

## Heather MacAllister: Keynote Address (final notes)

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Heather delivering Keynote  
Photo by Kelli Dunham

Good morning my beautiful fat sisters, brothers and others. I could spend my entire allotted time just simply saying thank you to the people in this room. The week I was diagnosed with cancer and had emergency surgery, I got a call from Leah Strock; both of us were on the board of NOLOSE at the time. As I laid in shock in a San Francisco hospital room, I heard what to me is some of the most beautiful, melodic cadence in all of language, that of the New York Jew—no, I'm "dead" serious; hah hah get it?; I'm a Judaiphile; that is a shiksa...er, I mean gentile who has an affinity for or love for Jewish culture. I mean, I studied Judaism, I celebrate Seder, I'm hanging a mezuzah on my house, I got the BRCA-1 gene, what more can I do?—so, when Leah Strock called to ask me, "Honey, can I send you a check?" I replied, "I'm not in a position to say no." And from that moment forward, it is the fat dyke in general and the NOLOSE community specifically that has been first and foremost in supporting me in my own personal reality TV show life-and-death fight against cancer. I have had great help from a wide diversity of people and communities, but it is fat dykes who have been the center of my support system, my LoveTroopers. I am humbled that there are so many people, many of whom don't even know me personally, that have helped organize a benefit, sent a check, or written good wishes for my health. Please allow me this forum to say thank you to each of you, and please give yourself a round of applause for showing up for a fat queer sister.

I am also deeply grateful to NOLOSE for your support of me way before I started my cancer treatment. Although I started being a fat stripper at Burning Man, which is a straight alternative culture festival, it was NOLOSE that gave me the confidence to actually develop my performance as a burlesque dancer, and to start the world's first truly inclusive, all-fat burlesque ensemble. There were other "plus-size" burlesque dancers performing in New York, but the difference was almost coastal—in New York, they had a height requirement—no, it wasn't 4'11", you had to be at least 5'8" to audition for the Glamazon Girls, and they were strictly feminine. San Francisco style, we had 'em short, tall, femme, butch, trans, and Glen. I'd seen Beth Smulyan perform at NOLOSE and I stole her for a Fat-Bottom Revue when she came out to San Francisco for another show. Because of NOLOSE I was able to nurture my own vision as an artistic director

and produce shows that highlighted a true diversity of fat talent onstage. And each year at NOLOSE I put on a bigger and better show that ended with the workshop participants, coined by 'becca widom as "The Fresh Bottoms", joining me and the other pros onstage to strut their stuff to the most supportive crowd imaginable. These moments fed me in a way nothing else could and again, I am humbled in my gratitude.

Since early on in NOLOSE, I have been begging someone, anyone, to start getting our fat dyke history recorded. I feel like we keep reinventing the wheel; that each generation comes along and feels like we are the first ones to invent fat liberation. And frankly, we can be a little bit snotty about it. So as someone who age-wise falls between what I will call "manifesto" fat activism and "GenX" fat activism, I am going to take a little moment to school us, especially since this is being videotaped. And if you have different or additional information, please contact Shira so we can start archiving our history.

NOLOSE was founded by the hardworking and gallant Dot Nelson-Turnier in response to a fatphobic incident in the lesbian community. A picture of a powerful fat woman appeared on the cover of Lesbian Connection magazine, and there was a frightening amount of truly vitriolic, hateful letters to the editor taking them to task for even daring to publish such a picture, as though a fat woman could be anything but an ugly parasite on an overburdened medical system just waiting to die of obesity. So Dot decided, with other pissed off fat dykes, to have a gathering called the National Organization for Lesbians of Size and NOLOSE was born in 1999.

In the intervening years we've been inspired by keynotes from the formidable and legendary Elana Dykewomon, elegant, eloquent artist C.C. Carter, been double-whammied in one year by the legislative brilliance of Sondra Solovay, and the cultural creativity of the one and only Marilyn Wann, the really almost unbelievable courage and persistence of Lynn McAfee, the challenge of a new generation from the continuously innovative Nomy Lamm, the groundbreaking academic insight of Katie LeBesco, and last year's full-force no-holds-barred burning down the house challenge of Chubster Boss Lady Charlotte Cooper. Can I get a chubby chub chub chub.....and there are many more people who have contributed in ways large and small to making NOLOSE the truly unique event it is today.

