ Much more archival work is needed to address this problem and search for fat activism across early social movements. One way my organizing group Fat Rose has attempted to explore nontraditional lineages of fat history is with a series called *Fat Roots*, which honors those we consider to be fat liberationist ancestors, regardless of whether they explicitly identified themselves as such, such as Fannie Lou Hamer. One article within FAT GiRL that attempted a similar project was “No One’s Getting Fat Except Mama Cass” written by Charlotte Cooper in Issue #5 which honored fat singer Cass Elliot from the band The Mama’s & The Papa’s as a fat icon/ contends with the horrific anti-fatness in the media surrounding her death which catalyzed many fat activists.

pre-existing social networks, only two of which were people of color and all of which were in the Global North (though she does explore the US domination of fat activism and cites evidence of fat liberation struggles outside of the West in places like South America and Asia). Tigress Osborn also notes in her blog post that part of this tension is what we define as being an activist, does it require being a public figure or simply touching the people around you?

However, regardless of whether or not the white fat queer Jewish women like Freespirit and Aldebaran are “the true” originators of the fat liberationist movement, it is also important to note that their work was very much inspired by the larger civil rights movements occurring at the time. Kivan Bay writes that “much of their work was informed by the black feminist and womanist works” which were emerging in the period and they were “working closely with women of color, particularly Black women who had been addressing appearance based shaming in their articulations of the racism they face in their own movements.”¹⁴ While I am unable to verify how closely these women were working with Black women activists, it is undeniable that they were informed by Black feminist and womanist texts and attempted to align their cause with the fights happening concurrently against racism and imperialism.¹⁵ Regardless of whether or not these white Jewish activists started the fat liberation movement, their frameworks for talking about power would not exist without the work of the Black people and other people of color concurrently fighting for their freedom. They also explicitly wanted their work to be anti-racist, and whether or not that was achieved in praxis, it was crucial to how these ideas began. It is important to credit individuals like Freespirit and Aldebaran, who are still unknown and marginalized by the huge swaths of people who now claim the ideals of body positivity or fat

¹⁴ Kivan Bay Twitter, accessed May 6th 2021, <https://twitter.com/KivanBay/status/1087907020701757440>.

¹⁵ See: the context on the Fat Liberationist Manifesto in my intro

acceptance, while nuancing and complicating our ideas of fat liberationist history to visibilize the contributions of fat Black women and other women of color. As Tigress Osborn states:

[It is our duty to learn about and recognize fat Black women and femmes] as important to fat history whether or not they were important to the formally organized fat rights groups of their times. But we also need to be sure we are not coopting their legacies just so we can say fat community is diverse ... We must know, acknowledge, and respect the work of fat Black people as liberation leaders in a multitude of ways, but one of those ways cannot be pretending Black people were integrated into the fat liberation movement in ways that they simply were not. (Osborn 2021)

Regardless of where fat activism began, we know the origin of fat hatred: anti-Blackness and the rise of the Trans-Atlantic slave & Protestantism. In *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fatphobia*, one of the most popular fat studies texts today, Sabrina Strings contextualizes the introduction of fat hatred with the glorification of fat women's bodies in the High Renaissance (including fat Black women). She then traces how body size "became a sign of race, morality and national identity" (Strings 2019: 10) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She examines how an attempt to detail the particular "aesthetic charms" (or lack thereof) of the women of each race was central to the work of many early race scientists. These "scientists" increasingly named the size and shape of one's body as the most important marker of race besides skin color, marking African women's "plumpness" as evidence that they were "lazy and thieving, with a 'penchant for pleasure' and a fondness of gluttony" (Strings 2019:81). She writes that "while condemnation was not the original intent ... in the context of mushrooming French and British slave trade enterprises, presumed innate racial differences came to be used as sound evidence of inherent inferiority. The body too became 'legible' through racial discourse, as body size was increasingly linked to racial category" (Strings 2018:79-80). Thinness quickly became a way that Europeans proved they were moral (especially in relation to the Protestant

ideal of discipline/sin of gluttony) in opposition to Black people. Strings traces this logic in extraordinary detail from the time of the slave trade, through various flip-flopping American beauty/health ideals through the 19th and 20th centuries (doctors being concerned with middle to upper class white women being too thin/encouraging weight gain, then weight loss). She then details how thinness became a marker of American exceptionalism, how various eugenic doctors weaponized fatphobia against immigrants, and how the medical hostility towards fatness (and especially towards fat women) intensified after insurance tables became widespread. Importantly, Strings notes that “the image of fat Black women as “savage” and “barbarous” in art, philosophy and science, and as “diseased” in medicine has been used to both degrade Black women and discipline white women” (Strings 2019:211). This gives us insight into why fat white women have often centered their activism in their fatness (because their weight is the primary site which they are disciplined), while Black women must contend with it in the context of experiencing racism. Strings closes the book with the history I detailed in my introduction, how anti fatness came to a head with the invention of the “obesity epidemic” rhetoric in the early 1990s, which primarily focused on disciplining the bodies of low income Black fat folks.

String’s book has been a major landmark for the discipline of fat studies, as it is incredibly thorough historical documentation which has legitimized to many that anti-fatness stems from anti-Blackness and is integral to the project of creating the visual logic of race. While Strings has been the first to bring this discourse to the mainstream, one of the reasons I was so drawn to FaT GiRL was my surprise at how explicitly they understood antifatness as a mechanism of white supremacist bodily hierarchy. All of my interviewees described the collective which produced FaT GiRL as predominantly white, but the content frequently discusses race, for example issue three (the first issue I was exposed to), which explicitly

proclaims on its cover that it will explore “taboo subjects” including “racism and fat hatred” (FaT GiRL #4). The issue centers on a roundtable of primarily fat women of color on this intersection, beginning with the assertion that “there is no way we can begin to understand and end fatphobia unless we understand how deeply racism and classism work to sustain fatphobia and vice versa” (FaT GiRL #4: 42). The issue also contains a review of a novel called *Cowrie* by Cathie Dunsford in which “fat tension/phobia is presented as being modern, colonial, racist, and imperialist in its origin” (FaT GiRL # 4:24). In one of the first pieces in issue one, Max and another collective member Elizabeth, who identifies in the work as a fat Asian dyke, process that they are often mistaken for each-other, despite Max’s whiteness and Elizabeth’s Asian features. Elizabeth was working as a piercer at the time, and explains that she was telling her therapist how uncomfortable it makes her when this misnaming happens with clients. Her therapist articulates to her that they are only able to see her as fat because they are uncomfortable seeing her as the Asian woman she is, explaining:

You know when people come into your work, they’re so freaked out, and especially if your clientele are white, and they get pierced by you, for them to feel safe they need to whitewash you. The only thing they can keep in mind of who you are is your size, this fuzzy image of your size. (FaT GiRL #1:19)

Multiple of my interviewees wrestled in our conversation with the idea that by visibilizing their fat community, they were visibilizing a very white fat community, that while the network of people who contributed to FaT GiRL were not exclusively white, they were predominantly. This is crucial to reckon with and not something I wish to downplay, but I think it is also important to note the sophistication of racial analysis of fatness that early on in fat feminist development/pre Fat Studies. My interviewees articulated that the depth of their analysis stemmed from the intention to “fully tell the truth” (April) of their lived observations, “to be centering [their]

analysis in the intersection” (Max), and was also, in their eyes, a reflection of the discourse happening in their queer and fat activist communities at large.

Cultural Memory of Third Wave Feminism

This project will analyze cultural memory of the FaT GiRL project, and thus we need to understand the dominant cultural understanding of third wave feminism and the centrality of queer feminist media to the era. In the book *No Permanent Waves*, Nancy A Hewitt compiles seventeen essays to “argue for new chronologies, more inclusive conceptualizations of feminist agendas and participants, and fuller engagements with contestations around particular issues and practices than has been possible using dominant analytical frameworks” (Hewitt 2010:1). For example in the essay “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism” Becky Thompson argues against the common conception that the transition from second to third wave feminism was centrally the transition from a white middle class feminist movement to a more inclusive and multiracial coalition. Thompson articulates that this framing is not only overly simplistic, it also completely erases the crucial work of many women of color and working class feminists in the period we consider the second wave. As Thompson points out, the tendency to understand the progression of feminist ideology through a linear progress based model has a tendency to be ahistorical. Our cultural memory of feminist movements regularly invisibilizes the radical work marginalized people were doing, oftentimes much earlier than we collectively imagine.

It could be very easy, in doing a project like this, which attempts to document the contributions FaT GiRL made to fat activist frameworks, to delineate waves of fat feminism and make over simplistic claims about linear progression towards radicalism over time, as well as

peaks and valleys in the strength of fat activism (aka, that it jumped from the '60s era to '90s or from '90s to 2010s). However, the truth of movement evolution is always more complicated. As I previously discussed, there is a belief that fat feminist ideology did not exist in the '90s due to the dominant culture experiencing a "supermodel era." There are also claims that fat feminisms have only recently gained racial analysis or the perspectives of fat people of color and while, as I detailed in my last section the zine was predominantly white, to claim it was exclusively is to erase the significant work fat people of color (as well as anti-racist white fat people) did throughout the zines to excavate their experiences and make connections between racism and antifatness. To delineate FaT GiRL as an entirely new wave of fat feminism would also erase the contributions many older fat activists like Freespirit made to the project, as well as the intention of the creators to make the project intergenerational.

FaT GiRL did undeniably come from a younger perspective and utilized different tools and rhetoric than the earlier fat feminists, most often characterized in the analysis of FaT GiRL by the celebration of the fat physicality through sex (especially BDSM) and pleasure. All my participants characterized their perspective as moving from a framework which needed to primarily combat the deficiency model placed upon them (i.e. fat is ok) to one which allowed them to take pleasure in their fat bodies. However, FaT GiRL was embraced by these older activists and actively worked to maintain an intergenerational thread via interviews with fat elders, roundtables on fat and age, and engaging with the older fat lesbians in the Bay Area. While the primary backlash against FaT GiRL cited by all participants was the disapproval of their portrayal of BDSM, which came from both their peers and the older generation, all my participants felt that the previous generation of fat activists really appreciated their contributions. As April phrased it:

*Not everybody liked the sex, particularly not the BDSM aspect of it. Not everybody liked the punkiness of it, but they loved that it existed. And they loved that it was hot. And loved that it was literate and thinking. So even if there were, this is the older people, even if they were only "reading the articles" *laughs* they loved what we had to say that was content as well as images. (April)*

As this quote illuminates, despite the varied opinions on the punk aesthetic and the explicit portrayal of hardcore sex, FaT GiRL was a project which engaged and was engaged with by fat feminists of all ages. As I make claims throughout this thesis about the progression of fat and queer activist ideology over time, the transformation in language around gender and the way culture has shifted in the last 30 years, know that the truth of feminist lives can never fully be articulated in a manner which accounts for the true diversity of experience in any particular time period.

While there are major issues with the wave model of feminism, it is also useful to this project to highlight how FaT GiRL was situated in a larger context of "third wave" feminist and queer media technologies. In *No Permanent Waves*' sixteenth chapter "*US Feminism- Grrrl Style!: Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave*," Ednie Kaeh Garrison considers "the role of democratized technologies, the media, subcultural movements and networks, and differential oppositional consciousness in the formation of feminist consciousness raising among young women" in the 1990s (Garrison 2010:380). She argues that third wave feminist frameworks are as much a product of "postmodern cultural conditions as [they are] a product of the first and second waves, or of women's studies, or the media backlash, or violence" (Garrison 2010:386) One major facet Garrison characterizes as being an indicator of this postmodern nature is the third wave's "reliance on networking among different cohorts of women who compose a movement culture that is disparate, unlikely, multiple, polymorphous." While many of the white feminists characterized as second wave "sought to create the resistant

subject ‘women,’ in the third wave, this figure “women” is rarely a unitary subject” (Garrison 2010:386). Garrison frames how feminist networking in the ‘90s involved a technologic of “temporary ‘unified’ political groups made up of unlikely combinations and collectivities (i.e. affinity groups or even anthologies, the combining of diverse technologies to construct powerful cultural expressions of oppositional consciousness” (Garrison 2010:386). This very clearly applies to FaT GiRL and is consistent with how all my interviewees understood how and why their zine came to be; that it was a product of the larger culture environment of democratized feminist media which sought to deconstruct hegemonic culture by visibilizing multiplicitous subjectivities.

Also central to this logic was the desire to provide your community with access to information. In the book “Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies,” Cait McKinney documents how lesbians throughout history have responded to frustration and their desire for information about lesbian identity by generating that information themselves, utilizing collective media making processes to create community and social movements. McKinney argues that sharing information is a world making gesture “motivated by desires for shared history and an erotics of being in proximity to a past organized by sexuality—a history built and occupied by others” (McKinney 2020:21). FaT GiRL not only shared information about queer fat history, it also compiled extensive resource lists in each issue of fat friendly clothing and furniture (catalogs & in person stores in the Bay Area), organizations, events, announcements, and fat positive media including: print, movies/film/video, books, magazines & zines, music, and internet resources. This form of information sharing sits within the legacy of queer media making which actively works to enhance the lives of its readers via access to affirming community, media and material objects.

Geopolitical Context of 1990s Queer San Francisco

Finally, we must briefly touch on the geopolitical importance of the Bay Area to 20th century queer history and the dawn of the tech industry. Throughout the 1900s, the Bay Area has been understood as a major gay cultural center of the United States. In the 2003 book *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*, Nan Alamilla Boyd argues that San Francisco is a queer town “not simply because it hosts disproportionately large gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities but because a queerness is sewn into the city’s social fabric” (Boyd 2). From the 1930s onwards, tourist-based queer cultures mutated and exploded, with queer people taking up residence in communities all across the area. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, San Francisco’s reputation as a locus of queer life with dedicated spaces like clubs and bars as well as ample activism influenced many young queer people to move to the area, including the creators of FaT GiRL.

However, from the early 1990s onward the Bay Area has also become the center of the tech industry and functionally the global center of digital age late stage capitalism. In the 2018 book *Pictures of a gone city: tech and the dark side of prosperity in the San Francisco Bay Area*, Richard Walker explores how the technological revolution has fundamentally transformed not only the world at large, but specifically the physical and cultural environment of the Bay Area. He traces how the 1980s were a turning point across the country in a shift towards the metropolitan core. This shift brought a huge influx of people to central cities creating “a new sheen of greater density, commercial revival, and cosmopolitan pleasures, a phenomenon that has come to be known as the New Urbanism” (Walker 2018:153). Companies like Atari, Apple, and Oracle were all founded in the Bay Area in the 1970s and in the 1980s, Silicon Valley became the widely accepted center of the computer industry. The .com boom brought a huge influx of

money, jobs and technology into the region which, as I will explore in chapter three, allowed for the creation of FaT GiRL. However, the huge influx of capital, techies and the subsequent .com bubble burst in the very early 2000s have hugely displaced queer, and trans working class people and communities of color from the area. This has especially hit queer women and gender nonconforming people who are, by virtue of their gender, more economically marginalized than queer men. Despite the centrality of digital technologies to its founding and proliferation, the rise of the tech industry has destroyed much of the queer social fabric of the region and displaced the individuals who made the environment so culturally rich. This too is central to the story of FaT GiRL— how the gentrification via the rise of tech changed the class landscape of the Bay Area, irrevocably changing how queer people could or couldn't gather and thus the culture they could produce.

