

## **Geleni Fontaine, Keynote Address**

### ***Nolose 2008 - More Than Just Fat: The Intersection of All of Our Identities***

Good morning and welcome to everyone. My name is Geleni Fontaine. It's with tremendous joy, honor, nervousness, giddiness, and deepest gratitude that I speak to all of you here today. Thanks so much to Deb for her introduction. Great thanks to the amazing and hard-working Board of Nolose: Cristy Cardinal, Devra, Robin, Holly Hessinger, Amanda Piasecki, Joe Libin, Gigi Basanta, Kim Paulus, and Zoe; to all the great workshop presenters, generous volunteers, the exciting vendors, and to all of you for making this weekend possible. Thank you so much to Cristy for the insightful activity last night. It's laid important groundwork for all of us.

This morning I'll be telling and re-telling some history as well as a few stories. We'll each do something lovely for ourselves together; then I'll offer some unsolicited ideas, read a short poem, and lastly we'll do something very special and outrageously loud together. All this will take about 45 minutes, which will fly by, I promise.

I'd like to ask everyone to take a moment to take a good, long look and listen around this room. Take in new faces, friends, lovers, acquaintances, people we share so much with. Powerful fat dykes and bi women, transpeople, allies. There's so much we can tell by looking at each other, and so much more that can't be assumed but we can only know by listening and learning from each other. There's beautiful richness and strength in this room. We come from different histories, cultures, and backgrounds that create the woven layers of who we are as people. Welcome to all of us, not just parts of us, but the whole of each of us and what we bring to this table.

Raise your hand if you've been to every Nolose Conference. Raise your hand if this is your third Nolose Conference. Raise your hand if this is your first Nolose Conference. Raise your hand if you're currently or have ever been on the Board of Nolose. Everyone turn to the folks near you and offer a big welcome in the words of your first language. Welcome, and welcome back, everyone!

As keynote speaker I'm standing in the footsteps of many amazing former keynotes and activists in this movement (and it's important for our shared history that I name them.) I just finished studying Acupuncture and East Asian Medicine in a program with a wonderful Chinese-American healer and Taoist priest. When he taught us Chinese history he emphasized the importance of knowing the names of different legendary healers because he considered them to be our spiritual ancestors. It made me think of all the other ancestors and teachers I should honor. Please honor these folks with me. Elena Dykewomon was Nolose's first keynote speaker. In the early 70's in California she helped to start a fat social justice movement in feminist and lesbian communities, and was among the first voices to challenge mainstream culture's fat hatred.

Other brilliant and strong folks followed: powerful performing artist C.C. Carter, Nedra Johnson who performed and sang her wonderful music for us, Sondra Solovay who's

expertise and passion is helping to frame size discrimination as a social justice issue, Marilyn Wann who moved from the experience of being denied health insurance because of her size into creating culture and sparking activism for herself and many others, Lynn McAfee, an original member of the Fat Underground who worked to challenge the medical-industrial complex of the US head-on. (As a side-note, I choose the words medical-industrial complex carefully. When I use those words I'm referring to a multi-billion dollar a year industry in the West composed of doctors, insurance companies, drug companies, and institutions that feed - and feed off of - the dominant society's hatred of fat.)

In more recent years Nomy Lamm has blown us away with her beautiful, proud voice. Charlotte Cooper shared with us her DIY activism, humor, and art, challenged us to expand our perspective beyond national borders, and has inducted many of us into her vicious gang of fat thugs. (Check out her blog Obesity Time Bomb and her zine Big Bums!) In 2006 we were all honored to be addressed by Heather MacAllister, political activist and organizer, burlesque dancer, founder of the Fat Bottom Review, first all-fat burlesque ensemble. Those of us who were at the conference in Upstate New York that night remember that Heather used her grace, strength, and attitude to challenge us to reflect on who we are as a community, and to do the most bad-ass thing we can do – love ourselves and each other beyond our fears.