I want to state right from the beginning that everything I say today comes from love. I love our community with a passion and ferocity that I've never felt for any individual person. I see fatties on the street and I want to run up and hug them and kidnap them to NOLOSE. When I see fat children I want to find a way to communicate with them how perfect they are in the bodies they have and give them a suit of armor that lets in love but keeps out all the world of hurt I know they are likely in for. I've felt this way about my fat community for many years, and it is enhanced by my new-ish status as a cancer rock star. I decided that my particular way of fighting cancer is rooted in punk rock and fat activism; that saying "fuck you" to expectations runs deep and it is how I am going to save my life. So some of my newfound clarity has me realizing that love truly is the only thing that ultimately matters, and believe me I may live in Portland Oregon now but I am from Detroit and I am no hippie. No offense, some of my best friends are hippies. But it's true; I am finding out that we are put on this earth to learn how best to love each other. And some of the things I plan to say this morning might be challenging to us, and I want each of you to remember that I love you just because you are fat or an ally, and that when I am taking a hard look at issues in our community, I am including myself in that look and I want you to receive my words in the spirit of love from which they are being given.

I also want to say that I have more questions than answers. I am honored to have been asked to keynote NOLOSE. As I hope to make clear, NOLOSE is my family, my home, the place where the most people who love me are in the same place at the same time, with the possible exception of my wedding, my funeral, or a half-off sale at Torrid. After last night's fantastic identity politics/cruise control exercise, I felt like I had to

run back to the room and rewrite the whole thing, while at the same time I've been writing this speech for twenty years. There is a level of consciousness around the organization of this event that gives me hope that the fat liberation movement can be one of the most collectively empowering and radicalizing movements of the 21st century.

I want to make a point of thanking Kelli Dunham, my chevalier, without whom I literally could not have made the physical journey here. Some of you may remember last year when MC Bevin made an announcement about Kelli's nametag that said "kinky poly switch looking for you". And now Kelli has moved across the country to be my boi, so I strongly urge you to take the bull by the horns, and advocate that Free Ass Pass or whatever works for you, because you can manifest some powerful shit in your life. Let me ask you: have you thought about what you want to manifest at NOLOSE this year? What I saw last night is that lots of people wanted to try something new, lots of people wanted to get laid, but EVERYONE wanted to make new friends. And I want us to think about that--how do we create a conference where there is room for all of those desires that doesn't leave anyone feeling like what they want or need can't be manifested here? What makes NOLOSE different from NAAFA besides vegan food and a sliding scale?

I think and hope that we are starting to move away from what I perceive as a somewhat singular focus on sexuality. I definitely don't agree with a lot of the criticism from some movement feminists of what they perceive as too much of a focus on sexuality in the fat lib movement. As anyone who has attended previous years here can attest, I am a big fan of sexual liberation and activity at this event. But I don't want our sexual liberty at the expense of our other fat liberations. What other liberations do we seek? How do we achieve a sensual, physical liberation that truly comes from the inside out, so that our sexuality is an organic outpouring of how great we feel about ourselves, rather than a forced or manic overlay that we try to "achieve" this one magic weekend a year?

There exists a sexual currency at NOLOSE. Lists of "who's hot" automatically creates a list of "who's not". We recreate the hierarchies of high school or other social contexts because 'finally' we can 'compete' on a "level playing field"; one I have invested in creating. Fluidity of fat—how does that impact activism? Compare to LGBT movement (fluidity) and black Civil Rights movement (sited on body). Disability rights movement (fluidity, body) trans/intersex (medical pathologization, fluidity, body-specific, gender norms breaking (fat women and men), sexual and social currency/autonomy—take this over to critique of NOLOSE.

Fat is the new black. Fat is the new Black. Fat is the new trans. In terms of the "in thing" to be radical about, the most subversive you can get. Growing bellies on purpose—but will they stay with us after it's over? We've succeeded in making it cool to be fat—now what? Where does this leave the fat people who still aren't "cool"? The "sexy" people, the "cool" people, becoming the dominant zeitgeist of the conference. NOLOSE has always had to contend with individual participants feeling isolated, not part of the loop. As fat people, we have often experienced extreme social isolation and hostility. Within a fat positive context it is disturbing to see some of the same social dynamics being played out. No one person or group of people is to blame. There is no way that it could NOT happen with the social model we all live in.

