

“The Goddess is Fat”: The Emergence of Fat Dyke Liberation, 1970-1990

Research Thesis

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by

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I want to dedicate this thesis to my mom, Kim Glassmeyer. She never put any pressure on me to be anything but exactly what I am, and I would not be who I am today without her support. She is beautiful in every way – I just wish she could see how much.

As they emerged nationwide in the late 1960s and 1970s, feminist movements were often criticized for failing to account for intersections of identity experienced by women who did not fit into a mainstream notion of femininity; instead, these movements initially focused on issues faced predominantly by white, middle-class women. However, women eclipsed by these political assumptions began to push back and demand rights of their own. This dynamic was central to the development of lesbian feminism itself out of the women's liberation movement and would soon transform lesbian activism as well. Lesbian feminists who felt alienated by the central role played by young, white, middle-class activists in their own communities began expressing their pain and suggesting ways that lesbian feminism could be conceived of in a more inclusive way that would challenge fundamental structures of race, class, and gender oppression in the United States. An important but heretofore unexamined part of this phenomenon was the organizing of fat dyke liberation, a movement within lesbian feminism that interrogated the treatment of fat lesbians within their own communities, and developed intersectional political theories of race, class, misogyny, disability, and looksism.<sup>1</sup>

Lesbian feminism developed in part from difficulties that lesbians experienced in the women's movement.<sup>2</sup> Although lesbians had been active in all facets of the women's movement

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<sup>1</sup> "Looksism" and the struggle against it was an important part of lesbian feminist politics and cultures of the 1970s. Lesbian feminists critiqued the way that patriarchal, misogynist ideals of female beauty, and in fact all socially sanctioned ideals of beauty did violence to women and erased individual women's experiences and value.

<sup>2</sup> On this history, see Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 143-195; for a personal account of these years, see Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A memoir of Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); for an account of the origins of lesbian feminism that fits it into the larger context of US lesbian history in the twentieth

and the more radical women's liberation movement from the beginning, they began to face immense pushback for their sexual identities as lesbianism became more visible in the first years of gay liberation following the Stonewall Riots. Famously characterized by Betty Friedan's proclamation of lesbians within the women's movement as a "lavender menace," heterosexual feminists feared that the inclusion of lesbians in the movement would provide "the ammunition to dismiss the women's movement as a bunch of man-hating dykes."<sup>3</sup> This paranoia over lesbianism's perceived threat to the respectability of the women's movement helped launch the lesbian feminist movement. Taking pride in identifying as a "lavender menace," lesbian feminists burst into the National Organization for Women's Second Congress to Unite Women, wearing "Lavender Menace" emblazoned on their chests. Passing out their manifesto, "The Woman-Identified Woman," they expressed a belief that "only with women ... could feminists integrate their emotional, political and sexual lives."<sup>4</sup> Lesbian feminism was born.

An important facet of this new movement was the creation of women's spaces to facilitate a feeling of freedom and comfort in the company of one's own sex. Though lesbian feminists often saw loving other women as a political move, the development of lesbian feminist communities also allowed women who had no political experience to come into consciousness of their love for other women. Ruth Rosen, in her book *The World Split Open*, quotes Sara Lucia Hoagland, who described lesbian sex as "the most natural thing in the world ... To this day I wonder why it is not called, 'coming home.' For the first time at ease with being a woman, body

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century, see Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 188-214.

<sup>3</sup> Rosen, 166.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

and soul were united –healed—or was it complete?”<sup>5</sup> Many women were drawn to this aspect of the lesbian feminist movement – the sense of belonging that they felt could only come with being in relation to women and the opportunity to escape objectification by heterosexist, patriarchal society.

Though it is undeniably true that lesbian feminists worked to create safe spaces for some women, others within the community often expressed feeling policed in lesbian feminist spaces by notions of appropriate lesbian feminist behavior and bearing.<sup>6</sup> Lesbian feminist communities initially catered to appropriately feminine women. Granted, they could have body hair and avoid makeup, but the appropriate femininity identified with lesbian feminists seemed often to emphasize whiteness and thinness. At the same time, diet culture spread en masse in the 1970s, preying on the fears of thin women of becoming fat, and on fat women’s shame about their own bodies.

### I. Feminist Consciousness-Raising of Fat Oppression

Driven by feelings of alienation in lesbian feminist communities, the fat dyke liberation movement emerged nationwide. Activists took part from all over the country, including: Vivian Mayer, who wrote under the pseudonym Aldelbaran and was the original publisher of *The Fat Liberator*, an important periodical published in New Haven, Connecticut; Judy Freespirit, a Jewish lesbian feminist who founded the lesbian feminist fat liberation dance troupe Fat Chance and Fat Lip Theatre in San Francisco, as well as the activist group Fat Underground in Los

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 171.

<sup>6</sup> Important examples of lesbian-created women’s spaces include lesbian land communes across the country that were often open to heterosexually-identified women as well. On this subject, see Joyce Cheney, ed. *Lesbian Land* (Minneapolis, MN: Word Weavers, 1985). Other spaces included women’s music festivals, coffee houses, and self-defense classes. Faderman, 215-245.