Lit Review Summary

While some academic works have documented the content of FaT GiRL, no academic text has ever primarily focused on FaT GiRL beyond textual analysis of the zines themselves or through a social science lens. Most work which has analyzed the text has focused on the portrayal of sex, with one also studying the use of humor and strategies of counterabjection. Charlotte Cooper's book attempts to document an overarching history of fat activism, and while Cooper does conduct an interview with at least one member of the FaT GiRL collective, the analysis is a small component meant to serve the characterization of general fat activism over time. Her book also does not ask fat activists anything about the state of body politics today and how they feel their work affected the world at large. Documenting a history of fat activism is extremely complicated due to the way compounding marginalizations have resulted in lack of

documentation, especially of the work of Black fat activists and other fat activists of color. The cultural memory of feminism through a wave model often erases the work of the most marginalized feminists who are often engaging in radical anticapitalist/race and class conscious/anti assimilationist frameworks much earlier than we imagine. FaT GiRL fits sits in the larger context of collective run democratized queer feminist media of the period which visibilized multiplicitous subjectivities and engaged in information activism. The zine also serves as a case study of how neoliberalism has affected the climate of American social activism (especially in the context of the Bay Area). Given all this context, this thesis is a vital intervention.

CH 3: METHODOLOGY

Positioning the Researcher

I want to be clear with the ways my methodology choices, circumstances and positionality have shaped this research. I discovered FaT GiRL by complete chance the first time I was ever assigned a text about fatness in an academic context. The piece was “No Fat Futures: The Uses of Anti-Social Queer Theory for Fat Activism” by Francis Ray White and it offhandedly mentioned “the seminal fat/queer zine FaT GiRL” in a footnote (White 2013:22). I had recently seen a Twitter thread by Fat Studies scholar Kivan Bay which mentioned Jewish lesbians, the Bay Area, and zinemaking as instrumental in the history of fat liberation, and so when I saw the phrase “fat/queer zine,” a bell went off in my brain. As a Jewish queer fat zinemaker from the Bay Area, I knew I needed to learn more. I managed to get a copy of FaT GiRL issue three sent to my school’s library, and when it arrived I lied on my floor combing

through the pages, fascinated by this snapshot of queer history. There was something so undeniably powerful about seeing work that not only centers the intersections of my identity, but that showed me that people like me have always existed, have always fought for justice and engaged with the world in the mediums I love.

I searched FaT GiRL up online, trying to figure out where I could get the rest of the issues. I found an old Facebook page, which I followed despite it being inactive. On July 2nd 2019, the account posted for the first time in four years “Hey FaT GiRL fans, you should check out Fat Lib Ink! Rad t-shirts, zines and more!” I clicked on the Fat Lib Ink / Fat Rose website because I was intrigued; what was this fat liberation organization that included my name in the title? On the website I found an application form for Fat Rose, an organizing home for fat people on the left seeking to embed intersectional fat analysis in all movement spaces. I applied and wrote about FaT GiRL for one of the questions. I quickly received an email from the organization’s founders Max and Dawn that not only were we neighbors in Richmond CA, Max was one of the original creators of FaT GiRL and my writing about it had made the two of them cry. I went to my first Fat Rose meeting a few days later and I have been organizing with them ever since. It is important for me to share my personal history with this topic and these people, because I would not have the access to and trust to tell these stories if it were not for my personal relationship with Max from the almost two years we have spent working together/in community. My work as an active Fat Rose member and my positionality as a queer fat person grants me insider status, without which this research would be impossible.

As someone conducting feminist sociology within the field of fat studies, it is important that I locate myself and my stake in this project. My name is Rose; I am a twenty-two year old

white Askenazi Jew, a queer small to mid-size fat¹⁶ (she/they) nonbinary femme with chronic pain who grew up middle class in the Bay Area (East Bay). I am an interdisciplinary artist and organizer who got into art and activism because I was trying to make sense of my experience in the world, much of which was trying to make sense of the violence I experienced from a young age because of my fatness. I am constantly striving to learn, grow and transform through an antiracist, anticapitalist, abolitionist feminist, queer and trans fat politic. I operate from the knowledge that as a white person I benefit from and undoubtedly unintentionally perpetuate the structures of white supremacy, but that my liberation and the liberation of everyone I love is contingent upon its dismantling. My fat liberationist politic aims to center those most marginalized by structural anti-fatness, namely Black, working class, queer and trans, and superfat folks. The kinds of activism I love to engage in are those which invite us to show up as our whole, complicated, multi-talented selves, which lean into revolutionary joy and the transformational power of community care.

Methods Principles

This project carries on a tradition of queer oral history and feminist sociology which seeks to engage in research justice. Research Justice, a methodological framework emerging across academic disciplines, requires researchers to “consider the sacred obligations and responsibilities of scholars and activists to create a space for mutual respect in defining research goals and questions” (Jolivéte 2015). It pushes researchers to do work which benefits and is accountable to the marginalized communities being studied, not only requiring reflection on the

¹⁶ Even as someone with chronic pain who has been fat my entire life, I have immense size and able bodied privilege as a small/mid fat person with a lot of mobility. I have been able to access the world in a way many fat and disabled people are not able to. I am currently in the midfat range as a size 22ish. I have been treated as fat since I was born and I became officially plus size around early high school (was a small fat (size 16 or 18) for the majority of the last 8 years).

positionality of the researcher, but acknowledging that research is a political process of co-constructing knowledge. It values community based epistemologies (versus the classical understanding of the researcher as an objective outsider analyzing a passive subject) and attempts to create reflexive ethical methodologies which utilize research for social change. Most research about fat people's bodies and lives is medical, othering and stigmatizing; it so often is done on us, without us, upholding antifat frameworks and perpetuating violence on our bodies. Thus, it is vital that a project such as this, which holds the stories of fat queer elders, engages critically with a research justice framework and uplifts its interviewees as the brilliant knowledge producers they are.

There is a long lineage of queer intergenerational oral history within the practice of feminist social science. In the 2012 book *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez dive deeply into the practice and what is required of it as a methodology, given the various complicating factors that oppression, pathologization and social stigma bring. They argue that there is “a tacit mutual responsibility for elders to sit, reflect and recall while younger generations commit to recording, processing, and analyzing the previous generations’ historical knowledge” and that intergenerational oral histories can disrupt “historical paradigms that do not or will not acknowledge the existence of bodies, genders, and desires invisible to previous historical traditions” (Boyd & Ramirez 2012:5). They outline how queer oral history values bodily knowledge, including sexual knowledge and storytelling as an embodied practice and requires us to “be systematic and critical—while remaining caring and appreciative” (Boyd & Ramirez 2012:6). Furthermore, Boyd and Ramirez note that because queer oral histories can be intense interactions if deeply personal information is shared, oftentimes oral history collaborations evolve “into something more, a bond, friendship,

or political commitment” and that in the social space “something transformative seems to occur as new knowledge is produced” (Boyd & Ramirez 2012:2). I can certainly attest to this feeling of transformation and how the process of queer intergenerational oral history can create something larger than a research project; after our interviews several of my participants asked if I wanted to talk to them another time not in the capacity of researcher, to meet me if/when they are able to return to the Bay Area, and continue a relationship post this project. I look forward to the possibility of continued relationships with my interviewees and the potential of co-constructing more knowledge together in the future. To co-construct this oral history I utilized a combination of semi structured in depth interviews and content analysis of the zines, each detailed below.

Interview Methodology

My prior relationship with Max somewhat dictated who I was able to interview for this project, as ki¹⁷ was my primary contact to other members of the collective. While I went through the process of IRB approval at the end of January 2021, Max began reaching out to the FaT GiRL collective members whose contact information ki still had. Ki told them who I was and what I was doing and then gave me the email of anyone who responded that they were interested. Three of my interviews were people who came from this initial round of outreach. After my interview with Max, ki realized ki should put me into contact with someone who was on the later iteration of the collective and subsequently asked one of the members who joined issue five. There was one additional collective member who several of my interviewees mentioned and thought would be important for me to interview. I asked Max if ki had reached out to her and ki

¹⁷ Max uses ki/kin pronouns. For context on ki/kin pronouns see: <https://medium.com/equality-includes-you/an-argument-for-all-new-pronouns-we-are-ki-we-are-kin-d30674618eaf>

hadn't because they were no longer in touch, but at my request ki managed to find her and she reached out and emailed me.

Once I was given an email address to contact I emailed and introduced myself, providing a little context on who I am and the project, asking if they were still interested (since I was only given contact information for those who already expressed interest to Max). I offered a sense of my availability and asked if there were any times that would be best for them for an approximately hour and a half long Zoom call sometime in the next few weeks. All five additional members I contacted responded and were interviewed. Once we agreed on a time, I sent them a Qualtrics link to sign my informed consent form (and let them know to ask any questions if they had them) and a Zoom link with a waiting room and password to ensure privacy. When we first got on the call we introduced ourselves to each other and got to know each other a little bit; many asked me questions on whether I had had access to all the zines and how I got into this research. I asked for my respondent's pronouns and whether or not they would like to be named in the project, giving them the option to change their answer later. I gave them a general rundown of the structure of the interview, and then we dove in.

My interviews were all in depth and semistructured, but ranged in how heavily we stuck to my interview guide. For the most part I stuck to the order and asked all of my questions, only adding in follow ups, but answers inevitably overlapped and wove through many of my topics. When we would reach a topic we'd already discussed I would sometimes skip the question if we'd gone really in depth, but usually I'd note to my interviewee that we had already touched on my next question, read it to them and asked if they had anything more they wanted to add. For the first couple interviews I did not send my participant my interview guide beforehand, but as Barbarism and I were scheduling our interview she requested that I send it to her so she could

prepare her thoughts. Around the same time Max gave me some feedback that ki had heard from people I'd interviewed that they wished they'd been able to see the questions beforehand, since I am asking them to recollect memories from 25+ years ago, so that they had more time to prepare and remember. Ki suggested that I offer to send my interview transcripts to those I'd already interviewed and allow them to add more comments if they had any. I happily took this suggestion and offered it to all my interviewees, telling them to note on the transcript if there was any particular information they wanted me to leave out of my project (as well as returned them a copy of their informed consent form). For the two interviews I conducted after this suggestion (April and Barbarism) I provided them with both the questions and the transcript. Allowing participants to add more thoughts onto their interview transcripts and decide retroactively if they want to change the terms of their participation (i.e. change from named to pseudonym or decide they no longer wanted a story included) is a part of my research justice methodology which centers co-construction of knowledge and the production of research which is beneficial to the researched.

I felt the way to do the most organic intergenerational, community-oriented research was to be my authentic self as an interviewer, to not shy away from engaging in conversation, expressing an opinion or sharing a little about myself. While I had a personal relationship with one and had briefly interacted with one other, four out of my six interviewees were people I was meeting for the very first time at our Zoom interview. We had no real sense of each other before the moment we met to discuss their lives and deeply personal work, and we are also only meeting over video camera, so do not get the ability to fully gauge each other as we could in person. When you are a political fat person you are often approached by well-meaning academics, journalists, or artists who want to write about you, and handle you poorly. Many

participants told various stories of being characterized in other people's work (Women En Large, Eat Fat, mainstream dyke media etc.) in a way that was frustrating due to the writer's projection of outsider gaze. I wanted my interviewees to feel they got to completely and honestly express their opinions with someone who would have the capacity to hold the rich nuance of their stories as fat people. I knew that a removed demeanor would not only be inauthentic— for me to produce the research I wanted to, I needed to create conditions in which my interviewees had the agency to make an active comfortable, informed decision to trust me (or not) based on an honest impression of me and the project.

Because of this, I was open with what my academic process was going to look like, the types of questions I was going to ask and what I'd be asking from them in this process, and I was honest when they asked me how I ended up researching FaT GiRL. I did not express an opinion on a topic before I asked a question, but after they gave a complete answer I spoke candidly in my response. I often talked a little about my own queerness or fatness if I related to something in the last part of their story (I kept my observations to myself when it was the middle of an answer as to not stop their flow, but when it was appropriate after it was clear they were done with the question, if I had something to share I did). When I related their answers to the world we share it often prompted more thought, insight and deeper conversation. Because of this rapport, these interviews felt very natural, conversational and honest. Every single interviewee at some point has thanked me for doing this work and/or expressed excitement for the project/that they had fun talking to me. However, I don't want to give the impression that I am blindly coming from a place of admiration and did not think deeply and critically about these zines. My gaze comes from a sociologist looking to capture the most nuanced, thoughtful truth possible. It comes from someone thinking intentionally about this work from all angles who will undoubtedly still get

things wrong. I am coming earnestly and honestly from my position as a queer fat sociologist seeking to engage in research which is transparent from all angles in its stakes.

I conducted all of my interviews in 2021, between February 25th and April 1st. They lasted between 1 hour and 11 minutes to 2 hours and 42 minutes, with an average length of an hour and 48 minutes. I spent over 25 hours fixing the auto-transcriptions of 10 hours 47 minutes worth of conversation via the software otter.ai. I then compiled the answers of all 6 participants in one document (as in, I took the frame of my interview guide and imported all 6 answers or any relevant information which came up at another point in the interview under each question). After the material was compiled I coded the 109 pages of transcribed text in the program atlas.ti. My initial round of coding resulted in 165 codes and 511 tags, with the 20 most frequently appearing being: impact and legacy of FaT GiRL, change over time, reception/reaction to FaT GiRL, Bay Area, race, internet & social media, intergenerational, representation and visibility, in person community, punk, sex, class, queer community, Blackness, trans & nonbinary, fat community, friendship & group dynamics, zine production, intersectionality and burnout. It is important to note that while many of these themes would have emerged organically in an unstructured interview, many of them emerged so frequently because they were central to the questions I asked.

This project is an oral history of complex and overlapping timelines from 25+ years ago, and analysis of that memory combined with analysis of the original text these memories surround. I asked my respondents questions which required them to share a combination of their present opinions and to recall specific moments from a period of time they are now far removed from. Therefore this work is undoubtedly shaped by memory loss, distortion and retroactive interpretation. My interviewees were quite self conscious of this, repeatedly noting when they

felt their memory was hazy, they couldn't recall a detail, or how their worldview has since shifted. There were many instances where one interviewee would comment on their memory loss, and another interviewee would unknowingly corroborate their story, filling in the gaps. I pieced together the narratives I was given and independently researched the various threads which are well documented. My interviewees sent me down rabbit holes-- from researching a particular contributor who submitted to FaT GiRL through their writing in lesbian periodicals, to learning about specific locations and events in San Francisco history (historic clubs and cafes, the New Pacific Academy, the 101 California Street shooting etc.), to the various culture makers they named. I also cross referenced the opinions and experiences they shared with the content of the zines themselves, and the 1996 interview of the collective in the *Research Zines!* book, which many of my interviewees referenced. While the combination of all of these methods and my six different firsthand accounts makes me fairly confident in the historical accuracy, since I am conducting this inquiry retroactively, memory and perception are central to the questions I am asking. This project is not only investigating what characterizes the zine content and this unique moment in culture, it is inherently and centrally an analysis of how the primary creators perceive their work 25+ years later, living in a very different cultural landscape.