Over the years I have carefully examined my motivations for trying to create a fat-valuing sexual currency. How do I differentiate between what I try to do and the "woman as sexual object" paradigm that I have always fought? Originally it was purely self-serving; I wanted to "compete" for sexual partners, and engage in sexual flirtation and dynamics, and feel sexy, on a 'level playing field'. But I questioned whether that was reinforcing the idea that a woman's value lies first in her looks or in her sexual attractiveness. On one level the dominant paradigm was subverted in my efforts simply because I identified as bisexual and it wasn't only men I was trying to attract. In fact, as time went on, it more and more often was women I was trying to gain the attention of. However, I did not find an accepting home in the lesbian community; although

there was a slightly higher margin for how fat you could be and still be considered attractive, various cultural factors mitigated. So I have spent a great deal of time and effort trying to create a culture that has room for people, especially women, who are sexy and fat at the same time. And I have found that simply existing as a sexually self-actualized fat woman is a politically and culturally radical act. It is how we enact our sexuality, I think, that makes the difference. We have agency and autonomy—it's like in my burlesque troupe—it is my dancers, not the audience, who decide what they will or won't show or share, and when a person is truly at home sexually in their own body, they manifest that same autonomy and power. The sexual drive doesn't even need an outside audience, it is sexual power simply for the sake of sexual power, it's very existence, inhabited in the body of a fat person.

## **EMBODIMENT OF FAT LIBERATION**

OK to dress sexy at NOLOSE—at the dance, onstage, the play party—but there is little actual nudity. “If I arrange my fat in just such a way, or hide it with creatively placed feather boas...” Fashion is fun long denied us as fatties, but our obsession with aesthetic can overwhelm/hide our deep need to get comfortable in our own skin. We have to acknowledge that most of us still struggle with body image. That people who have been exposed to fat liberation are getting WLS. It's a daily assault requiring a daily defense and a great deal of energy. When will we prioritize this spiritual/emotional, physical work? We shouldn't get down on ourselves for still struggling. Even if we've spent years in therapy and/or fat civil rights, we MAY have healed the childhood trauma, but we are bombarded every day so it's no surprise. Is this where *embodiment* as a tool for/of fat liberation comes into play? We can talk about fat liberation until we're blue in the face but if we don't love our bodies we will never have it. It is easy for us to intellectualize fat liberation; we're fatties and we've lived in our heads instead of our bodies most of our lives.

## **WORKSHOP INFO**

Our oppression is sited on our bodies; our bodies are the direct target of hatred. So true healing has to include a physical component, and it is ongoing since fat hatred is ongoing.

I want to make a distinction between "positive body image" as a personal growth phenomenon and fat activism as a radical social movement. THEY DO NOT HAVE TO BE SEPARATE. In fact, each can only succeed with the other. However, we need to avoid the pitfalls—including racism and classism—of most "personal growth movements" as well as of the majority of the struggle for other kinds of social justice. As I've said three times now FIND THESE, FAT LIBERATION has the potential to completely transform our society—literally from the inside out. If we can harness the power of the Activism, Academia, and Art triangle to the inner spiritual work of loving our BODIES from the inside out, we can create a social movement different and more powerful than any we've known in our lifetimes. Yes, fatties, we ARE the vanguard of social justice in the 21st century!

It is imperative that we create a new model of /for group interaction/dynamics. Because fat cuts across all other borders: age, race, culture, class, geography, gender, sexual orientation, ability), we have a unique opportunity to build a *truly* inclusive model (acknowledging differing cultural attitudes toward fatness, and need for research and work on that), beyond identity politics, so that all individuals are and feel welcomed and included.