In the mid-90's Shira Stone and Gail Horowitz started the group Fat is a Lesbian Issue in the LGBT Community Center of New York City (which was then the Gay and Lesbian Community Center of New York City.) That was one of my earliest experiences with fat community, and it opened lots of doors in my consciousness. At the same time I got my first copy of FatGirl magazine, put together by a fabulous collective including Max Airborne, Elena Escalera, and Sondra Solovay, but lots of other folks. If you were part of that collective, please raise your hand. In 1997 Miriam Berg, Nancy Summer, and Dot Turnier-Nelson created a two-day conference for fat women in New Jersey called Fat Gala. That was my first fat event, and I taught a self-defense workshop with the fabulous Brenda Jones. (And there's my wonderful and loving partner almost 13 years, Lissette Cheng sitting right next to her!)

Dot Nelson-Turnier started Nolose in 1999, partly as a response to letters of fatphobic outrage that appeared in the magazine Lesbian Connection after a photo of a fat woman appeared on their cover. She put her great energy behind creating a space for fat dykes to support each other and create a community politicized around fat liberation. Nolose had its first very conference that year.

My great apologies for not naming more folks. There have been so many strong and passionate people who've done, and continue to do great work. Loving thanks to all of the past keynote speakers, and to all the activists and educators that have put forth their voices, hearts, fists, and courage to create community and change.

So, who am I and why am I the keynote this year? As my bio says, I'm a fat, queer, Latina/o transperson living, studying and working in Brooklyn, New York. I'm a former

Board member of both NOLOSE and the Audre Lorde Project (which is the first queer people-of-color community center in the U.S.) For 13 years I worked and trained as a self-defense teacher and martial artist at The Center for Anti-Violence Education. I've been part of this community since its early beginnings, teaching self-defense, violence prevention, and healing workshops at almost all the Nolose conferences. Over the years I've been involved with Shira Hassan, Kim Paulus, Naima Lowe, and Nomy Lamm – the Phat Camp collective, the Chicago-based youth workshop and support network. I'm also a poet, an anti-war protester, former HIV counselor, former registered nurse, and have a long crisis intervention background. I've recently been studying acupuncture and East Asian medicine. I just graduated from school two weeks ago! For years I've been thinking about all of these old and current identities, how they come together and shape me, and how all of us are formed from so many layers of identity and experience.

Standing in front of you is like living a dream I couldn't even imagine having when I was a child and a teenager; the chance to share understanding, love, and experience with people who not only accept, but welcome me in my body. This is crucial because I believe I as a person am not actually separate from my body; that mind, body, and spirit are deeply connected and that their separation is only an illusion that benefits the status quo.

This conference is titled, "More Than Just Fat: The Intersection of All of Our Identities." This is a major personal and political issue for me and for many of us here. In a general sense what we're considering here as a community is how the experience of being a fat person is interwoven with race, ethnicity, class, gender identity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, ability and disability, age, and more. And beyond that, we're also considering how various identities carry different kinds of privilege and different kinds of deprivation from mainstream society and the dominant culture. None of this is static because we are not static. Our experience depends on the context of the spaces and worlds we move through at a given time. This means that the levels of privilege and deprivation shift depending on where we are and who we're with. We have some identities that we can obscure and choose to reveal when we feel safe or strong enough, or outraged enough - and this ability to obscure can be important coping mechanism for oppressed people, but can sometimes become a conduit for internalized hatred if it become a default behavior; other identities are apparent as part of us wherever we go. Lots of questions emerge from this; how can we as individuals become integrated through all our layers and live as whole and empowered people? How can we challenge fat hatred, racism, homophobia, classism, ageism, sexism, ableism, and more as individuals and community when we are so diverse in identity and experience? How do we find common language (often literally) to talk about these issues? In what ways can we act as allies to others experiencing oppression and hatred we don't ourselves face? These are questions without easy answers, but asking them, considering them together is a good place to begin.

I was once in a gathering of fat women many years ago, a group that met in a member's basement. I was one of two women of color in the room. (I identified as a woman then, but don't now.) As some of us started talking about a vicious immigration raid of a

nearby sweatshop in which several undocumented Latina workers complained of sexual harassment by police and immigration authorities, one woman (an older white woman) turned to another and said under her breath in an exasperated tone, “What does this have to do with fat?” I remember feeling angry and unable to articulate why. Though I knew that the issues surrounding this incident felt connected to the experience of fatness for me, I didn’t know how to articulate it. I thought over and over of my own mother, a fat woman, a Spanish speaking immigrant from Cuba who worked in sweatshops before I was born and told me of some of the painful experiences with supervisors and authorities that she experienced. I remembered being ten years old, a little fat kid, bringing rice cakes wrapped in a towel to my aunt for her lunch at the sweatshop where she worked. She was dieting furiously even though it made her dizzy. We were all trying to be thinner as a way of somehow being more American. This was a very personal link between fat, racism, and imperialism.