Interviewee Profiles

The FaT GiRL zine began as a collaboration between Barbarism and Max Airborne which became a fluctuating collective including seven to ten people each issue. Six people were only on the collective for a singular issue, four for every published issue, and the remaining seven were on the collective for three-five issues each. I interviewed six of the seventeen individuals who were listed as a collective member at any point over the course of the zines run. Of those that I interviewed, five were in the founding collective (three worked on the first four,

two worked on all seven), with one joining issue five (worked on the last three issues). My interview sample skews towards the first/founding iteration of the collective. All are between the ages of 52-64 and still identify as queer and fat. All decided if they wanted to be named in this work, use a pseudonym or be left nameless. My interviewees (according to their own descriptions, in the order I interviewed them) are:

Max Airborne (ki/kin): 55 year old white “genderqueer, or agender, non-binary” superfat person. Born in San Francisco, grew up in Milwaukee and Albuquerque. Was a founding member and left after issue 4. Contact for all other interviewees because of our established relationship.

Candida Albicans Royale (she/they): 52 year old “fat queer Jewish, witch femme and dyke.” Grew up in Southern California. Was a collective member from issues 1 through 4.

Bertha Pearl (she/her): 64 year old white queer fashion designer who was born in Manhattan and grew up in Brooklyn. Was a collective member for all 7 issues.

Sondra Solovay: (they/she) 50 year old “white Jewish superfat, disabled queer” on the “femme side of queer, goth side of alternative,” a self described “crafty lawyer” who has been involved in a lot of legal work around weight discrimination. Grew up in a small town in Arizona. Was a collective member from issues 4-7. We have met before at virtual organizing meetings but we have never had a one on one conversation before.

April Miller (she/her): 57 year old superfat femme, “Black Norwegian American/Fat biracial dyke artist” who grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Was a collective member for all 7 issues.

Barbarism (she/her): 55 year old white queer woman with Irish and Jewish ancestry. Grew up with her grandparents & mom in a multiracial working class family in Brooklyn, NY and throughout the country with her father who was in the military (including Fort Baker at the base of the Golden Gate Bridge). Was a founding collective member and left after issue 4.

The collective was described by all interviewees as predominantly white, but did include several Latinx members, of which my sample unfortunately does not include any of (one of whom has sadly passed away). It is important to note that these members and the rest of the collective that I did not get a chance to interview may have different opinions and perceptions than those I was able to work with.

Use of the Zines

My study is grounded in textual analysis of the seven issues of FaT GiRL, in order to contextualize the accounts of my interviewees and compare them to the material they produced at the time. The original zines do not exist online and most copies belong to those who bought them at the time. Originally I asked Max if ki was able to lend me copies and ki was hesitant (since ki only had one copy of each) but told me there was a box of the remaining zines sitting in someone's garage in Oakland. I offered to pick them up and transport them to ki's house in exchange for borrowing them. Unfortunately, the person who was storing them was unresponsive and time was passing quickly. Because of this, I asked if I could borrow Max's set, spend a day scanning them and then return them in the evening. Ki agreed and I did so with all seven issues of FaT GiRL, as well as a copy of Size Queen, the project that Max and Sondra did in 2005. Each author in the zine has sole rights to their work and there has been disagreement over whether the zine should be online, so I am not publishing or distributing the link in any capacity.

I offered a Google Drive link to a folder with copies of the scans to all my participants and several expressed gratitude that I had done the work of digitization.

My method of data gathering and analysis of the issues took a number of steps, as I revisited throughout the research process. I did informal first read throughs of the zines before turning in my IRB proposal so I could ask questions grounded in knowledge of the actual content. Concurrently with my interview process I began to code each zine with a qualitative analysis software called atlas.ti. I read every piece across the seven issues and began to quantify the types of material included in the work. My codes started with the subcategories included in the table of contents of each zine, and then specified them further (i.e. “Advice and Resources” became two separate codes, “Chewing the Fat” got broken into interviews, roundtables, survey responses etc.). I tried to concurrently code the themes of each piece, and I quickly realized that it was impossible to accurately capture the complexity of the thoughts and wealth of ideas embedded throughout FaT GiRL in content codes, as there are so many complex and overlapping theorizations of the human experience. Instead, I looked through each subgenre content and synthesized a general summation on the types of media included, ordering them by frequency of occurrence.

Synopsis of FaT GiRL Content Via Coded Subgenres

I will now present a synopsis of FaT GiRL via its coded subgenres. This by no means captures the wide range of specific ideas that FaT GiRL published, but is included so that a reader who has never seen the zines themselves may gain a general sense of the text itself.

Between the 488 A4 pages there are:

364 Photos- almost all of them of fat bodies- naked and clothed, having sex, face portraits etc.-- many are included in the **41 photo sets** (series of photos taken for spreads, for columns, roundtables, at Fat Girl events etc.)

71 Advertisements: Either for FaT GiRL or from community businesses (match makers, fat friendly massage, sex shops, handmade corsets or boxers, lawyers, other zines etc.)

69 Letters (one section per issue except the first): Mail received by FaT GiRL, huge range of praise, critique, response, discussion, sometimes responded to by the collective in print

55 Personal & Classified Ads (one section per issue): Many looking for sex but also housing, friends etc.

7 Resources Sections (over 5 pages each issue): Includes sections on: clothing (catalogs & in person stores in the Bay Area), where to buy fat friendly furniture, organizations, events, announcements, “Media Feast” (print, movies/film/video, books, magazines & zines, music, internet resources)

28 Various Illustrations/Drawings: Often next to articles or stories, includes things like: how to sign Fat Girl in ASL, many portraits of fat bodies, aliens, doodles etc.

26 “Rants & Raves”: Nonfiction writing: articles, essays, reflections, working through intra communal discourse on class/race, sexuality etc., and more. Some titles include “A Word to Our Concerned Sisters,” “Is Radical Lesbian Feminism the Only Radical Approach?” “Confessions of a Fat Sex Worker,” “No One’s Getting Fat Except Mama Cass,” “Reports from the Front,” “Fat and Bi,” etc.

26 Solicitations for Reader Involvement: Asks and instructions for how readers can participate including: submit photos (specific types and generally), letters, write specific columns they’d like to see, answer survey responses, write personals, help with distribution, give them the resources they needed to keep publishing, send newspaper clippings of fat related news, organize a roundtable, share resource knowledge (clothing, media, events you’re hosting etc.)

22 Survey Answer Compilations: Each posing a question to the readership and publishing a wide variety of responses. Some questions include: What do you like and dislike about being fat? What are your experiences (positive and negative) in the dyke community around your size? How are fat women represented in media? What do you want from thin allies? How does being fat affect your sexuality? What is your relationship to sports?

19 Action Sections: Encouraging readers to direct their energy to an action against anti fatness. Includes asking people to write to various entities. Includes “hints” (5) and “pranks” (3) often cheekily encouraging direct action which redirects energy at oppressive institutions (for example, how to toss Christmas ornaments full of paint at diet centers)

18 Poems: On various topics, size focused and unrelated

16 Pieces of Erotica: Stories on various sexual experiences, both kink and non-kink

15 Fiction Stories (non erotica): Explore a wide variety of topics including childhood, family, fatphobic violence, superhero parodies, eating disorders, crushes, self image etc. (may mention sex, but not written graphically with the intention to arouse)

15 Reviews: In depth analyses on various plays, books, movies, events in the cultural sphere of the time that explore fatness

15 Total Advice Columns: Recurring segments across the 7 issues. Regular columns include: Gear Queen (info swap, practical, often bodily questions), Ask a Fat Girl (advice), Fat & Healthy (health column), Kitchen Slut (food & recipes)

13 News Pages, 6 installments of FatWatch: News stories involving fat people (usually cases of fat oppression, sometimes including action you can take in response), 7 updates on Fat Girl (Dirty Bird Zine Conference, Michigan Women's Festival, collective members shifting, financial troubles, future issue topics & Fat Girl in person events etc.)

11 Comics: Some humorous, some heavy, some autobiographical, some fictional

8 Interviews/Conversations: 3 interviews with important community figures: (Judy Freespirit, Dorothy Allison, Jewelle Gomez), 3 conversations between collective members: Max & Elizabeth (being mistaken for each other, racial & sexual identity, life experiences), "More on Apricot Hankies", the SA/ME Debate (response from several collective members to an anti-kink letter), 1 in depth conversation between a couple on what it is like to be in a relationship with a fat & thin couple

6 Roundtables: In every issue but #6, central part of the Fat Girl project & long rich sections, each focuses on a different intersection, topics include: (experiences and intentions of the) **FaT GiRL Collective, Fat & Age, Racism & Fat Hatred, Class/Conscious, Sexuality, and Butch Identity**

4 Editorials: Letters from collective members on: Who counts as "fat," Happy Birthday Fat Girl (reflections on the first year of publishing), announcement of collective members leaving and joining, Sports and Swimsuit issue explanation

3 Memorials: Tributes to community members who had passed away

3 Collages: Various assemblages

3 Future Issue Surveys: Presenting questions for the reader to answer

2 Paperdolls: DIY paper dolls for readers to cut out

2 Lyrics: Transcribed from two fat positive songs, including one of Max's titled Fat Girl

1 Word Find: Word search of fat positive terminology

With that general sense of the content included in FaT GiRL and how I conducted my research, we can now turn to my discussion and analysis of how FaT GiRL came to be, how it affected its environment, and how it affected body discourse at large.

FaT GiRL is:

AGGRESSIVE•ANDROGYNOUS•**ANGRY**•**BOLD**•**BIG**•
BUTCH•**BUXOM**•**CELEBRATORY**•**CHALLENGING**•
CHARMING•**COMIC RELIEF**•**COMMUNITY BUILDING**•
CREATIVE•**CRITICAL**•**DIVERSE**•
DYKE-IDENTIFIED
 •**FAGGY**•**FAT**•**FAT POSITIVE**•**FEMME**•**FEMINIST**•
FLESHY•**FOR YOU**•**FOUND NEXT TO YOUR VIBRATOR**•
FUN•**FUNNY**•**GOOFY**•**HAIRY**•**HOT**•
HUNGRY•**IN YOUR FACE**•**INTROSPECTIVE**•
JIGGLY•**JOLLY**•**JOYOUS**•**KIKI**•
KINKY•**LOTS & LOTS OF FUN**•**MAKING ROOM**•
MORE FUN•**NERDY**•**NON-JUDGEMENTAL**•**OPEN TO**
DIFFERING DYKE SEXUALITIES•**OPEN MINDED**
 •**PACKING**•**PERVERSE**•**POLITICAL**•
POWERFUL•**RADICAL**•**REFLECTIVE**•**RESOURCEFUL**•
S/M-POSITIVE•**SASSY**•**SEX-POSITIVE**
 •**SEXY**•**SILLY**•**SMART**•**SMUTTY**•**STEAMY**•**STICKY**•
TAKING UP SPACE•**TALKING ABOUT HARD THINGS**•
TRANS-POSITIVE•**TWISTED**•
UNAPOLOGETIC•**VIBRANT**•**VISUAL**•**WET**•**WIERD**•
WITTY•**WORLD-CHANGING**•**XXXXXXXXXXL**

FaT GiRL SEEKS:

activities•advertising•advice•articles•cartoons•centerfold•comics•
 contests•drawings•experiments•fantasy•fashion•fat sightings•fat-girl
 actions•fat-positive medical advice•gossip•hardware tips•high-quality•
 home-improvements•hot sex•inspirations•investigative reporting•
 job-discrimination info•letters•media watch•news•no comment•
 personals•photos•poetry•quizzes•rants•raves•reader responses•real
 life•recipes•resources•reviews•sex parties•smut•stories•swap info•toy
 advice★



Photos from the RESEARCH Book *Zines! Vol 1*

CH 4- A QUEER ORAL HISTORY OF FAT GIRL

How did Fat Girl come to be? What did its production process look like? Why did it end? In this chapter I conduct an oral history of the FaT GiRL project by synthesizing and analyzing the testimonies of my six interviewees. I will begin by documenting the trends I found within the individual lives of the creators of Fat GiRL (how they became politicized in their understanding of fatness) and the origin story of the project. Next I recount a brief history of the zine's production process and publication arc and the joyous queer fat embodiment it created for its participants. Finally, I will document how burnout, scarcity and gentrification brought the project to its end.

Pre FaT GiRL

I did not enter this project with the intention of analyzing my participants' personal lives. However, FaT GiRL was a project born out of the feminist culture of the personal as political, started by a group of friends, stemming from the oppression they faced and witnessed. The zines

themselves were meant to be a reflection of the rich lives they had lived and were living, and so I asked some preliminary questions about their experiences growing up as fat queer people and if they recalled any critical moments which shaped their politic. Throughout my interviews, my participants went into great detail about their personal histories; some even gestured that they knew they were sharing a lot, but that they felt the context of their individual lives was necessary for me to understand how and why FaT GiRL came to be. Because of this clear articulation of the importance of their personal lives to the story of FaT GiRL, and because I found clear trends I had not anticipated in the stories my participants shared about their politicization as youth, I will now briefly discuss how the creators of FaT GiRL came to their fat politic.

The six participants had very different upbringings in varied class circumstances, family configurations and locations, but almost all of them shared stories of being politicized very early on in their childhood, many by their families. For example, April grew up going to protests with her mother, and shared vignettes of her parents, an interracial couple, being politically active around racism in their community. She also recounted early experiences with alternative political education, and began, at age 14, providing childcare for an anarchist organization called A Movement for A New Society (later facilitating their meetings). Barbarism shared stories of her mom, a New York City public school teacher who was active in the Communist and Socialist party, taking her along to meetings at parks and beaches to hear people talk about "the revolution". She articulated that she was politicized around race and class and disability at a very early age because she grew up in a working class multicultural family in Brooklyn and "lived the aftermath of what that meant to the people in my life that I loved," tracing her first political act back to first or second grade. Max similarly cited a newsletter ki made in grade school as ki's first political act and credited ki's political family with exposing ki to activism in childhood.

Candida cited growing up with closeted lesbian moms who gave her a lot of access to information and feminist thought, and Sondra mentioned growing up going to Lutheran school as one of very few Jews in their small Arizona town. While many of my participants expressed that they have "always been fat" (Max) and recounted the fatphobia they experienced from family at an early age (multiple were brought to Weight Watchers and other diet programs as children), family was also a site where they learned to think critically and act politically, which primed them to later be politicized around fatness.