Surround yourself with fat-positive images. Stop reading Cosmo and watching TV. Get naked in front of a full-length mirror. Get a tattoo on the fattest part of your body and show it off. Touch, tattoo, decorate, reveal, show off, the fat parts of your body. Have sex naked, with the lights on. No lingerie/boxers! Take bubble baths regardless of gender. (speak to masculine folks pampering their body, talk about how women are told to use food-scented and -named products on the outside of the body but not to take food inside the

body and give credit—Bitch magazine?). Find a way to be naked in the sunshine. Swim naked. Slow down. Get pictures taken of your body, nude and clothed, that are flattering without hiding. Say nice things about your fat parts and other people's fat parts. Eat mindfully and gratefully. Move. Sweat. Take a "physical" risk. Get bodywork—learn and share reiki, massage, barter/trade nonsexual and sexual touch. Wear comfortable clothing—lose the girdle! And perhaps most important, develop a relationship with a really great best friend/family. I want to especially thank my heartsister, Tina Palivos, who is here for the very first time—yes, she is single—I want to thank her for advocating for me medically when I unable to do that for myself. This is a subject near and dear to my heart, and it goes way beyond my fight against cancer. Nearly all of us raised our hands last night in acknowledgement that for years and years we fat people have been mistreated within the medical industry because of fat phobia. Those of us who are also women, or trans, or people of color, or have disabilities, or are poor—and yes, some of us have been blessed to deal with ALL of these identities—have an even more pressing battle to fight. I have heard over and over about how scared we are to go to the doctor because we have or expect to experience discrimination. That at best they won't understand our needs or know how to treat us, and at worst they will exercise their unearned and unbalanced power over us to attack us because of their own fear, ignorance, and bigotry. I've heard—and experienced—the horror stories of transphobic, homophobic, and sexist gynecologists, or inadequate or nonexistent public health care, or primary care physicians who refuse to treat their fat patients "until they lose weight".

And friends, I have one thing to say: **BUCK THE FUCK UP**. I KNOW how scary it is to go to the G-Y-N; Because I am poor and on Medicare and have to go to the teaching hospital for my treatment, I get three pelvic exams for the price of one! AND I have to get at least one every month! So I don't want to hear you whining about the doctor using the wrong pronouns so you're not going to go to the doctor. That's a fucking cop-out, and you are copping out on yourself. I LOVE YOU. I want you to love you, too, and to act like you fucking well care enough about yourself to do whatever it takes to get the medical care you need. I LOVE YOU, but as far as most of the rest of the country is concerned, we're just a room full of fat freaks who deserve the lonely deaths they are sure we'll have. No, they might not be taking guns against us—they don't have to, they can just sit back and let our fear keep us from getting the health care we need. We have to love ourselves enough to be fierce! If that means you bring your most badass friend into the doctor's office with you, do it! You have the right to do that, these people are working for you! They are YOUR EMPLOYEES, including, ESPECIALLY, if you are on public assistance! Don't let your employees tell you that you can't get medical care that you need and deserve. We have to love ourselves enough to act like our health care is not a privilege, IT IS A RIGHT FOR EVERY FAT PERSON! They would rather see us dead so don't let them win! There are lots of resources and more and more are being created every day; 'becca's workshop will be a great place to start. But you have to love yourself enough to make it happen. Act as if you already believe that. If you can't do it for yourself, do it for your fat mother, your trans co-worker, your crip best friend, and do it on the buddy system. Love your loved ones strong enough and let them love you back.

## QUESTIONS

### FASHION

Ultra-femininity of some fat women—big hair, nails, makeup—is it different in dyke culture? I know some of us have ridiculed or judged straight fat women who so enthusiastically buy into the "fat version" of the beauty myth, but how is our "queering" of it a subversion? Valuing largeness vs. fatness. Shape privilege. Mainstreaming fatness. Firmness and curves vs. just "fat". Like assimilationist lesbians and gay men "we're just like everyone else except for who we love" vs. queers.

Fashions that look 'good' on thin women/people (deconstruct gender difference in clothing?)—do those fashions look 'right' on \_us\_? Does it depend on shape? Do we need our own aesthetic? Why can't I find a person who sews who wants to work on plus size clothing design?