I thought about my mother’s first journey into the US. Cuba is only 90 miles from Miami by boat. Did you all know that? In 1956 she and her brother took their car on a ferry to Miami and drove north with plans to work in the factories in New York City for the summer and bring back money for their families. When their car broke down in Georgia my uncle stayed at the garage, and my mother went alone to look for a place to eat. She felt nervous and self-conscious as a Spanish-speaking person and a fat woman. (She was often teased about her body and harassed by her family about what she ate.) Restaurants, along with all public facilities, were deeply segregated by race in those Jim Crow days. She didn’t know that. Both the white diner and Black diner refused to serve her. She remembers being told upon entering each restaurant that she was in the wrong place. She wasn’t Black, and she wasn’t white. Had she been Black entering a white diner through the front door to sit at the counter she might have faced violence, but she was light-skinned person so was physically safe, though clearly a foreigner and not Anglo. Because of this, because parts of her were unacceptable, she didn’t get to eat.

Years later I also thought about how the history of sugar is tied to my own family history, and my own history as a fat person. Too much sugar / carbohydrates are what the medical-industrial complex and dominant culture in the West attribute fatness to, though the blame for our bodies is always put ultimately on us as societal failures. Cuba was first colonized (meaning pillaged) by Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the indigenous people were murdered outright; others enslaved and forced to work the sugar cane fields alongside African slaves. Sugar was always the main crop. In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the US government pretended to assist Cuba in its struggle for independence from Spain, but once Spain was defeated US armed forces stepped in and took control, until Castro’s Cuban Revolution. (My family has a long, complicated history with that revolution, too!)

My parents came to the US for good in 1960, and my father got a job on the assembly line in the Brooklyn Navy Yard at the Cumberland Packing Corporation, you might know them as the makers of Sweet ‘n Low. All of the men he remembers working with were Cuban-born. And most of their wives and daughters were on weight-loss diets (trying to be more American/white/Anglo) with the help of free samples. He would come home covered with tacky, fake sweetness on his clothes, hardhat, and skin, and we didn’t know

in those days that it was carcinogenic so we downed that shit with a desperate gusto. Today that sticky sweetness for me is emblematic of the false promise of the American dream - almost sugar and very sweet, but not ultimately something a human body can naturally digest, not real, not filling. This link between fat, racism, and imperialism bridged the personal and the political.

Back to that woman's question: "What does this have to do with fat?" If it hadn't been snarky it would have been an interesting jumping-off point to a good political conversation, and a chance for her to widen her views beyond her own experience. My answer to her two decades later is that US political aggression and a legacy of imperialism and genocide helped to create a dominant Western culture which distains women, queers, poor and working class people, transfolks, people of color, and many others; and is invested in our deprivation and self-hatred. Fat bodies are under attack by the same forces. These struggles are linked within a vision of social justice for all people, and more fundamentally and crucially they are linked within many of our own bodies and histories. Most of us here are fat as well as queer; others fat, queer, and living with disability, others have different and multiple identities. I am a fat, queer, Latina/o transperson. (As a side note, for me that means I don't identify with a gender binary, am not consciously making physical changes to my body in the near-future, and prefer to not be referred by gendered pronouns if possible, but it's OK if it happens. This is part of my own journey through gender – which is certainly a very individualized thing.)

Where are the neat compartments between these identities, the borders and boundaries? They don't exist because I'm not two-dimensional. I'm too fat to be two-dimensional! The indigenous Latina immigrant rights activist Chicahua Necahual said of all indigenous and Latin-American people, "We didn't cross the borders, the borders crossed us." I think this applies to us in our bodies, too. How often are we expected to just bring our feminist selves to a discussion, and asked to leave our queerness/culture/gender identity, etc. on the other side of the door because it inconveniences someone? I respect the rights of a group to meet and organize around a common oppressed identity, for example a group that's specifically for survivors of violence, but if a survivor in the group isn't welcome to talk about how the violence she faced is connected to her gender identity and expression, or other identity, then it's no longer empowering for her, or ultimately anyone else in the group. That's a border imposed from outside that forces us to become compartmentalized, but we can border ourselves from the inside, too.