The six members I interviewed identified a wide range of experiences which politicized them in their fatness, but several of my participants recounted experiencing fatphobia from a very early age, repeatedly attempting weight loss/internalizing the shame society imposed on them, and then having experiences which disillusioned them from the myths they'd been told about their bodies their entire lives. For example, Max and April both had intense experiences with the medical industrial complex at a young age which both cited as deeply formative to their politic. As a teenager, Max was incarcerated in a mental institution after being kicked out of multiple schools, and was held there for a year and a half because ki were not losing enough weight. The institution kept them on a 500 calorie diet and surveilled their body 24/7, only finally releasing ki on the condition that ki would come back to Chicago a few times a week to be weighed (with the threat of re-incarceration if they gained the weight back). Max stated that this experience was deeply confusing, as ki "had internalized all the fat hatred" but "also was angry and wanted to rebel". While ki did not have the language of an abolitionist framework at that age, as ki have grown into adulthood, ki continue to be radicalized by that experience because ki saw first hand how "the surveillance of bodies in terms of diet culture ... is training for the surveillance of human beings in a criminal carceral system". Similarly, in 9th grade, April

checked herself into a residential weight loss program at a local hospital in Minneapolis, where she was also kept on a 500 calorie diet and exercised every day, as well as attended a 3 hour belly dancing class each week. She lost weight at first, but then plateaued and gained the weight back, and her doctor "had a fit," accusing her of breaking the diet. She recounted how this moment brought a tipping point of realization:

*I was like, okay, wait a minute, I am doing absolutely everything they say to do, absolutely right. And more than that. And if this is not something that I can fix, you know, it's not something that I have control over to fix. ... It is not about this kind of, you've done something wrong paradigm. Right? And plus, you're an asshole *laughs* I know better than what you are saying, Mr. Doctor, sir. And I'm the 14 year old. Right? ... I'd always [been] sort of inclined to be against what society tells you to do anyway, but that was really the last straw for me. I was like, no, no, this is bullshit.*

For both Max and April, experiencing the violence of medical institutions were critical moments which shaped their understanding of their own bodies and catalyzed their disbelief in the hegemonic narratives about fatness. Bertha, Sondra, and Barbarism similarly all shared moments from adolescence (being called fat in high school and beginning to diet, never being able to get a role in any of school theater productions because of size, being fat on the swim team, constantly experiencing sexual violence centered on breast size etc.) which shaped their understanding of what it meant to be fat in the world.

These experiences of violence were crystalized into political analysis through the writing of first generation fat activists, relationships with older lesbian separatists, and the particular cultural attitudes about bodies forming in the Bay Area queer BDSM community at the time. They all wound up moving to the Bay Area in the late 1980s-early 1990s, some particularly noting that they came because of its reputation as a queer cultural hub. Both Bertha and Candida expressed that moving to San Francisco and interacting with fat people in the dyke community was central to the formation of their fat politic. Several interviewees mentioned consuming the

seminal fat liberation texts and learning about the fat liberationist activism I overviewed in my introduction. From randomly stumbling across a newspaper clipping about NAAFA, to *Shadow on a Tightrope*, to working with Fat Lip Readers theater, the creators of FaT GiRL were undoubtedly shaped by the fat activism of past.

Origin Story

FaT GiRL was explicitly created out of frustration with existing queer, dyke & kink publications, which outright rejected fat people because they believed “nobody wanted to see” fat bodies (Barbarism). While my participants realized they were attracted to women at a variety of ages, four of the six shared that they started identifying as queer & came out in college. One of those was Barbarism who went to UC Santa Cruz, where she participated in a wide variety of queer and peace activism. In the summer of 1990, she attended the New Pacific Academy, an education and training program for young LGBTQ+ activists from all over North America founded by Cleve Jones, after which she moved back to Santa Cruz to an anarchist house. At the time, Santa Cruz boasted a vibrant punk community, which birthed a queer erotica zine (with some intellectual/political analysis of sexuality) called *Inciting Desire*. Barbarism and EQ, her partner at the time who was later a central collective member, decided they wanted to submit a series of photos. Barbarism recounted:

We wanted to submit something to the zine because we felt like Santa Cruz was our stomping grounds and we knew a lot of the people who were doing the zine, and we were just sort of exploring our sexuality and had another friend who did photography. So we did, like a pretty hot scene that she photographed for us and we submitted and then we were rejected, because we were fat. And they wrote us this kind of weird letter ... but we got the inside scoop because we knew some of the people who were really upset about it and the photographer knew people and we were like, what the fuck? Excuse me. Like, I'm too fat for publication? What does that mean? You know, they were really, really sexy photos.

Sometime in late 1993 or early 1994, Heather McAlister, an old friend of Max's and a central person in queer fat community (who later started Big Burlesque and the Fat-Bottom Revue) visited the Bay Area. Barbarism and Max were dating at the time, and took Heather out with some friends to a rooftop bar in the Castro called The Cafe. Heather was looking for someone to cruise for the weekend and was disillusioned by the scene at the bar. As Barbarism shared they were "just talking about how skinny everybody is in the Castro and how white they are and how we're so punk. And she was just like, 'you gotta fix me up here.'" Barbarism racked her brain for who she could introduce Heather to, which led to her mentioning EQ and ultimately, recounting how they were rejected from *Inciting Desire* for being fat. Heather was outraged by the story, and collectively they began stewing on how not even the "radical kinky dyke media included fat people" (Max). As Barbarism put it:

*We were just like, we gotta do something about this! ... Why aren't we just doing our own zine? Yeah, we should just publish! ... and I was like "I want to call it Fat Girl, cause like, nobody wants to see pictures of a fat girl well, they're gonna see pictures of a fat girl!" *laughs**

They began to spitball and brainstorm what the project could include, and from the beginning envisioned an interdisciplinary zine that reflected the richness of their lives. It had to include space for art and politics, their variety of personal interests, and they also wanted to create space where queer fat women could safely and effectively cruise. As Barbarism reflected, a primary motivator was to create a medium where you could "find somebody to hook up with that you know wants you and you know you want them." Thus, FaT GiRL was born.

Collective World Building: Zine Production

Max and Barbarism first pitched the idea to their friends, including Candida and Bertha (who was introduced to this group of people by moving into the McAlister Street apartment that

Max and several other fat queer people were sharing at the time) who were completely enthusiastic. They decided they wanted to do the zine as a collective and then entered a period of recruitment, flyering at events like Dyke March. There are conflicting memories about how many members came from this period versus how many were people they already knew, but one member who did come out of public outreach was April. April recalled that she didn't know how the collective started but that she was working on other community zines and performing with Fat Lip Readers Theater, and someone told her about a Fat Girl meeting:

*I went to a meeting, [and] was like *excited gasp*. ... It was like, you need people, you're making this zine. Yeah! Hell Yeah! I'll do this. And I had been working with the Femme Collective and the Femme Show. And I'd been working with Fat Lip and, you know, writing a bit and working with the books and stuff. But I had a lot of time, I lived alone in an apartment in Oakland and I was like, yeah. I would love to do this. I'm an artist. So I just started helping.*

The collective slowly took shape and they spent six months of 1994 gathering materials and envisioning the first issue. They drew inspiration from the environment around them like the murals in the Mission, the vibrant queer club scene, the work of John Waters and Foucault, as well as their community's queer punk & BDSM culture. As Barbarism explained in the interview with the collective in the 1996 book *Zines! Vol 1*:

We spent a lot of that time talking. One of our first endeavors was to put together an 'issue statement' so that we had a clear idea of what we wanted to present. We discovered how diverse our interests were, what our heartfelt hopes were, and to incorporate a lot of diversity into our publication: sexuality, smut and sincere writing about being a fat dyke growing up in this culture and being alienated... talking about hard things as well as fun things. We spent a lot of time laying the groundwork, making sure we were inclusive about all of this. (McDonald 1996:131)

Part of this groundwork was conceptualizing the aesthetic and visual brand of the zine.

Collective members had varied ideas on how the project should look, with some desiring a more punk, small scale Xerox traditional zine aesthetic, with others wanting more polish and a full size

printed magazine. This period of time was the beginning of the explosion of tech companies in San Francisco, and Barbarism and Max both got jobs working for a high end computer systems administrator magazine downtown. The company paid them to learn Photoshop and Quark and as a marketer Barbarism was placed in several classes on magazine design. Barbarism applied the magazine cover design and marketing techniques she learned in these classes to help the zine reach as many people as possible via visual recognition and favorable placement at bookstores—a consistent color theme for each issue, FaT GiRL at the top so that if there were other magazines placed in front of them the name was visible, and strategic decisions about the masthead. The initial design choices she proposed were as much about brand recognition and distribution as they were about artistic preference. Max and Barbarism also utilized their work xerox machines and did much of the layout of the first couple issues at their work on their desktop computers, as no one had laptops at the time. As Max put it, “the .com boom helped FaT GiRL come to life because we had access to that training.”

The first issue came out in October 1994 with an initial run of 2000 copies. The content was a mix of media by forty eight different contributors (ten of which were the initial iteration of the collective). Many of these contributions came from individuals already in the collective’s existing social networks, but some presumably came from the flyering the collective did, to mixed results. As Max recounted:

*“We made stickers about fat, you know, some were “Riots Not Diets,” some were like “Submit to Fat Girl.” I don’t remember what else. And so we all got armed with these stickers. And we went around like a little fat army, trying to recruit people. And so anytime we’d see a fat dyke, or someone we thought was a fat dyke, we would approach them. *laughs* And people did NOT like this strategy, like some of them did, but some of them really did not. We did it at a Dyke March, it was the first or the second Dyke March, ever. We went around with our stickers, and we’re handing them to people and trying to get people to send us submissions and join our collective and all this. And some people were really rude, really rude, like, you know, really did not want to be identified as fat. And we were there identifying them as fat like, totally out about*

*it, like, 'hey, fat person, we love you!' And they're like, "Fuck you!" *laughs* But I think just it was revolutionary for a lot of people like, oh, "You're calling me fat? You're recruiting me for this fat thing?' Wow."*

After the first round of submissions were received, the collective began to decide what they were going to accept and how they were going to lay it out. For the first issue and all issues following, the collective made very intentional design choices to vary the genre and emotional registers of the media throughout the zine. All my participants stressed how important it was to them for the work to “reflect round vibes” (April) because they wanted media which reflected every facet of their lives and appealed to all different kinds of fat dykes. As Sondra phrased it:

I feel like that's what made sense to us at the time, and still does to me, that it's all, like you can't separate these things apart. That being represented and having your sexuality represented is important and having your politics represented is important and they go hand in hand. And having things that are funny and engaging to be with it, or you want to turn the page, like that kind of sort of sense of a variety show where it's all there. That felt really important, as opposed to a zine that was just smut or was just academic, or just like, none of that would make sense. And also, like, it was the whole community. I think there was a sense of wanting enough variety to appeal to all different kinds of people, because we knew, even though it was a narrow readership in a sense, like, we were a very diverse community. The community of fat queers, or fat dykes is narrow compared to the world, but it's a very diverse group, like racially and economically and spiritually, just a very diverse group. So you needed to have all of that stuff to appeal to everyone. And it was what was coming back from the community.

This variety show aesthetic allowed all collective members and contributors to contribute content which reflected their skillset and passions, from comics and visual art to photos to articles to creative writing and beyond. Several collective members picked up repeated columns on topics like health, news, advice, resource sharing and food, for example Bertha had a recurring column called “The Kitchen Slut” which celebrated and sexualized cooking in order to combat the way fat people are shamed for eating. They wanted the project to be a community forum for all fat dykes, so unless it was beyond redeemable (politically or artistically) they accepted any and all submissions from the community. In layout sessions they would search for balance and flow,

sometimes saving submissions or contributions for future issues to balance the types of media or emotional registers.

The collective opened the first issue with a compilation of anonymous answers to the questions: “How do you feel fat women are represented in the media? How do you feel fat dykes are represented in the dyke media?” and “If you could, how would you change the media’s presentation of fat?” (FaT GiRL #1 1994:2). The page that follows is the original photoset of Barbarism and EQ which was rejected from *Inciting Desire*. In this way, the origin story of FaT GiRL and the intention behind the project are very clearly visible in the text. Later in the issue there is a roundtable with the collective where they discuss their experiences as fat dykes and their intentions for the zine, as well as photos of them feeding each other-- a joyous and pleasurable refusal of food shame in which “seemingly impossible desires and bodily formations take shape, exhibiting the viability of such lives and practices” (Snider 2009: 228). For each issue that followed (except issue #6) the collective organized a roundtable on a different intersection of identity (Fat & Age, Racism & Fat Hatred, Class/Conscious, Sexuality, and Butch Identity) which brought together a wide variety of fat dykes (many not in the collective) to discuss their experiences, which they transcribed and documented with participant portraits. The roundtables often sprouted organically out of collective meetings¹⁸, but were very deliberately organized and transcribed, as the collective felt they were central to the project. As a medium, the roundtables built a space for fat dykes at various intersections to theorize their own identity in relationship to other members of their community; to celebrate multiplicitous subjectivities while creating solidarity.

¹⁸ “This is often how the Fat Girl meetings would go. We would start with one topic and then find ourselves like in the meat in some, you know, we'd picked down to the bone and be like, "Oh, this is really juicy stuff!" And that's, you know, that's how we'd end up with another Roundtable. *laughs* We'd start talking about things and we were like, "wow, we really need to do a roundtable on that." (Barbarism)

When I asked my interviewees what the primary message of FaT GiRL was, they all gave a version of the same response. To honor their collective vision, I compiled their articulations into one answer which incorporates language from all six: So, what was the primary message of FaT GiRL? It was:

Fat is not only acceptable... but fat is cool! Fat is radical. Fat is punk. Fat is sexy and playful. Fat sex is hot sex. Fat people are brilliant and thoughtful and deserving of love and attention and health care and caring. Don't be ashamed, live your life. "Don't dream It, Be It." Tell your truth. Just get out there. We want you! You are valued and you are wanted ... in your entirety. Self worth is a revolutionary act. But self worth is not enough, and we have to change the system, and no one else is gonna change it for us, we have to change the world. Fat Girl was celebratory, and it was also confrontational.

This collective answer elucidates several important factors to highlight. For one, while media representation was a key motivator for the project, FaT GiRL resists traditional neoliberal discourses of visibility by arguing that while self worth is revolutionary, it on its own will not dismantle structures of bodily hierarchy. Its framework places visibility and desirability politics within their context of larger institutions of dominance (“love and attention and health care”) and seeks recognition without attempting to placate dominant narratives (i.e. the fat is okay/fat won’t kill you rhetoric). Furthermore, the celebratory and confrontational nature of FaT GiRL did not just coexist, they were often one and the same. As I outlined through Le’A Kent’s analysis in my literature review, the work encourages the reader to take direct action in mischievous manners which not only resist diet culture, but give the participant the opportunity to find pleasure in harming the dominant institutions/narrative (prank calling or throwing paint filled Christmas ornaments at diet centers, cutting inaccessible seating with a chainsaw, faking dramatic births if someone asks if you’re pregnant etc.). Similarly the visibilization of images which glorify fat queer people’s joy and pleasure (sexual and otherwise) was a central, and explicitly political/confrontational act. As Max explained, when you grow up as fat, “not only are you not

seen as desirable, you're also not really allowed to have desire,” and thus the celebration of embodied pleasure, especially in relationship to food and sex, is a direct refusal of the shame and silence imposed upon you. The expressions of explicit and unapologetic sexuality, especially that which depicted BDSM oriented sex, was the most contraversial element of the zine but that which was most visibly a new contribution to the lexicon of fat activism. As April explained:

*Everybody was willing to talk politics. It's easy to find somebody who's willing to write an essay, or you know, a piece to perform, but, bodies are real. Sex is real. And it hits people in a place that's really, really different than.... women who aren't having sex are just women, you know, dykes who are having sex are dykes. *laughs* So that's part of it. ... Plus, you know, we thought it was hot *laughs* and we could publish whenever we wanted. It was actually hard later on, when our original publisher dropped us, and we had to find another publisher and they dropped us because of the sex, but we weren't letting go. That was really, really, really important. Partially just because that's not an image you get to see right? It's hard enough, okay, dykes, or at least women with women who are doing it for themselves and not for a male gaze? Not about meeting society's purchasing tendency was just what we wanted to do.*

FaT GiRL catalyzed both its contributors and readers to engage in radically pleasurable lives, encouraging any and all to submit the sexual representation they wanted to see. All my participants repeatedly stressed just how much fun they had throughout the whole process; in FaT GiRL joy was political, infectious, abundant and unabashed.