Angeles; Boston Fat Liberationists Elly Janesdaughter and Judith Stein from Cambridge, MA; fat liberationists writing anonymously from North Carolina, and collaborating with women from Minneapolis and Iowa; fat consciousness raising groups developed in New York lesbian feminist circles, and many more. All of these activists contributed throughout the 1970s and 1980s to raise awareness of fat oppression, both within lesbian feminist movements and in society as a whole. Many engaged with NAAFA (National Association to Aid Fat Americans, now National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance), which was a more mainstream attempt to raise awareness for the poor treatment and cruelty faced by fat people in American society.<sup>7</sup>

Written four years after the emergence of the lesbian feminist movement in 1970, lesbian feminist Lynn Mabel-Lois's piece "Fat Dykes Don't Make It" asserts that even as the movement grew, "coming out was seen as the lesbian way to stay forever thin," particularly within the lesbian press (i.e. *Sojourner*, *Lesbian Tide*, etc.).<sup>8</sup> Although Mabel-Lois acknowledges that lesbian feminist body-image ideals were not exactly the same standards as in heterosexual society, she argues that the allowed margin for weight in the lesbian feminist community was roughly about twenty pounds beyond mainstream standards. Mabel-Lois writes that "it's OK for dykes to be "strong looking" ... but it's not OK to be fat. There is no place for us." Mabel-Lois articulates how the freedom that thin women felt once they engaged in a lesbian feminist community was inaccessible to fat lesbians due to biases against fat people that were pervasive throughout even the most radical of movements. Within lesbian communities, she writes, fat women were often viewed as a "sister-Eunuch," where fellow lesbians would espouse the beauty of these women of size, but never view them as potential sex partners.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> On these regional activists, and their relationship with NAAFA, see materials in "Fat Liberation" Folder, Lesbian Herstory Subject File.

<sup>8</sup> Lynn Mabel-Lois, "Fat Dykes Don't Make It." *Lesbian Tide*. October 1974.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Not only did fat lesbians feel undesirable as lesbians of size, but they also expressed being made into something subhuman, as lesbian feminist Caryl B. Bentley writes. Arguing that all dykes have a shared sense of childhood difference, of being separate from other children growing up, Bentley describes her childhood experience as “not only [feeling] different” but like a monster. By making up for her “grotesque appendage” with intelligence, she recounts that in order for her to be heard at all, she was “forced to lie to straight people about lesbianism, thin people (straight or dyke) about fat,” leaving her to feel only contempt for herself and her community as a whole. There was no sense of “coming home” then within the lesbian community – no recuperation for that younger self – it simply became another site of alienation, exclusion, and ridicule.<sup>10</sup>

Fat lesbian feminists also expressed feeling excluded by a sense of lesbian respectability that didn't include them. Similar to Friedan's fear that lesbianism was a menace that would drag down the whole of women's liberation, fat lesbians were often viewed as a bane to the lesbian feminist movement because their appearance led to the assumption that they were so undesirable that they had no choice *but* to be lesbians. This came even from the mouths of their closest associates. Mabel-Lois writes of a friend who was in a nine-month relationship with someone, whose partner broke up with her because she was gaining weight. Her partner argued that they had to break up because it was “important for them not to look as though they were with each other because they couldn't get men.”<sup>11</sup> Even in a culture at large that discriminated against

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<sup>10</sup> Caryl B. Bentley, “Meeting Lisa.” *Lesbian Insider/Insighter/Inciter* Issue #1. Aug 1980. “Fat Liberation” Folder, 04660. Lesbian Herstory Subject Files.

<sup>11</sup> Lynn Mabel-Lois, “Fat Dykes Don't Make It.” *Lesbian Tide*. October 1974.

people of size, lesbian feminist Kate Taylor wrote in 1981 how she “experienced [her] most painful discrimination at the hands of other women and lesbians.”<sup>12</sup>

Fat lesbians expressed how society saw fat as a personal problem, something meant to be overcome at an individual level, and that all the blame fell on fat people for any abuse they might receive. To be fat was to “[live] with the reality that any person, from close friend to store clerk to jerk on the street, feels free to comment about your size, your appearance and your need to diet,” as early lesbian fat liberationist Judith Stein writes.<sup>13</sup> Kate Taylor, a lesbian fat activist from the San Francisco Bay Area argued that fat people in the 1970s had become “the last frontier” of generally accepted social oppression.<sup>14</sup> Taylor describes how all women already fear abuse being hurled at them on the street, but for women of size, they wear the “fat woman’s mental armor,” and utilize a certain radar to protect themselves against potential verbal (and occasionally physical) abusers.<sup>15</sup> Taylor here illustrates the ways in which lesbian feminist activists overlooked the ways that analyses of looksism and fat phobia could contribute in valuable ways to critiques of patriarchal rape culture.