For someone to have a respectful dialog with me about social justice, they can't choose to only address my queerness or my size. And if I'm asked to leave parts of myself behind (either because people think they're irrelevant or balk at me bringing up issues in relation to them), then that movement isn't inclusive of me and I'll create another to work with - or work with others to openly challenge the community to broaden its perspective. I believe that in order to make real change for any oppressed group we have to look at the struggles and resources of other oppressed groups and see these as connected struggles. We also have to do that work internally, re-weaving the connections between our own identities, because wholeness is strength. I think that this requires that we connect to our vulnerability, our youngest hurts, not to live through or define ourselves through our

suffering, but to connect to the vulnerability and struggles of others and set the stage for a real and organized human social justice movement. This is something that I think is possible.

I've talked for a while now. I think it's a good idea for us to do something moving with our whole selves. As part of my recent education in Chinese Medicine I learned a method of self-massage that one can do from sitting or standing. It's a means of centering mind/body/spirit and also a way of preparing for meditation or rigorous activity. This conference is pretty rigorous in different ways! I also think of this as a physical experience of our wholeness. If there's anything in this exercise that doesn't work for your body, feel free to change it. It's about self-touch and self-love, and there's no wrong way.

*Teach self-massage... (5-10 min) Face, head, neck, arms, abdomen, legs, lumbar spine, head tap.*

Now I'd like to talk about some specific issues that affect us as a community. As much as we all have layers of identity, we also often shift and evolve our identities and our bodies as well. One of the things I've learned from Daoist and Buddhist studies is that change is inevitable. If we're alive we're shifting and growing, so change is something to embrace as part of the fullness of life. This isn't always easy, especially when change challenges our beliefs about whom and what we are. When I first joined this community it was for people who identified as fat lesbians. Over a period of years Nolose has become inclusive of all queer women, transgender people, and allies - this happened as I was questioning my own identity in regards to gender. Creating this inclusion meant considering the links between body size and gender, and creating a forum to address them. This community also had to acknowledge that it was working on being inclusive of people who were already in it, in some cases. Additionally it meant creating space for people to ask questions, share fears, and get educated through workshops and discussions. This is a great example of how change creates opportunity.

Often in identity politics folks talk about creating safety for the members of their group. That concept of safety is sometimes subverted to mean keeping out other issues, ultimately meaning keeping out other people. I think that kind of safety is a trick. It isn't safety, but imposed silence. I've seen people in queer communities silenced when revealing racism in their own groups, fat dykes shut down when trying to talk about fatphobia in dyke groups. There's lots of examples.

I think that this group response to challenge is related to a personal, knee-jerk response that lots of us have to being challenged on our shit: I can't be racist / homophobic / transphobic / ableist / classist / ageist! I have lots of friends who are people of color / queer / trans, etc.! I've done trainings and workshops on being inclusive! I've put in my time already! The fact is that we all have more to learn and be challenged on, hopefully for the rest of our lives. I was once called on my ageism by a teen woman who was my student in a youth program I coordinated and taught. It was a good lesson, even though it stung at first. There is no shame in being told, and considering that you might be wrong

about something, that you might have been hurtful without knowing it. Consider giving the other person the benefit of the doubt even if you disagree with specifics. There are always much bigger issues than the specifics. This has nothing to do with you being a good or bad person, it has to do with having unrecognized privilege and needing to expand your knowledge of the experience of oppressed groups you don't belong to. Do it by reading, talking to people, attending trainings where you feel safe enough to ask questions. (There's an Unlearning Racism workshop for white folks after this, as well as a People of Color Caucus.) But don't assume that it's the job of a person of color to explain racism to you, or a super size person to give you an education about fat hatred from their perspective if you're mid-size or smaller. Find resources. This is also ultimately the acknowledgement that oppression works on institutional levels beyond individual action. Consider the big possibility that, even if you have spent your entire life imagining what it's like in other people's shoes, that you haven't actually worn those shoes, and never can; there is more experience beyond you. Instead of an impediment or a minefield, think of this as the groundwork for wonderful possibility.