FaT GiRL also functioned as a site for queer fat community to publicly work through discourse and critically engage in dialogue about media which portrayed fat bodies. One notable example of this was the back and forth with the author of the collection *Women En Large*, a 1994 fine art photography book of nude fat women photographed by Laurie Toby Edison, with text by Debbie Notkin. In the second issue of FaT GiRL, Candida wrote a review of the book, praising the beauty of the images while critiquing the way Notkin projects commentary onto the stories of the women photographed which make it clear she does “not get the main point behind what these women are saying” (FaT GiRL Issue #2 1995:31). The center of this critique is the way the book

handled April, who was photographed and asked to write an essay for the project. After April wrote frankly about the process of accepting her body and claiming her sexuality Notkin wrote, “Most of us aren’t as outrageous as April, but one way or another we do find an accommodation that works for us” (Notkin qtd in FaT GiRL #2 1995:32). In FaT GiRL both Candida and April responded to the use of the term outrageous and the way that it was so heavily steeped in projections about April’s personality given her fat Black womanhood. Candida wrote, “yes, how very outrageous that such a woman should demand and expect people to treat her as powerful and desirable. Thanks for dismissing her self-respect as outrageous.” (FaT GiRL #2 1995:32). April noted that while she was still honored to be in the book, with one line “they tainted my experience and dismissed all the power of my words, my life,” declaring defiantly, “Outrageous. Courageous. Spot the difference” (a quote which also graced the back cover of the issue) (FaT GiRL #2 1995:32). The next issue the collective published the letter that Notkin wrote in response to the review, apologizing to April and responding to the other critiques Candida made. In our interviews April and Candida both noted how useful this textual medium was as a way to have these complex conversations with other activists and artists, as April described:

*I responded, and then she responded *laughs* So to be able to have kind of conversations about where you are, politically and experientially that are surrounding this sort of fat experience with other people who are also trying to move forward was really, really good.*

In this way FaT GiRL offered a location for dialogue amongst fat people working through not only their own identities, but also how they wanted to be portrayed in media.

FaT GiRL was distributed far and wide, despite only having a run of 2000 copies per issue. The team was given lists of alternatives bookstores by other zinemakers in their community and would send samples, packing and mailing sets of copies to the stories who returned interest, as far as cities like Berlin and Amsterdam. They sent issues directly to readers

who mailed them money for subscriptions (each zine cost \$5) and would also ride around San Francisco delivering the zines to local stores. These bookstores including A Different Light in the Castro, one of the biggest queer bookstores in the country at the time, where they were the highest selling zine they'd ever carried (V Vale 1996:135). FaT GiRL found its way to corners all around the world, passed through queer community from friend to friend and into many unexpected hands. Many collective members told me stories of the unexpected places they later discovered their work— from encountering pictures of their own butt on the wall of dressing room of a plus size thrift store in Brooklyn, to straight strangers on planes bringing up the work without any knowledge of their involvement, to hearing from a friend in Korea that they ran into someone who knew the work—FaT GiRL proliferated far and wide. As the publication continued and the internet became more widespread they began a website called FaT GiRL Online where they republished content, primarily the political material and articles to avoid providing the sexual content to trolls. Both the physical publication and the website received press attention from more traditional media outlets like Time Magazine, the Nation, and shoutouts in the more normative queer publications. The collective was also interviewed for a RESearch book called “Zines! Vol 1” which profiled eleven prominent zines to investigate the counterculture phenomenon. As Max stated in the Zines! Interview, “for a being such a fringe thing, we sure are popular! Weird!” (Airborne qtd in V Vale 1996:137)

While FaT GiRL was primarily a textual endeavor, it also manifested as in-person community by bringing collective members and readers together in physical space. Sometimes this took the form of throwing events, primarily zine readings as fundraisers or getting together to do photoshoots, but usually involved collective participation in established queer, fat and zine

community events and spaces like Pride and Dyke March, the Michigan Womyn's Festival¹⁹, play parties, a punk conference called Dirty Bird, the NAAFA fat feminists conference, and OutWrite (a national queer writers conference). When I asked what kind of community spaces FaT GiRL birthed Candida explained:

I really don't know if we brought about many of the spaces, like we threw some events. And we definitely participated in some events that were opened up to us to be more inclusive ... I could be wrong, but I don't feel like we necessarily opened up those physical spaces. I feel like our presence made room for a dialectic where people were just direct about being fat, and asking for what they wanted. And then it can be sexy and hot. ... We took up space in queer culture in a way that I hadn't seen before. I felt like we wanted that room and we made that room. And we were recognized, I felt that things really changed.

Barbarism echoed this sentiment, noting that the community's reaction to their presence was also a product of the way the zine empowered them to unapologetically take up space together, which was surprisingly well received by the community at large:

*It was more like we just took over, we just became really emboldened *laughs* it's one thing to be out with your fat partner. It's another thing to like, be out with, like this huge group of clearly, like, self possessed fat queer women and we just started going to places together. We just, we got a lot more positive reception. And I don't know if it's just from people who read the zine as much as it, I think it just really changed our confidence and self worth and all of that stuff that comes from being our authentic self and feeling empowered.*

In this way, the zine transformed the lives of its creators as much as it did the lives of its audience.

While FaT GiRL created a lot of joy for both its creators and readers, it was also an incredible amount of work. Beyond creating their own content for the zine, the collective ran consensus based planning meetings, an editorial committee, coordinated photoshoots, and held all night layout sessions. They worked with printers, solicited local advertisers, transported the heavy boxes of zines, coordinated mail and in person distribution and threw events to raise

¹⁹ Several interviewees specifically wanted to note to me that they stopped attending Michigan Womyn's Festival when they learned how TERF-y it was (that it rejected trans women)

enough money to print. Finding free space that could accommodate that many fat people proved to be a challenge, as Barbarism recalled:

All the queer people I know rent all their lives instead of owning, because they weren't deemed worthy from their families, if their family had capital to be able to, like, you know, purchase their own homes. So we were always in some kind of semi squatting situation. And that's where the zine you know, I lived in this old fashioned really big Victorian flat, with a lot of different roommates coming in and out most all of whom were identified as dykes at different points. But because it was one of those old fashioned flats, one of my sets of walls were those double doors. And so we were able to have zine meetings and do the zine, because I was able to fly those double doors open and there was enough physical space for all of us. You know it was hard to like, have a collective and then fit into a tiny apartment and have a meeting and have enough chairs that can support all of our weight. Like odd logistics, but that was like an issue for us. And it was hard because I was on a first floor walkup. But you know, there wasn't anywhere else we could be. We tried meeting in some public spaces, like Red Dora's and everything, but there was never enough room for us. And we didn't have money to rent space.

While the collective all cared for each other, navigating the interpersonal dynamics of an established friend group which added complete strangers to attempt a consensus based, volunteer run collective process for something so laborious naturally proved to be quite difficult. FaT GiRL did not set out to make money (other than to pay for itself) or operate as a business, but inherently required enormous financial coordination which was extremely challenging given the conditions of economic scarcity. Navigating conditions of shared labor and creative control were also sometimes difficult, as all collective members navigated their own set of marginalizations, interpersonal relationships and participation level while working their paid jobs. This ultimately led to three of the founding members, Barbarism, Candida and Max leaving after issue #4, still participating by contributing materials but removing themselves from the collective process.

All my participants shared how lack of resources and access to capital proved to be the biggest challenge in publishing such a massive project. Raising the funds necessary to publish and mail sometimes required the collective to make difficult choices they did not want to, including one particular incident of unintentional ableism which was mentioned to me by

multiple interviewees. One this particular occasion, FaT GiRL was in desperate need of funds for their next issue, and thus planned a fundraiser. The only space the group could get donated was a place where one of the collective members worked, which just so happened to be up a flight of stairs with no other accessible entrance. After the event, a community member in a wheelchair who had previously contributed to the zine wrote them a letter expressing their hurt and anger that they had been defined outside of the bounds of community by virtue of being unable to access the event, and how it was even more hurtful than normal because it came from fellow fat dykes. As Sondra recalled:

That was a very hard moment. I didn't have the disability knowledge of politics at that time that I do now. ... I feel bad for the scarcity in that moment, the scarcity of resources that we had. The scarcity of accessibility, the scarcity of skill that I had, at that time to, you know, I remember, like, feeling the desperation of trying to raise funds, and not having a good way to do it, and making this decision to take this free space, and not feeling great about it, but also not having the skills to understand better, like how important it was to make a different choice. And just that feeling of hurting and disappointing someone who is a member of the community. And then also just feeling helpless, resource wise, to not have better resources. I mean, now I look at that, and it's terrible and it's also terrible that we had someone who had to work in that space. It's terrible to have inaccessible spaces. Not just the event, but the fact that like, we have fat people having to access these inaccessible spaces too, but ... I still feel bad about it to this day. I wish that we had made a different choice. And I really learned from that feeling of you know, defensiveness, and shame and scarcity, that horrible feeling of having messed up and not having known how to do better and that struggle, I try to learn from that every day.

The letter from this community member, Mary Frances Platt, was published in Issue #7, alongside a response from the collective apologizing and explaining how the choice was made out of economic scarcity, but that none the less it would not happen again and that they planned to study the anti-ableism collective discussion facilitator packet she mailed them. This story exemplifies the messiness which inevitably comes with a project like FaT GiRL; that trying to create inclusive community spaces under the stress of multiple compounding marginalizations and class struggle proves to be extremely difficult.

Burnout

When I asked my interviewees why FaT GiRL ended, most felt they didn't know the whole story. Piecing together everyone's experience of the end, it's clear that FaT GiRL ended because of labor burnout and financial strain. The collective members who left after issue #4 held much of the infrastructure and did a lot of labor, and once they left it fell on just a couple people who attempted to keep it going, but ultimately couldn't sustain how much work it involved. The influx of tech workers into San Francisco by this point (1997) also meant that life in San Francisco became increasingly more expensive. As Sondra articulated:

It's a big endeavor to sustain as volunteers who are facing our own discrimination and hurdles, ... people who were on the collective were working very hard and just having to survive and doing this whole huge, unpaid job on the side was tough. So, I think that struggle of ... how to raise the money to do it and keep it going and keep the energy going and to do it right. I think that was really the issue. ... I remember trying to do more fundraisers to generate money, and then the whole challenge of like, space is so expensive in San Francisco, how do we do that? When you're charging \$5 and it's donation based for a fundraiser, you really can't afford to pay for space on that too. So I think it was as the people who were doing the collective had like fewer resources, it just became harder and harder. I think San Francisco was also going through its changes then where artists were getting kind of squeezed, Bay Area artists were getting squeezed. Spaces were becoming more expensive. It was just harder to do stuff like that.

In addition to the financial difficulty and the loss of steam, compounding marginalizations and experiences of trauma created intense burnout. As April, one of the last collective members trying to keep it alive, described it, it was “a terrible congruence of everybody running out of spoons.”²⁰ She shared that she didn't know the details of why other people's spoons ran out, but that a major contributor to hers was her experience in proximity to the 101 California shooting at the law firm she was working at (she had gone out to lunch just before). As she recalled:

Burnout is a real thing. And it looks really different for different people. The other thing that I think that is different about my experience... is that back in the 90s, there was a shooting at the law firm that I worked with, 101 California in San Francisco, which is actually the reason there was that ban on big weaponry for a while, was because of the 101 California shooting. But that

²⁰ Spoons is a popular metaphor in the disability community for the limited amount of energy you have as a disabled person.

was traumatic. And over time, I have realized that I had serious Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, I didn't answer my mail or even open the mailbox for several years.... I stopped checking the [FaT GiRL] mailbox. There were a couple of us who were supposed to be doing it. And we had paid for it to go on for a while ... [but] nobody else did it. So we could have published another episode. But I think that the other people who were still around, obviously didn't have enough energy to do it, or get together with me to do it. And I wasn't about to pull up enough energy to do it on my own. So I would say that, you know, we died, we didn't lose interest, we burned out really, truly. We put out a couple episodes that were really only two of us.

As April articulates, compounding marginalization, trauma and burnout brought FaT GiRL to an unceremonious close, an end all too common outcome for ambitious activist projects. Several of the collective members stayed in touch, others lost contact over time as the cost of living and life circumstances pushed many of them out of the Bay Area. While FaT GiRL had a short four year run, its unabashed celebration, confrontation and vision irrevocably changed the landscape of queer San Francisco and the direction of fat liberation movements (the details of how I will outline in chapter 6).

As I close this oral history, I want to note that there are many more stories of FaT GiRL and the lives of my participants than I could possibly ever fit in one thesis; this is in no way could ever be comprehensive. However, I hope that by beginning to synthesize what my interviewees shared I am able to document and visibilize history that could otherwise easily go unrecorded and be lost to time. In my next chapter I will explore the larger political and economic trends which enabled FaT GiRL's existence, and in my final content chapter I will return to FaT GiRL's impact and legacy.

CH 5: OF IT'S TIME

The 1990s saw major transitions across all spheres of life, from the rise of the internet to the rise of identity politics discourse, from the global shifting of geopolitical borders to the devastating fallout of HIV/AIDS. In this chapter I will briefly analyze the ways FaT GiRL was a snapshot of the larger economic and political conditions of the time, as well as the rapidly evolving queer discourse on gender and identity.

'90s Spirit: Artistic Entrepreneurialism & Zine Culture

In the 1980s, protection against media company consolidation was unraveled by Ronald Reagan's FCC Chairman Mark Fowler and the ownership of mainstream news sources was consolidated into the hands of fewer and fewer corporations. As society faced major political and economic upheavals throughout the '90s, zine culture exploded in response to the "crisis in the media landscape" (Vale 1996:4) of shallow reporting, discourse homogenization and fear mongering. As V Vale put it in *ReSearch Zines! Vol 1*:

If communication can be viewed as food, then everything the mass media serves has been depleted of nourishment by corporate self-serving agendas. Amidst this landscape of lies, the zine movement has arisen everywhere like hydra of discontent. Finally original, fresh and truthful communication between individuals is proliferating on a massive scale. This is a movement without leaders or spokespersons and there are no rigidifying standards dictating what may or may not be presented. (Vale 1996:4)

Vale's final point, that this movement intentionally lacks centralized leadership, is an important facet to the way zine culture resisted the neoliberal capitalism rising at the time. Resource sharing and intra-zine solidarity was also central to this countercultural movement; FaT GiRL received lists of alternative bookstores and publishing help from other zinemakers, published lists of any fat zine they could find and the collective would regularly trade FaT GiRL for other works.