OK let's face it: NOLOSE has become a bit of a fashion show. Now anyone who knows me knows I am a fatshionista; a fat person who loves fashion and takes opportunities to create "alternative" fat fashions. Then again, would we create these "fat" fashions if we didn't have to? If regular fashions, or designer fashions, or even "skinny" alternative fashions, were more available to us? There was a time, early on in NOLOSE, when one suitcase was enough, even for me. The empowerment of celebrating our size in sexy clothes is real and crucial. At the same time, does it create an atmosphere of exclusion for people who can't participate even if they want to? Unless you sew or can afford to have clothes made for you, you are limited to buying sizes 28 and smaller, even if your body is not. I realize that for some of us, this is the first or only place we have the opportunity to "play", particularly in a sexually provocative or revealing aesthetic. And lord knows I've enjoyed the hell out of it. But I think it is interesting that we are here in this natural setting, where wearing platform heels is not the same experience as it would be at a hotel conference, and I want to encourage us to maybe relax a little...

## **CLASS**

Breakdown of cost includes lodging, food (inaccessible both type and financially in a hotel) and registration. The conference hotel model may not be working for us anymore; if we want something different we need to create it together but not sit outside and criticize without contributing our time and ideas. I have been the recipient of some kind of NOLOSE Scholarship every year and am living on a fixed income so I understand the financial challenges faced by many of my sisters.

## **GENDER**

In an academic setting, when someone presents a paper of their own research, there is often a call for more research. I have a limited amount of time to use the most important forum, to me, that I've ever had. So I want to ask a few questions and leave the answers for us to discuss this weekend and beyond. In queer studies, when we use it as a verb, it means to look at something through a queer lens. I want to do that here, because there is a burgeoning fat studies movement in academia, and I want to "fat" certain questions; to look at things through the lens of fatness to hopefully lend insight into issues and questions in the larger community.

Within the larger queer community, there is a great deal of discussion and controversy surrounding what is perceived to be a preponderance of young female-bodied, masculine-identified people having irrevocable body modification done in an effort to appear more masculine. I'd like to "fat" that by asking the question: does our society's hatred of women's bodies, particularly of fleshy women's bodies (and men whose bodies are, because of their fat distribution, perceived as feminine), and its corresponding censoring of the body by foundation garments like girdles, relate to the "rush to manhood", the wearing of almost universal wearing of restrictive binders by masculine women. Basically, are binders girdles for your tits?

Fluidity of fat—how does that impact activism? Compare to LGBT movement (fluidity) and black Civil Rights movement (sited on body). Disability rights movement (fluidity, body) trans/intersex (medical pathologization, fluidity, body-specific, gender norms breaking (fat women and men),

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over? We've succeeded in making it cool to be fat—now what? Where does this leave the fat people who still aren't "cool"?

## **RACE**

I don't know the numbers, but my memory is that NOLOSE had the most participation by people of color the year that Nedra Johnson was our guest star and C.C. Carter was a performer as well as our keynote speaker. The flyer for that year's conference showed both of their faces and as I recall, no others. I don't know what other work happened behind the scenes, but I felt and feel that there may have been a perception of NOLOSE as an event that was of interest to and relevant to the lives of women of color, particularly, that year, African American women.

There is a pervasive myth among many fat white people that it is somehow "easier" or "more accepted" to be fat in certain communities of color. While I don't deny that fatness intersects with race in complex ways that are different than in the white world, and that in many different ethnic communities there is a tradition of acceptance and celebration of fatness, it is--literally--not a black and white issue, but it is one that is underaddressed here.; fat lib is no different than other 'progressive' movements re: race, meaning that well-intentioned white people wring our hands about whether there are "enough" people of color but may not be accessing anti-racist resources that would improve the relevance of their event. And by "our" hands I am referring to myself as a white girl, not trying to whitewash the conference or ignore the people of color who do chose to come here even with the hardships around race they can expect. Communities/people of color struggling to survive financially, struggling against racism, might not see fat lib as important in comparison.

Since many progressive movements are so segregated; people of color are doing social justice work bit it's invisible to most (white) progressives. If we want to build a racially inclusive movement, white movement people need to go outside our comfort zone. Using "our" to include myself, not to white wash the conference. And acknowledge that the leaders of our movement are primarily white.