Some things to remember: When a person who has experienced oppression around one of their identities feels compelled to challenge someone's racism / sizism, etc., it may not be as polite an address as we would like because of the context of that history. An angry or impatient delivery doesn't invalidate the message, however. And when we challenge someone's homophobia / classism in regards to us, a group we belong to, or even a group we don't belong to it helps if we can do it in a way that fosters discussion. We can all get beyond finger-pointing and guilt. And a word about guilt, it serves no one, especially not the person feeling it. It can also become a self-indulgent means of clinging to the status quo, and refusing to challenge it in yourself or the world.

We are fat, but what does that mean? Those of us in this room who identify as fat are not all the same size, and it's likely that we have different feelings and ideas about our bodies. We also bear the brunt of mainstream society's hatred differently. Those of us who are super-sized can't obscure that identity, and while all of us are affected deeply in our psyches by fat hatred, the larger of us are the ones that feel the direct impact of that hate most keenly. Super-size folks are directly targeted by mainstream society and the medical-industrial complex, yet invisible unless we're seeking to change our bodies by any means. The only time I've ever immediately found a comfortable seat in a doctor's office was when I went to see an endocrinologist and was seated with fat people who were having weight loss surgery. Basic physical access in the world is a prevalent issue for the super-sized. Mid-size people are also under attack, but can sometimes slip under the radar of direct assault, much like a light-skinned person of color. As a light-skinned person of color racism hurts me in my core, but I'm less likely than someone brown or Black to be followed around in a store because the shopkeeper assumes I'm there to steal. My experience is related, but different.

Some of the longtime super-size people in this community have in recent years had weight loss surgery, and this means that there are fewer super-size and larger-size people at Nolose. This is hard for some of us. The people I know who've gone through the surgery have spent a lot of time and energy in making their decisions. For years several

ideas and beliefs have been at the foundation of this community: we are living in bodies that are under attack by the dominant society, and we can't change our bodies without being surgically harmed and perpetuating self-hatred; we need to love the body we live in because we are worthy and beautiful, that means actively challenging the society's paradigm of physical attractiveness; and we can be healthy at any size. In the past five years weight-loss procedures that were considered risky and permanently damaging have been replaced by ones that are considered safer. Several of the people I know who've had surgery went through years of struggling with physical illness and health issues, and felt that the operation was the best option for them, and now they're considering their place in the community.

What is the place of (often still fat) people who have had weight loss surgery in a fat community? (In many cases the community they've helped to create.) What is the place of people who come out as trans and are going through intentional bodily changes (or not) in a women's community? How can we find ways of honoring people's right to make choices about their own bodies and identities if we feel those choices seemingly contradict the specific movement for social change we're all involved with? Do these choices actually do that? Is there a way to incorporate them - keeping in mind that our bodies are, or should be, always under our own control?

One thing that's certain is that power and privilege can shift with body size, and many of us are in a body size that we weren't in several years ago (whether because of weight gain or loss – surgery related or not), and we're all in shifting bodies if we consider the passage of time. Some of us may carry new privilege that we're not yet aware of yet and need to check into. Some of us are working hard to examine and integrate these changes. And this is part of being an activist in a movement, or being an ally.

When I consider the ways that Nolose has become trans-inclusive and is dealing with the issue and reality of weight loss surgery I see the possibility for us to step back and re-consider the basic questions: Who are we? What do we want? And what do we believe? This puts us back on the precipice of change, with all the associated fears. But what if we take a moment to celebrate the fact that dealing with these issues is making us evolve and grow? And what if we consider the possibility that it might even make us stronger? We're all stronger if we work not to leave any of us behind.

There are some loving challenges I'd like to throw out there for all of us this weekend, and beyond:

- Many of us here know each other for years and have tight-knit groups, others are new or outside of groups. The thrill and intensity of being in this space can sometimes lead us to perpetuate hierarchies of popularity that don't serve us or our community. I encourage folks to who relate to either the experience of being in the in-crowd or out-crowd at this conference, or both, to consider where it comes from, talk about it, and break out of comfort zones. Expand beyond what you feel are imposed limits, and look at the ways others may be experiencing limits they feel are imposed. Reach out.