Throughout our interviews my participants repeatedly stressed how “special” this period of time was, how widespread artistic entrepreneurialism permeated countercultural movements, and how they were a product of their environment at large. As Barbarism described:

“The 90s was a time where people were, being entrepreneurial in so many different ways. And zines were about taking back communication and creating niche communities where you could find your people. And then finding your people, you could be that much more together. The 90s was a time of irreverence too and ... you know, so many of our friends dealing and dying from AIDS, there was just a lot that was going on. ... San Francisco had a sense of people doing it for themselves... In the Mission where I lived there was Red Dora’s Cafe, there were all the different sort of bookstores, there were a lot of anarchist oriented bookstores. There were a lot of zines for perverts like Brad Attack by Fish. And we also were creative you know ... all of our friends were creative.”

FaT GiRL sits within this queer, irreverant artistic explosion of entrepreneurial culture, as well as the explosion of publishing culture and personal as political, collective oriented work (like A Bridge Called My Back) within queer and women of color feminisms at the time. As Candida put it:

“It was an environment that was very welcoming for us to be sex positive. You know, zine culture was really going strong. But in San Francisco, especially, there was just like, a lot of really like, in your face, dyke queer activism and artwork. And that was a big part of how we came to do what we did, because, it was inspiring, it was really inspirational, what other people were creating, and we wanted to create something that reflected our own sex lives and our own cultural lives in our own communities.

Many of my participants not only stressed how fun and inspiring this environment was, but how they “didn't know that it was an exceptional period of time at the time” (Candida). Throughout my interviews, my interviewees wanted to impart the ‘90s inspired artistic entrepreneurial spirit onto the world, noting that their work illustrates how a small group of people can independently build the culture and make the change they want to see. Many of them also felt that to do such now would be easier, as many of the difficulties that came with traditional printing (cost, mailing, heavy boxes etc.) can now be obsolete via internet transmission. However, they also

repeatedly noted that through the lense of today's late stage capitalism and the isolation brought by displacement, they now recognize that the conditions of this period were unique because of how those forms of in person collective community work are not possible today. As April phrased it:

*That moment in time in the Bay Area was just incredibly fun and incredibly vibrant. And I hope it comes back, I think there's a certain necessary level of decrepitness, for people to have like the financial and emotional ability to make wild wonderful things happen, and I understand it doesn't have it now *laughs* But wherever it goes, I really hope it comes back. That kind of "anything is possible, we're going to do it all together!"*

As April suggests, this “anything is possible, we’re going to do it all together” framework not only required the artistic entrepreneurial spirit, but also a particular set of class configurations which did not last and have not been re-realized since.

“It Was Fun To Thrive:” Impact of The .Com Boom & Burst

In many ways, the arc of FaT GiRL traces the technological hinge between an analog and digital world, as well as the economic & spatial effects of the rise of the tech industry. Before FaT GiRL existed, before Max moved to San Francisco, ki's first connections to several members of this community were facilitated by the early lesbian email listserv Sappho. As ki recounted:

It was the beginning of the Internet, and the beginning of email. ... Long before social media, that was the social media, was a listserv type thing ... and so I was able to post to Sappho "Hey, I'm coming to San Francisco. Does anyone want to meet up?" And they hosted a brunch for me. And at that brunch, I met the person who became my first girlfriend in the Bay Area. And you know, just like all these connections, and so many people were fat and radical and just totally ready to be my friend, it was actually quite amazing.

As Max identifies, Sappho was an early way to utilize digital technology to connect with people from your niche subcultures/marginalized identities and build community. However, later in our interview Max articulated that one of the factors that distinguishes this era and allowed FaT

GiRL to achieve what it did is that “we were fat people all in the same place, having community with each other, real community, rather than isolated people connecting on social media.” The brief combination of the technological facility to reach strangers via the internet, combined with the lack of its ubiquity (i.e. no smartphones and very few laptops) made this form of community possible.²¹

FaT GiRL was primarily facilitated via traditional mail, with letters being the central form of communication between the collective and its audience. There were 69 letters from readers published over the course of the four year run (and some letters unpublished) and the mailbox served as the method by which contributors submitted their work. FaT GiRL built a website about halfway through its publication (issue 4, which was published in 1995, was the first mention I could find) and was hosted for several years on Candida’s work server because of how new internet technologies were. As she recalled:

This was so early in that process, we were like, nobody will ever know! Even though it was totally in the URL, like it was the same domain as work. ... It was maybe two years before they caught onto that and gently suggested that I move that shit off of there. But yeah, that was early in the internet days, people hosted all kinds of stuff on their work domains without any thought of how damaging that could be. I mean, this was like, some really smutty material. I mean, we had no visually pornographic material up there, but you know, it was kind of out there.

The lawless nature of the early internet, where all were still learning how the systems functioned, allowed FaT GiRL to co-opt the infrastructure of their jobs to promote fat liberationist content.

This co-opting of workplace infrastructure was also done by Max & Barbarism who, as I recounted in my last chapter, used the work computers and marketing training from their jobs at a high end computer systems magazine to bring FaT GiRL to life. Barbarism shared that before this position she had been low income and struggling (as she had been cut off financially from

²¹ Which is not to say fat community is not possible in person now, but the vast majority of fat liberation community and activism today happens online.

her family during college for being queer) but managed to get a temp opportunity through a local job agency in the Castro which placed LGBTQ+ folks. This temp position brought her opportunities to work in the tech industry which transformed her life and she went from “not having support in my life to actually making money and having more money than a lot of my peers who were working at the time.” During her time in tech, Barbarism also helped launch one of the first online only magazine publications ever for web developers. While it is certainly true that the majority of people who benefited from the .com boom were not locals/queer or otherwise marginalized people and that the rise of tech greatly contributed to the loss of FaT GiRL and countless other queer community venues, it also undeniably gave the creators the resources to make FaT GiRL possible.²² In this way, FaT GiRL nuances some of the conventional narratives of techies versus queer people/artists,²³ as the creators were able co-opt the resources of their tech workplace to engage in radical queer anticapitalist work.

However, as the ‘90s came to a close the enormous transformation of San Francisco and .com bubble burst made the city unaffordable for many queer people, including FaT GiRL collective members, dissolving their in person queer fat community. Between 1997 and 1999 commercial real-estate rates in San Francisco rose 42%. By 1999, the median rent for an apartment reached \$2000 and the average cost to buy one hit \$410,000. Homelessness rates were rising fast and rent control and tenant protection laws were relaxed which brought a 400% rise in evictions between 1995 and 1997 (Graham and Guy 2010:376). This made the city unlivable and an unviable option to settle down in. Both the members of FaT GiRL who’d worked in tech and those who’d never been involved with the industry could no longer afford to live in the environment in which they had thrived. April described watching the community drastically

²² Which is not to say it wouldn’t have happened otherwise, but not in this form.

²³ Walking around San Francisco it is common to see “Queers Hate Techies” stamped on the sidewalk.

change throughout her 20 years in the Bay Area (1986-2006) as the houses in her neighborhood began to double in price every year. As she recounted:

*It got to the point where it was like, okay. I'm getting to be a real grown up, and someday I'm gonna want to buy a house, I'd love to buy a house now. I can't buy a house cause they're already \$400,000. ... it wasn't a good place to be a grown up, ... once you weren't willing to just live on, you know, somebody's dining room that you've converted into a bedroom, and maybe you split it with somebody else. *laughs* It was like, I didn't want that to be my whole life.*

The inability to secure housing (overcrowded shared apartments or otherwise) displaced multiple FaT GiRL collective members and countless other queer, working class and people of color from the Bay Area.

FaT GiRL sat within the transformation of the city and its residents at large, the “struggle over the very idea of what San Francisco as a city actually is” and “a wider social and political struggle against global neoliberalism, the virtualization of urban life, and the hegemonic dominance of corporate (network) ideologies” (Graham and Guy 2010:378). The huge rise in urban development²⁴ and technological innovation were mutually constitutive in transforming the cultural landscape of San Francisco and created, as Rebecca Solnit and Susan Swartzberg’s put it, a “cultural and class purge” (qtd in Graham and Guy 2010:366). This purge closed many of the queer community venues my participants mentioned (clubs, cafes like Red Dora’s etc.) and shuttered countless arts organizations. As Stephen Graham & Simon Guy articulate in their piece, “Digital space meets urban place: Sociotechnologies of urban restructuring in downtown San Francisco,” the city “has been forcefully appropriated as a strategic site of digital capitalism” (Graham and Guy 2010:372).

Many of my participants missed their lives in the Bay Area and hoped for the day they had access to in person community again, as April put it:

²⁴ “With 35% of US venture capital centred on the Bay Area, investments to support cyber- gentrification are quickly restructuring the selected districts of the central city” (Graham and Guy 376)

*If we could have everything we wanted, I would move back to a Bay Area that still had the vibrancy and was not as expensive. I don't have the impression that it's really that way. ... I hope at some point to be able to regroup closer to people who are part of my community, but I don't know where that's gonna be. I think we're gonna have to figure this, live through this next transition of changing the world before we get to places, back to places where you can thrive. It was fun to thrive. *laughs*.*

As is clear through these experiences, the gentrification and class transformation of the Bay Area not only displaced queer people from this particular location, the rise of digital capitalism has frequently denied people the ability to have any in person queer or fat community at all.

Shifting Queer Community Identity

FaT GiRL offers a unique snapshot into the rapid transformation of the collective identity of queer community in the '90s. This period, in many ways, was defined by questions of who is defined as “our community”, via the politics of sexual practice (especially of BDSM), of size (who is fat enough to be included?) and trans identity. While FaT GiRL defines transgender and bisexual women within the bounds of its definition of dyke identity (in stark contrast to many lesbians at the time who did not recognize trans women as real women), its collective identity was still entirely centered in notions of womanhood. Several of my interviewees mentioned that they attempted contact with Bear (fat gay men’s) organizations, but Max articulated that it felt important at the time for the project to stay centered in queer womanhood in order to have its political lense because none of the Bears were political and they “didn't want to have anything to do with people who weren't men” (Max). Other members articulated how the centering of dyke language was, at its core, a political choice. As Candida put it:

Dyke identified and queer identified was, at that time considered pretty... I wouldn't say revolutionary, but it was very in your face. And we were very proud to reclaim it. ... Some it was a little class oriented too, honestly, we were all like, working or lower middle class and there were a lot of sex workers among us. We just were really scrappy, and felt like we didn't really care about using language of respectability. We wanted language of respect towards people in

our community. But yeah, we were very dyke oriented. We were very action oriented. We were very into a kinky, leather, queer aesthetic. And so we were into pushing those boundaries.

Part of pushing those political boundaries was playing with gender expression, especially the idea of butch and femme identity which had somewhat fallen out of favor within the general lesbian community. As April articulated, there was a sentiment that embracing gendered aesthetics of butch/femme identity was old school or anti-feminist, but “we were feminists who were reembracing what it meant to be femme or butch, we were embracing our choices [and] .. what our desires were.” The project was a reflection of “people who were exploring gender and gender boundaries within the pervert community” (April) while still defining the bounds of their community within a politicized dyke identity.

However, after the zine began publishing, many people in their immediate fat community began to transition and no longer identify as women, dykes or lesbians. My participants had different recollections of when this shift began occurring (whether it was during the 4 years the zine ran or right after) but many described how large of a cultural transition it was. As Max put it:

When we started Fat Girl, none of us knew any trans men. Since then, numerous people who were on the collective or involved are now trans men, you know, but it happened like, like a year after, ... maybe a year after Fat Girl ended or something, suddenly there was an explosion in trans men claiming their identities as trans men, and people going on T²⁵. And people assuming I wanted to be called he. ... It was an explosion in the Bay Area. Whereas before that, like I hadn't ever even thought of such a thing, right? It was not part of our community. ... That was where gender splendor really started to happen. Like, oh, we can actually think differently about this.

When I asked if they knew what catalyzed this shift, ki mentioned the access to testosterone provided to many community members by the Tom Waddell Health Clinic, whose “Transgender Tuesdays” were the first public-funded transgender care clinic in the country, founded in

²⁵ Testosterone medication.

November 1993, one month after FaT GiRL began. The clinic was originally created to ensure homeless trans women sex workers had safe access to estrogen, but as the clinic grew its clientele became 20% trans men (Davidson et. al 2013:4). Other than access to hormones, Max felt that the only other reason ki could identify for this shift was that once a few people started physically and socially transitioning, it made it possible for more and more people to explore and understand their identity through a trans framework.

Many of my interviewees described the reckoning they had to do internally, interpersonally and as a community as many of their friends and lovers began to come out as trans men. In a community where you have collectively defined yourself by your sexual attraction to women, what happens when a huge portion of the people you have worked with, been friends with, dated or slept with no longer identify as such? My interviewees had varied opinions and stories on this shift, but multiple expressed feeling uncomfortable with the idea that you could “transition away from being included” (Sondra) and recalled reckoning with this towards the end of the FaT GiRL publication arc. Sondra recalled having conversations about this when she joined the collective issue #5, explaining that the boundaries of fat dyke identity no longer felt comfortable. As she describes:

I remember feeling very uncomfortable about exclusionary language where I felt like Fat Girl had benefited from the work and the labor of people that was bigger than that tagline of like “fat dykes and the women who want them,” because some of those people were not women, or they were not women anymore. And it just felt very unjust to me to keep using this narrow language, when the work of people who had gone into it, like, you know, collective members didn't necessarily continue to identify that way. So I personally felt like the language needed to evolve. ...I feel like when the transition happened between like people who were leaving the collective, and then like new people who were coming in ... I felt like around that time, I mean, that was definitely discussion. So, I know, stuff didn't change on the zine, specifically, then. But I definitely think we were talking about that.

However, while Sondra struggled with the language of FaT GiRL, they also described the “amazing synergy” they felt between fat girls and trans boys coming into their personal and communal identities in this period. Sondra mentioned how thin trans men at the time often got fat issues “because we were all in this place of exploration at the same time ... of you know, realizing that we weren't disposable, and we were valuable. And we were okay as we are, not only if we reach some kind of goal that someone else has set for us” (Sondra). While the shifts in community & personal identity were described as difficult and uncomfortable by many of interviewees, it was also clearly a period of enormous community growth.

This internal reckoning of communal queer identity frameworks has been documented within larger narratives of trans history. As prominent trans historian and activist Susan Stryker recounts in her book *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, this was the time that the word “transgender” first started “acquiring its current definition as a catchall term for all nonnormative forms of gender expression and identity” and thus the trans community exploded (Stryker 2017:123). As the trans movement began to gather force in this period, it “posed a challenge to the new queer theory similar to the one posed by sexuality to feminism-- it asked whether the framework of queer sexuality could adequately account for transgender phenomena, or whether a new frame of analysis was required” (Stryker 2017:131). While FaT GiRL ended before expanding its frame of analysis beyond sexuality, Sondra and Max attempted to center this “change in the landscape” (Max) and include trans men and nonbinary people in their community's collective identity through their 2005 zine *Size Queen* which was “for queen size queers and our loyal subjects” (Size Queen 2005). *Size Queen* follows the format and variety show aesthetic of *FaT GiRL* (though this time in full color) and includes a 6 page exploration of four prominent community writers tackling questions of “weight, gender and transition” (Size

Queen 2005:29)—of their community reckoning with both weight loss and gender confirmation surgery. *Size Queen* leaves room for this discourse to be messy, complex and human, expanding beyond strict identity politics to account for the nuances of interpersonal growth, hurt and transition. Ultimately, *FaT GiRL* and *Size Queen* were both snapshots of queer community discourse in transition, quickly evolving and navigating boundaries of belonging.