I would like to propose that we take a cue from the Deaf community. "Deaf" vs "deaf"; "Fat" vs. "fat"—capitalization to distinguish the culture/identity from the noun and adjective? Would we use it when writing about individuals or only as a community?

Reaching people who don't have the luxury/privilege of intellectualizing fatness or who aren't "progressive" in other ways, if someone doesn't have an "identity politics" framework they won't respond to our message as it is now disseminated. Who are we trying to reach? Are we trying to be all things to all fat dykes, or are we content, more focused even, if we consciously limit ourselves to a certain specific niche community that has a shared value system? How will that intersect with our work on race and racism? Fat lesbians in the Midwest (or wherever) who shop at the mall, wear girdles, go to fatphobic doctors and consume lesbian culture that has no place for positive representations of fat dykes. Fat dykes who live in both blue AND red states. Lesbian yuppies desperately exercising and other body modifications (plastic surgery, WLS). This is all about MAKING THE MOVEMENT ACCESSIBLE AND RELEVANT. People don't want to be members of the fat club. Believing that, despite all evidence to the contrary they can get and stay thin through dieting exercise, pills, WLS. Tailor your message to fit your audience, include language, literature. Most people are not committed enough to spend the effort and money to get here. So for those of us who are: what are we going to make NOLOSE into? We can't be all things to all people, so is this a place specifically for folks already fat-positive? Is it just to recharge, a social time, or is it a place to get tools for liberation after the weekend is over? Who's liberation?

Our message is so out there yet we fight amongst ourselves and create niche communities. First off, if you have attended every single NOLOSE, please stand or raise hands. I don't have numbers, and this is part of why we need to document our work. In my perception, NOLOSE has very quickly changed its demographic. Move toward a more gender inclusive, queer vs. lesbian event. I was on the board during that transition and it was difficult on a lot of levels; an incredible amount of processing went into that and like I said, there is a willingness to learn, stretch, and grow that is astounding. However, the age of participants has become noticeably/significantly younger. Less people of color than in previous years. Longtime lesbian feminists who founded the organization aren't coming anymore or in WAY smaller numbers. I can count on one hand the number of wheelchairs and scooters in use at the each of the last two conferences. 1 st/2 nd generation gap—"old school" lesbian feminists vs. indie queer hipsters. Who are we for, and what are we losing out on by not having those women here?

### **WEIGHT LOSS SURGERY**

I have long held the position that there is never a good enough reason for someone to get weight loss surgery. And I can't say that I've changed my opinion on that. But there are people I know personally who have had largely positive experiences with the surgery, and I can't ignore that reality. In trying to answer this very complicated and highly charged issue for myself, where I'm at right now is here: If we hold that it is never ok to get WLS, then we as a movement have failed our sisters and brothers who do choose surgery. We haven't done a good enough job of providing another option for "supersize" people who have every imaginable pressure on them to have this invasive, expensive, dangerous, and typically unsuccessful procedure. And I am concerned that a lot of the criticism of people making a choice to have surgery is coming from people for whom WLS is not a serious concern, specifically, "average" or "mid-sized" fat people. If we continue to refuse to listen to the personal truths and stories of people who have had or are considering bariatric surgery, we are truly failing as activists and more importantly as human beings. I can and am extremely critical of WLS and at the same time I need to make myself open to hearing about the experience of people who are much fatter than I have ever been and why this feels like an option to them. And I need to do it without an attitude of condescension and judgment. I don't have to support the decision in order to support the person. It's tricky but it's possible and it's crucial. This issue is only going to get more important and we have got to stop hiding our heads in the sand and not talking about it, and creating an atmosphere of hostility around people speaking their own experience.

### **IN CLOSING**

Let me end by showing by example. I want to publicly thank my own body, my body that has suffered so much hatred and pain from inside and out, even before the cancer. My body that is fat enough to withstand TWO YEARS of unremitting chemotherapy—that's right folks, if I had started out this journey as a skinny girl I'd likely be dead by now. My body that has brought me at least my fair share of pleasure and joy and is still allowing me to have the fantastic experience of life in a carnal body. Thank you, body, and thank you, NOLOSE, for your HUGE part in helping me become a person that can stand up in a roomful of people and love and thank her body. May you all have that and so much more.