- One of the truly valuable things about Nolose is its sliding-scale. There are few institutions that incorporate a means of dealing with economic and class inequity in order to create access for as many as possible. We come from different levels of economic access, and that can play itself out in the ability of some of us to dress up well and often at the conference, while others can't. (Some of us have called this the Nolose Fashion Olympics.) How can we honor the obvious right of folks to self-expression and creativity while respecting the issue that arises in this context? I challenge us to consider this carefully. There's a workshop called More Than Just Fashion this afternoon led by Zoe and Cristy which addresses this issue.
- Take time to tell your stories, to yourself and others. What are your intersecting identities, and how do they intersect and connect to struggles for liberation?
- Understand how oppression works against you and learn how it works against groups you don't belong to.
- Examine your privilege (ability to get a bank loan, to speak the same language as the local beaurocracy, to not be assumed to be a threat by police, to have physical access to a space, to get an apartment or house in a certain neighborhood, etc.) Know that you can use your privilege to challenge oppression against other people, and you should. Be an ally, and start by being open to learning.
- Organize with others, and keep a clear vision of the change you want to make. If a movement working towards respect and justice for all bodies (particularly fat bodies) matters to you, get involved with Nolose, lead workshops, volunteer; donate time, money, ideas, whatever you can.
- Another story: I once asked a nine year old girl in one of my self-defense classes why she thought we were having an activity about self-esteem and body image in a self-defense class. She was a survivor of sexual abuse and eating disorders. She replied, "You have to love yourself in order to fight for your life." I challenge us to love ourselves whether we feel strong or weak, feel healthy or ill, through the ongoing changes we move through as bodies, through the choices we make about how to live, to love ourselves past our fears through to new possibilities, and toward our own vision of a just society.

The poet June Jordan said, "We are the ones we have been waiting for." We are the ones to change the old paradigm. One of the things I learned in teaching self-defense and violence prevention for so many years is that the real heroes who find remarkable ways to fight against and often survive violence are people like us, our family and friends – this means that possibility is in all of us. My mother once defended herself against a white man with a shotgun who was robbing the store she worked in by speaking and negotiating calmly with him in what she felt was her non-existent English. Just months ago when she and I were walking together and a little boy in the street verbally harassed us for being fat she started a conversation with him about there are lots of different kinds of people in lots of sizes and colors, and that that was a good thing which maybe hadn't occurred to him. After a minute or two he agreed and we walked on. We are the ones we have been waiting for.

Almost done! I want to extend all my thanks and love to Lissette, my partner, for all her support always, and for her help in the editorial process. And thanks again to all of you!

Two last things now. I wrote this short poem for my body, which is to say for myself, but I dedicate it to all of us:

### **Fat**

The water that I am  
living all its seasons  
close to earth.  
The lifelong beach  
we make  
strewn with careless  
adornment  
interrupted, but forgiven  
-luck and magic.  
Not the wounded mistake  
or the broken surprise  
stealing ground and space.  
Not the hated gears of flesh  
spinning alone  
and useless forever.  
Not the mute one  
whose self-immolation  
feeds so many  
(dying candle  
than never lived.)  
Not the disease  
of forced stillness  
and undeserved hunger  
as a way of life.  
Not the motherly  
voice of shame  
singing goodnight lullabies  
from every outlet,  
pretending commerce  
and pride are the same thing.  
Not the saccharine cataract  
dimming every face  
and splintering every body  
especially my body  
especially your body  
especially every subversive body  
moving alone  
through borders of night rain.

The water that I am  
bubbling well  
through the soles of my feet.  
Water that fills  
our mouths and our cells  
side by side  
the truth of us  
the warmth  
of us  
together born.

Now the very last thing.

Folks who can stand, please stand up. Folks who are sitting, please get space so you can see. Come up front if that works for you. I'd like to end by having us all do some punches together. These punches can represent breaking through something, pulling something in to you, or just be punches that feel good to do. If you don't use one arm, you can use the other. If you don't use your arms, we'll be adding in something to the punches you can do.

*Teach front punch.*

Now I'm going to add another technique to the punch. This is called a kiai, which in Japanese means a gathering of the spirit, certainly something that makes sense for this conference.

*Teach kiai.*

Front punch and kiai.

To each other and our strength!

Thank you all so much!