CH 6: “DON’T DREAM IT, BE IT”: IMPACT & LEGACY OF FAT GIRL

In this final content chapter I will examine the collective’s understanding of their impact on their community at the time of FaT GiRL’s publication, how they have witnessed the impact of the work on the world in the last 25 years, and their perceptions of fat liberation and body positivity movements today. I argue that FaT GiRL created possibility models for joyous fat subjectivity which had an outward ripple effect denting our dominant culture of bodily hierarchy. Finally, I examine how FaT GiRL collective members simultaneously hold their excitement at the changes in size discourse with their critiques of the neoliberalization of fat activism, as well as their righteous anger at the various intersecting political and social crises we are currently facing.

Impact: Building The Fat Kid’s Table

How was FaT GiRL received at the time of its publication and how did it impact people's lives? Across the board, my interviewees felt the world was “ready for us” (Bertha)— that FaT GiRL was unlike anything the queer community had seen before and that they were embraced phenomenally. The only people my interviewees felt did not like FaT GiRL were those who were anti-queer, fatphobic and/or anti kink (which was the most prominent form of discomfort mentioned because it’s the one that happened intracommunally). However, most people who read

FaT GiRL found something they enjoyed and were transformed by the content, and most queer/alternative bookstores loved it because it sold quite well. As Max articulated, “it really filled the need It connected people who weren't yet connected. It galvanized people around fatness, fat issues, being political and fat, being sexual and fat.”

All participants stressed how fun it was to witness fat people take up space unapologetically in existing community spaces and claim their identity. Because the zine connected many new people to each other, it created new fabrics of fat community which my participants then felt was more visible in queer culture at large. As Sondra articulated, if you went to a dyke event in the Bay Area, it felt more likely that there would be other fat queer people “because this was now like, a cool thing, because there was a zine and a community, there was more willingness or excitement to talk and get together” and less of a feeling of isolation. In the 1996 *Zines! Book* they note that the personal ads section of the local gay/lesbian weekly transformed because of their visibility, going from using euphemisms like “big,” “plump” or “not skinny” to people unabashedly identifying as fat. My participants repeatedly stressed that they “made their own inclusion” (Candida)—that Fat Girl built “a world in which fat dykes could totally be the center of [their] own sexy life” (Max). As Candida phrased it, “I don't feel it was like, ‘oh, move over, let's make room at the cool table for these guys.’ So much as acknowledgement that there was a fat kid table in the room.” While much of this table was centered in the physical community of the Bay Area, it also emboldened its readers across the world to take up space in their own communities. The letters section of each issue is filled with correspondence with readers whose sense of self and presence in the world were permanently altered by encountering FaT GiRL. It also allowed for community discourse to be negotiated in public as the textual medium facilitated conversations between people from all over the world

who would not interact otherwise. FaT GiRL created a visual culture of "living out loud," (Bertha) documenting fat lives as a means of connection and expanding possibilities for fat embodiment.

My participants also stressed that beyond those "for whom it changed the world" (April) by introducing them to a fat politic, it also created intergenerational connection and revitalized the worldview of existing fat liberation activists. As I detailed in my introduction there were a lot of working class fat lesbian activists in the Bay Area (particularly in the East Bay) who had been doing fat activism for a long time. My interviewees felt that while FaT GiRL didn't have as much impact on these individuals "they were glad to see somebody else doing something new with it" (Candida) and glad to see the explicit sexual representation. They felt that for existing fat activists who had been active for a long time it was a form of re-radicalizing because "all of a sudden, [they] were like, oh, there's a different way to do this" (Barbarism) and thus that it "added a vibrancy and sort of a new wind to the fat activist movement that it really needed, cause there was sort of a business fat activism thing going on" (April). FaT GiRL not only galvanized many new people (fat & thin alike) into a fat politic, it also reinvigorated the existing fat activist movement.

While the fat kid's table did not exist to seek the validation of the mainstream thin queer culture, the zine received a lot of attention from across the queer community which made the collective members suddenly and very noticeably hypervisible. From being asked to participate in queer media conferences like Outright to being asked to model for Cathie Opie's infamous Dyke Deck to the fan letters, the FaT GiRL collective and the individuals within it suddenly found themselves culturally desired in their niche sphere. This process of recognition was fun in some

regards but overwhelming and hard to reconcile with how they were still being treated in every other sphere of life. As April articulated in the 1996 Zines! Interview:

Over the course of doing the zine, I learned that most of us were outsiders or outcasts most of our lives... All of a sudden, doing the zine we're famous and popular and almost "in". It's a very strange experience: being very "fringe" most of your life and suddenly having people read the zine and coming up and telling you how much they love you. So this part of the world has changed ... but the rest of the world still hates me!" (Miller cited in V Vale 1996:146)

This hypervisibility contributed to experiences which were difficult and hard to reconcile, contributing to the inevitable burnout. As Barbarism articulated, everyone felt this attention in different ways and would come to meetings holding their experiences. She explained that, "everybody would need caretaking from their experiences, right? A lot of us needed to be nurtured during the process, and we didn't always have the time to nurture each other, and do the work and take care of ourselves."

Much of this caretaking was necessary because the collective ultimately had no control over who was buying and reading the zines and had to manage the projections of strangers. Plenty of this came from straight fat fetishist men sending letters or stalking the website, but also queer community members who didn't understand the line between sexualization and objectification. Similarly, April recalled that if bookstores did not sell the zine they would send back the ripped off cover, and sometimes instead of returning FaT GiRL they'd return straight fat fetishist porn magazines. For a vendor to mix FaT GiRL up with a straight publication which turned fat women into objects to be controlled felt like a clear indication that they could only see "the fat person is object" when FaT GiRL was "the fat person, me, as subject or even as action figure" and that "if there's money coming to us, you don't want to support us" (April). Interviewees also expressed frustration at the way criticism of the portrayals of BDSM centered on the idea that they were somehow reenacting patriarchy, when they were expressing and

portraying their agency and sense of desire. Despite explicitly not centering a male gaze and fighting for sexual agency/subjectivity for fat people, the collective always had to navigate the hegemonic frameworks of objectification and dominance of fat bodies. However even so, it created worlds of possibility outside of dominant culture where fat people could thrive.

Legacy: Possibility Models

FaT GiRL had a far reach as the collective worked tirelessly to get it in queer bookstores and libraries all across the world. While the primary effects that my interviewees were able to witness happened in their immediate and in person communities, many expressed that they will never fully have a sense of everyone that the work touched. As the years have passed many of my interviewees have had countless people approach or write them and say some variety of, "I was really young. And I came across this and it changed my life. It saved my life" (Barbarism). When you grow up fat, you are often told (directly and through media) that unless you become an after photo, you will die prematurely, you will never be happy or find a partner or live the life you desire. FaT GiRL was a lifeline for so many young people because it created a possibility model for robust fat lives— it made it possible “for people to imagine good lives for themselves,” (Max) filled with joy and desire and community.

Many of my interviewees also stressed how FaT GiRL also influenced readers who were not fat and/or queer. Many people outside the fat dyke community found something in FaT GiRL that they had not found anywhere else and approached the collective to share how FaT GiRL has changed their worldview. As Barbarism articulated in the 1996 Zines! Interview:

The pervasiveness of self hatred in our relationship with our bodies is so endemic, that when people see us work through this for ourselves, something shifts within them. By focusing on what we feel, what we’re experiencing and where our anger is, we allow other people to

re-examine personal issues about their own bodies in a similar light (McDonald qtd in V Vale 1996:133)

Barbarism reiterated this idea in our interview by sharing a quote from a former partner of a collective member and trans activist named Athen Zachary who posted in recent years on Facebook about how FaT GiRL fundamentally transformed his political framework. As he wrote, through FaT GiRL:

[I] began to understand how a culture of dominance weaponizes shame and roots it as trauma in our bodies, the bodies of anyone who could be saddled with stigma. It took some years for me to know how vital and connected the work of fat liberation was to my own experience, as someone who's trans and queer and hearing disabled, yes. And also, as someone who's thin and white and male, the physical essence of who we are, which each of us is gifted so briefly on this planet, should never be used to judge shame and degrade us. And yet socially and economically, that cycle is one of the most powerful currencies in the world. If I'm busy internalizing stigma, and hating myself and you, then we can never unite to remake our lives and our world the way we want and need them to be.

While at the time of publication FaT GiRL was first and foremost interested in creating space for fat dykes, the collective members are extremely proud of how the legacy of their work is influencing people across identity categories to dismantle their shame in order to refocus on building the world they want to live in.

Since this project set out to assess FaT GiRL's impact on the trajectory of present day fat liberation and body positivity movements specifically because of the way it is often forgotten in the histories of queer and fat activism, I asked my participants how they felt FaT GiRL has affected the world since it stopped publishing, if and how they felt it affected body liberation movements and what they believe the legacy of the project is. Most characterized its effect as a ripple—that FaT GiRL affected people who went out and affected their own communities and made more culture (citing several prominent media makers) which was invariably influenced by FaT GiRL's framework. As Max articulated:

Fat Girl really made it more possible to survive as a fat person, as a fat queer person, as a fat weirdo. So I think that that is totally a factor in the world we live in today and the way fatness is embodied today by people. I don't think people know it, many of them. Most haven't ever seen or heard of Fat Girl. But I do think that it has had an impact on the culture as it relates to your fat experience.

This sentiment was common across my interviews, while my interviewees also acknowledged that they might not have the clearest view of how much of the change was due to their project because of how proud they are of the work. They often returned to examples of when they have encountered FaT GiRL out in the world unexpectedly, arguing if it appeared in such disparate places it “has to have a wide reaching impact” (Sondra). Whether or not fat people today have any knowledge of the zine, my participants noted that there are now a lot more people “who live in that space that the Fat Girl people were living in” (April). As April articulated, “there's a lot more of them now than there were. And I think that's us! I think that's us. I think that we made the thing happen. And from then on there were possibilities that didn't exist before and there are people taking advantage of them.”

Multiple of my interviewees specifically named the increased fat representation in queer porn, as well as the explosion of plus size clothing, especially which is glamorous or BDSM oriented. Bertha, a plus size fashion designer who has designed everything from corsets to boxers over the years, heavily stressed the change in the clothing market. As she put it “access to clothing is one thing, and access to fashion is another” and while there are major issues with the fast fashion industry and also the exclusion of superfat and infinifat people, the landscape of clothing and fashion availability is wildly different today. As April put it:

*Every time I look at Facebook, I can't believe ... I'm getting ads for at least thirty different really sexy clothing companies for women my size, which is like the 32-36 range, you know, and being like, oh, my god *laughs* I think we changed the world. I know other people also changed the world, but I think that FaT GiRL changed the tone of the conversation in a way that was really important.*

Regardless of whether or not the explosion in plus size availability and other major strides in size discourse are due in part to the tone shift FaT GiRL brought, the collective members and contributors have continued to do important work since which they brought the lessons and knowledge from FaT GiRL to. The shift in clothing happened because of fat designers like Bertha making clothing for fat people to have “fabulous wild fashion” (Bertha). Barbarism recounted bringing the way that FaT GiRL taught her about the importance of fun to planning the femme conference Licking the Knife, and several participants like Candida and Bertha have regularly participated in the NOLOSE conferences.²⁶ April and Barbarism recounted how they’ve brought the confidence and analysis they developed through FaT GiRL to challenge anti fatness in their workplaces, and Sondra and Max continue to be very active in present day fat liberation organizing. If all the readers and contributors similarly brought the lessons learned from the project into the various spheres they have occupied in the last 25 years, there is no doubt that FaT GiRL has affected the trajectory of American body discourse, regardless of whether or not it is known or credited for such. My participants also articulated that they don’t believe the zine is finished having an impact, as evident by the fact that I am sitting here writing about it and re-visibilitying it in the world.

When I asked my interviewees what they wish the world knew about queer fat activism in the ‘90s all answers boiled down to three central ideas, none of which were about fatness. All wanted to communicate that change is possible, that they want people to know they have the power to make the culture they want to see in the world, and that it’s important to have fun doing it. They stressed that the legacy of FaT GiRL is that they built community relationships and built a culture, and that “it’s not a magic thing that just is gonna happen,” (Sondra), to not be daunted and to know that if you make it an audience will come. They stressed the ways the world still

²⁶ The largest queer fat conference throughout the 2000s.

needs to really shift structurally and intersectionally, but wanted the world to know how they witnessed the transformative power of unabashed political pleasure. As Barbarism phrased it:

“You can't discount the power of joy that comes from fun and the fun of really saying what you mean, and doing what you mean and being authentic. And when you stray from that, I think it's hard to sustain anything. And when you try to sustain something over time, that isn't authentic, you know, that in itself will traumatize you.”

Reflections on Fat Liberation & Body Positivity Movements Today

When I asked my participants what they make of present day fat liberation and body positivity discourse the general consensus was a “mixed bag” (Candida), primarily a combination of excitement at how fat politics have become more common and apprehension at how neoliberal capitalism has dictated the movement’s course. They identified two primary forms of this neoliberalization: the consumption and image focused body positivity, and the individual celebratization/book industry of fat activism.

Widespread neoliberalization²⁷ hit queer activism far earlier than fat activism, as mainstream LGBTQ+ rights agendas assimilated throughout the ‘90s and 2000s to neoliberal frameworks which redefine “citizenship as ownership and freedom as freedom to consume” (Weiss 108, 2018). This primarily occurred at the hands of white middle/upper class LGBTQ+ advocacy groups whose agenda centered fighting for inclusion in marriage, the military, the market and protection from state, furthering homonormativity and homonationalism. During its publication arc, FaT GiRL positioned themselves in opposition to these culturally dominant forms of queer activism; their work was in stark contrast to the most visible LGBTQ+

²⁷ “David Harvey defines neoliberalism as an economic theory that ‘proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.’ Neoliberalism is also a cultural formation that produces and validates marketized understandings of the social world. As Wendy Brown argues, drawing on Michel Foucault’s work on biopolitics and governmentality, neoliberalism is aimed at “extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action.” Neoliberalism offers “freedom” as the core political goal, and the market as the site where that freedom might be realized.” (Weiss 2018:107)

organizations which were turning “away from liberationist or radical demands for dismantling oppressive systems or promoting sexual freedom or pleasure” (Weiss 2018:108).

Similar to queer activism, in the 2000s the liberationist fat activism of past was eclipsed by the assimilationist offspring of their framework: body positivity. Many politically queer and fat activists like the FaT GiRL collective were extremely burnt out after years of nonstop labor, and while some attempted to continue the work through conferences like NOLOSE, some interviewees felt that fat liberationist work significantly shrunk through the early 2000s. As more and more people gained access to the internet, online plus size fashion (sometimes called Fatshion) spaces, which as I detailed in my literature review were started by Black women and other women of color and then quickly taken over by small fat white women, became the primary form of fat community. The body positivity movement picked up steam because it was congruent with the general climate of commodity activism,²⁸ focusing on plus size women’s access to the clothing market. Dove famously launched their “Real Beauty” campaign in 2004 which gained widespread media attention and began the trend of brands selling themselves on their inclusion of “real women’s” bodies (although most of these did not occur until the latter half of the 2010s). Body positivity rose in popularity and became a buzzword within the dominant cultural lexicon in the last five years (especially in online spaces like Instagram), without any clear meaning other than the vague idea that we should accept ourselves including our “flaws”. In her book *You Have the Right to Remain Fat*, prominent fat activist Virgie Tovar documents her observations as she drifted from fat liberation spaces to body positivity spaces, a transition she notes was facilitated by her straightness and “sunshiny disposition,” her educational capital, her access to and interest in publishing and monetizing her work, and her

²⁸ Neoliberal framework that “merges consumption behavior—buying and consuming products—with political or social goals” (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012:20)

size privilege relative to other fat people (Tovar 2018:93-94). She documents how she went from being the only straight woman in a room of confrontational and political anti-assimilationist queer people to rooms of straight white women who were hyperfocused on respectability politics, desired to assimilate into dominant culture, and had no clear sense of their own demands or vision. She notes, “it was the silence in the body positivity movement that allowed traction to be gained” (Tovar 2018:95) as the focus on access and justice was replaced with self-love. Tovar argues, “it was white femininity if I ever saw it”— a performance of respectability which at its core believed that “through submission we could maintain privilege” but which wanted the “right to claim that they were radical no matter their actual politics” (Tovar 2018:97). Multiple of my interviewees described feeling alienated by the body positivity Tovar describes, articulating that the assimilationist agenda for access to privilege brought a culture which only celebrates “smaller traditionally approved fat people with hourglass figures” (Bertha) or whose understanding of fat activism stops at selfie culture/surface level visual representation. As Max articulated,

There's a lot of co-opting going on, and there's a lot of capitalism going on. ... Yes, you can argue that just showing your face or your body is radical in this world where you're not supposed to. Yeah, yeah, I agree. That's radical. And there's a part of me that's sort of like, God, we've been doing this for so many years, can we ever move past this to actually building a world that we want? ... There's a way in which body positivity feels a little bit like, for this to be the doorway for everyone feels like it's just gonna keep us stuck there forever.

As Max and Virgie Tovar both articulate, mainstream body positivity rhetoric has been able to rise to popularity through its sole agenda of visibility, as well as its focus on access to the market and desirability privilege. This has also primarily played out on social media, with very little in person fat community.

The question of the importance or harm of visibility continues to be negotiated as fat people rise into various arenas of the public sphere. While there were a few individuals

considered icons within the fat community in the '90s (especially Marilyn Wann and Nomy Lamm), FaT GiRL and much of the other influential work was done collectively. In contrast, today there are now a select group of fat people who've reached major celebrity status (the two most famous being Lizzo and Tess Holiday), a large number of curvy, midsize and small fat body positive influencers and models, and a handful of thinkers and writers considered fat celebrities within activist spheres (Lindy West, Virgie Tovar, Roxane Gay, Jes Baker, Aubrey Gordon, Sonya Renee Taylor etc.). For the latter category, a whole media industry has sprung up out of the blogosphere and into publishing, similar to the skyrocketing of the anti-racist book industry, which attempts to teach its audience how to love themselves and/or some version of a body positive or fat politic. While some of these books do contextualize fatness with an oppression focused lense, multiple of my participants expressed reservations at how they have individualized fat activism and created "fat experts" who are paid to be spokespeople for the movement. As Candida articulated:

A lot of fat acceptance work has become such an industry of influencers and cultural cachet turned into socio economic jobs, basically? Like people are like making a living. I'm not 100% against it, either, it's just a very different thing. You know, I felt like my interest in the work had always been sort of anticapitalist in terms of my interest in working with collectives, ... I have a really socialist bent in terms of how I feel about that kind of work. But, you know, there are a lot of people who are making a living by it, honestly, I don't feel like that's necessarily a problem so much as like there have been times where somebody's like break through book, I really felt like came through somebody else's labor, like anti-capitalist contributions to create a community product or project working with other people in community that somebody else ended up taking over and turning into a book that, you know, like all of that other collective work previously wasn't really acknowledged. ... That makes it a little difficult to feel as excited.

My participants did not blame those who've risen to fat fame for their participation in capitalism, noting that everyone is just "trying to figure out how to monetize their time to survive" (Barbarism), but wrestled with the way the neoliberal frameworks of career activism have invisibilized collective labor. Additionally, as these activists have published work which attempts

to further their version of body politics, they often reconstruct a history of fat liberation which does not name FaT GiRL. The collective nature/lack of individual leader as well as its sexually explicit, queer and anti-assimilationist politic does not work under a neoliberal body politic and thus has been somewhat forgotten from the cultural memory of queer and fat activism, even as told by our community members. As Max articulated:

We were marginalized by virtue of our outness about queer, kinky, and radical politics, and our attachment to being politically radical. It's just interesting to think about history and the things that get left out. And I think it would be very easy for that, to continue with Fat Girl. Because, you know, who wants to be the person shouting, "but I did this back in 1994."

While my interviewees stressed the difference between their vision of fat liberation and the forms of fat activism which have dominated the 2000s, many of my interviewees specifically uplifted and expressed excitement about the rich politicized work of present day fat activists of color, especially Black activists, who are making the connections between anti-fatness and anti-Blackness and refocusing the conversation on dismantling structures of bodily hierarchy. They all stressed the importance of intersection work, access to physical space and how much more there is to fight for. Many expressed fear, anger and exhaustion at continued violence and lack of access Black, disabled and fat people face from policing, healthcare and especially the crisis of COVID-19. April described how the urgency of the situation is unavoidably dire, and how exhausting it is to have done this work for so long and still be facing this level of violence:

If I were to get COVID, they would let me die. Absolutely. That's probably gonna bring me back to doing fat activism again, because I've done little stuff, but like I said, burned out. But they would let me die. I'm Black, they would let me die. I'm femme, they would let me die. I'm older, they would let me die. You know, it's sort of like, it's hard to look into the eyes of a monster like that, and be more and more targeted over time. ... I'm not supposed to have to do this again. ... It's like how could we have worked so hard? How could we have worked so hard, and so long, and be here again? So, yeah, it's very upsetting.

As April articulates, and as all my interviewees stressed, the stakes of fat liberation work are as dire as ever. The overlapping crises of COVID-19, late stage racial capitalism, and ecological

collapse will not be solved with visibility— we need an unwavering and unabashed commitment to a politically fat vision which builds a world where Black and Brown, disabled, queer, fat, and otherwise marginalized people are not only alive, but able to rest and thrive. While the work of the FaT GiRL collective and other fat activists has undoubtedly transformed the state of body politics, we are far from the world they worked so hard for, still struggling to resist the traps of neoliberal capitalism and fighting for our collective survival.

CH 7: CONCLUSION

In her chapter *“Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go from Here?”* Elena Levy Navarro argues that the past can be used to change the present when it allows us to understand our bodies “outside the terms dictated by the dehumanizing, objective, pathologized categories like ‘obesity’” (Levy Navarro 2019:21). To resist the violence we face, Levy Navarro articulates that “we need to develop alternative histories that follow a very different, queer logic”—that to queer fat history is “to begin to discover different relationships between the past and the present” which help us “reinterpret our fat in ways that are transformative” (Levy-Navarro 2019:17; 21). In this thesis I have attempted to queer the relationship between fat past and present, documenting the history of the FaT GiRL zine and expanding our cultural memory of queer & fat activism in the 1990s. I have traced the history of body size discourse and fat liberation activism, analyzing how body size politics are always in relationship to the larger structures of dominance and bodily hierarchy which uphold racial capitalism. I have examined how FaT GiRL created possibilities models for political, joyous, and pleasurable queer fat embodiment which transformed the lives of its readers and its creators, invariably effecting the trajectory of body size discourse at large. I also analyzed the snapshot FaT GiRL offers us of

the evolution of shifting lexicons of queer identity, the complex pathways of movement evolution and the effects of gentrification and late stage capitalism on anti-assimilationist activist projects. Through studying FaT GiRL we can understand the transformational power of unabashed, community oriented, political, confrontational pleasure. It offers us an example of how a small community of people can use art to build a culture which defies hegemonic logic. It also allows us to see the deeply political roots of present day size activism, giving us the tools to resist the neoliberal co-optation of fat liberationist frameworks and refocus our movements on those who are most marginalized.

To this end, there is a significant need for more projects which retroactively document histories of fat activism. Specifically, fat activists need to begin to look beyond the bounds of US based organizing which labels itself as fat activism to search for and honor the contributions Black women, other women of color and women outside of the US have historically made. Much work also remains to visibilize the history of FaT GiRL beyond academia. In the future I plan to hopefully work on a public access project with my interviewees (probably through a website) so that all can learn about the anti-assimilationist, queer, anti-capitalist and anti-racist foundations of size activism. I may also write more analyzing the content of the zines themselves, and am particularly interested in the ways that FaT GiRL offers us examples of how fatness can undo gender.

It is vital that we understand the history of our movements because having access to the past helps us make sense of the world we are living in. Knowing our history gives present day and future activists a wider and stronger foundation, which allows us to more easily mobilize towards liberation. Furthermore, it reminds us that people like us have always existed, that we are not alone, and that change is possible. In a world facing overwhelming upheaval and

collapse, it is so easy to feel that we will never be free of the systems that saddle us with stigma and enact endless violence on our bodies. However, as Levy Navarro states, we are only stuck in this all-too-oppressive present “if we impose on ourselves the modern temporal logic in which the past is supposedly over and done with, in which justice and joy can only be achieved in some utopian future” (Levy-Navarro 2019:21). The fight is far from over, but joy and justice is possible. We can and we will survive, we can and we will thrive—in past, in present, and in future.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for participating in my thesis project. Before we begin, I want you to know that the purpose of our conversation is to explore your experience as a person who was participating in fat liberation activism in the 1990s.

Format

During the interview, I will be asking you questions about first your background, then about your experience doing fat liberation organizing in the 1990s, then some questions on movement evolution and then finally, your opinion on the fat liberation and body positivity movements today.

Confidentiality

Please feel free to speak honestly and openly about your experiences. I will not be offended by any of your responses. There are no wrong or right answers to these questions. You have the authority to not answer any of these questions. You may see me writing at times, this is to ensure that I am capturing what you are sharing with me. This interview is going to be audio recorded. Do you feel comfortable with me recording this Zoom? If so, I will delete the video footage immediately following this conversation, only saving the audio. If you are not comfortable with this, you are also fully welcome to turn your video off, or if you prefer I can externally record just the audio with my phone.

Your name will only appear in my project if you are comfortable doing so. Please feel free to use a pseudonym to refer to yourself or other people. Would you like to be named in this work?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

BACKGROUND

1. Tell me a little about yourself. How do you identify? How old are you? Where did you grow up?
2. If you are comfortable sharing, I'd love to hear a little about your journey with your fatness. When did you start identifying as a fat person?
3. If you are comfortable sharing, I'd love to hear a little about your journey with your queerness. When did you start identifying as a queer person?
4. How do you define fat liberation?

5. When did you start engaging in any organizing/activist work? What organizations/causes were you focused on and what motivated you to start engaging?
6. How did you get involved with fat liberation activism?
7. Do you have any stories of critical moments in your life which have shaped your politics?
8. Who would describe as your community?
9. Do you identify as an artist? If so, what kind of art mediums do you engage in?

II. FaT GiRL

1. Can you tell me a little about the general climate of the queer & fat activism that you were involved in in the 90s? What type of issues were being addressed/work was being done?
2. What is the origin story of FaT GiRL? How did it begin/how did you get involved? What were its inspirations?
3. How did people become a part of the FaT GiRL collective?
4. How was zine content generated? Was the material included from members of the FaT GiRL Collective (not submitted from readers) solicited/planned around certain themes, or did people just offer work they were already making?
5. What did the production of FaT GiRL look like? What did the submission, editorial and printing processes entail?
6. How was FaT GiRL distributed?
7. What do you feel the primary message of FaT GiRL was?
8. How were decisions made within the FaT GiRL collective? Were there any major conflicts within the group?
9. Reading FaT GiRL, I was really struck by the intermingling of political analysis with sexual and artistic content and humor, can you talk a little about the decision to include all of these elements in such close proximity?
10. What is one memory of working on FaT GiRL that was joyful, and what is one that was challenging?
11. What was the relationship of FaT GiRL to other fat zines?
12. What was the relationship of FaT GiRL with other fat organizers? Older and younger?
13. How do you feel FaT GiRL was received?
14. Why did FaT GiRL stop publishing?

III. MOVEMENT EVOLUTION AND INTRA-COMMUNAL RELATIONSHIPS

1. Reading FaT GiRL, it is clearly grounded in a dyke identity, and I noticed that it explicitly names bi and trans women as included in its defined audience/submission pool, but still centers in language around womanhood. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you've observed in the evolution of language around gender and identity?
2. Frequently in Fat Girl authors talk about feeling excluded from the larger lesbian/queer community due to their fatness, what kind of community spaces were birthed around FaT GiRL?
3. FaT GiRL is really explicit in the ways race and class and gender and fatness intersect so I'm curious, why was this important to the project and what did the racial dynamics within the FaT GiRL collective and surrounding community look like?
5. Sex/sexuality/desire as so frequently central themes of the work. Why was this integral to the FaT GiRL project? Why is desire central to this work?

IV. LEGACY

1. What do you feel the impact of FaT GiRL has been?
2. What do you wish the world knew about FaT GiRL and/or generally queer fat activism in the 1990s? The power of joy
3. What are your opinions on the current state of fat liberation activism and/or its derivatives (body positivity etc.)?
4. Do you feel FaT GiRL effected the trajectory of fat liberation politics?
5. What do you do (fat lib organizing or otherwise) now?
6. Anything else you'd like to share?

Exit Interview

Thank you for your participation, time, and effort for my research project.

At this point do you have any questions or commentary for me about this interview?

(If the individual decided to include their name) Having completed the interview, do you want to remain named in the work or would you like to choose to be nameless?

Please do not discuss the study or experiences with others outside IRB or myself until the conclusion of the research, since it might otherwise affect the responses of other potential participants.

As a reminder, the purpose of the study is to capture the experiences of queer fat activists in the 1990s.

To review what we did, we came to an agreement on the informed consent forms and conducted an interview.

My full contact information is my email at rgelfand9024@scrippscollege.edu or my phone number to call me at (510) 685-5720

The contact information for the Scripps College IRB is irb@scrippscollege.edu or you can contact them through the office of the Dean of Faculty at (909) 607-2822, office hours Monday-Friday 8AM-5PM (closed on observed holidays).

If you experience emotional distress, you can be matched with a therapist online available in any area:

Better Help online

440 N. Wolfe Rd, Sunnyvale, CA 94085 contact@betterhelp.com