Fat lesbians also denounced the ways they were alienated and abused by health practitioners as fat dykes. They pointed out how doctors would emphatically denounce women of size for being fat, whether they came in for “a cold, a hangnail, or a broken leg,” as if all ailments were tied to weight.<sup>16</sup> This discomfort with the medical profession led many fat women to avoid doctors all together – something far more dangerous for their health than their weight.

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<sup>12</sup> Kate Taylor, “Mama, Mama, Look at the Fat Woman.” *Plexus*. January 1981. “Fat Liberation” Folder, 04660. Lesbian Herstory Subject Files.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Stein, “Fat Liberation: No Losers Here.” *Sojourner* Vol. 6 Issue 6. February 1981.

<sup>14</sup> Kate Taylor, “Mama, Mama, Look at the Fat Woman.” *Plexus*. January 1981. “Fat Liberation” Folder, 04660. Lesbian Herstory Subject Files.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> “The Politics of the Fat Underground.” *Lesbian Tide*.



Lesbian fat activists were often critical of efforts by mainstream feminists to bring ‘fat’ under the umbrella of feminism. Published in 1978 by Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (whose subtitle varied from “The Anti-Diet Guide to Permanent Weightloss” and “A Self-Help Guide for Compulsive Eaters”) received positive reviews by feminists upon its publication – something which fat lesbian feminist Elly Janesdaughter was critical of, noting that “fat women, unlike Lesbians, haven’t organized against our oppression. Therefore, the feminist community doesn’t acknowledge that fat oppression exists—indeed it condones the fatophobia of the general culture.”<sup>17</sup> *Fat is a Feminist Issue* argues that women choose fatness over thinness because of the oppression of the patriarchy and the male gaze. Janesdaughter critiqued this by arguing that “compulsive eating, like vaginal orgasm, is a fiction propounded by the medical and psychiatric establishments to keep women out of touch with their instincts and preoccupied with the basics of life.”<sup>18</sup> For lesbian fat activists, Orbach’s attempt to rationalize fat oppression, and the positive reviews it received, showed just how entrenched beauty standards impressed upon women by society still were, even in feminist circles, and the ability of the medical field and diet companies to shame fat women.

One of the great achievements of the women’s liberation movement was the founding of the women’s health movement, which “emphasized specific health concerns of women,” and addressed the long history of “the medical establishment’s arrogant attitude toward their ailments.”<sup>19</sup> Within this movement, women worked to attain reproductive rights, to make the pill

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<sup>17</sup> Elly Janesdaughter. “fatophobic feminists.” *Off Our Backs*, Vol. 9, No. 7. July 1979. p. 28

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Ruth Rosen, p. 175; for a specific discussion of the relationship between women’s liberation and the founding of the women’s health movement, see Judith A. Houck, “‘What Do These Women Want: Feminist Responses to ‘Feminine Forever,’ 1963-1980,” *The Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, v. 77 (1): 103-132.

more accessible, to fight against forced sterilization, to question certain medical practices and procedures (such as the use of tranquilizers on depressed women or a high incidence of hysterectomies), and to view themselves as “medical consumers, rather than passive patients.”<sup>20</sup>

As vital as the women’s health movement was, it failed to question the medical practices pushed upon women of size – both the shaming of their bodies by medical professionals as well as the use of “corrective surgeries” to force their weight loss. Lesbian feminist fat liberationists described how the oppression to become thin created a toxic atmosphere both within and outside of radical movements, where “being fat [meant] getting desperate and having your jaws wired shut, your stomach stapled smaller, or a large piece of your intestines cut out.”<sup>21</sup> Even those methods did not ensure a slender figure, often leading to death – either as a result of surgery or by the hands of the women themselves. Lesbian fat activists noted how women in the women’s health movement in their critiques of patriarchal medical practices missed the fact that while men faced fat oppression, women were the ones most shamed for their bodies and for their “inability” to be appropriately feminine and desirable in conventional ways, and that the paternalistic medical field exploited that insecurity.

At the same time as lesbian feminist fat activists criticized abusive medical institutions and the failure of other lesbian feminists to be aware of the specific kind of cruelty that fat women faced when engaging with health practitioners, they also decried the specific medical negligence of therapists and other mental health professionals. Mayer, who had spent fifteen years of her life going to therapy, saw “the ignorance and bigotry of their well-meaning therapists” as the epicenter of this abuse.<sup>22</sup> Through intense psychotherapy, abusive rhetoric

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<sup>20</sup> Ruth Rosen, p. 177-178.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Stein, “Fat Liberation: No Losers Here.” *Sojourner* Vol. 6 Issue 6. February 1981.

<sup>22</sup> Vivian Mayer, “Fat Woman.” Lesbian Herstory Subject Files 04660, Fat Liberation.

about why women were fat became intellectualized. By centrally placing the blame for their bodies on fat women and a perception of them as having a weakened mental state, therapists developed pathologizing explanations for women's body weight, including their inability to "face the responsibility of being an attractive person," fear of sex, unwillingness to "accept femininity," and failure to restrain greedy, infantile and impulsive urges.<sup>23</sup> The undertone of all of this, however, was that "when you stop hating yourself, you will lose the weight."<sup>24</sup> By placing the blame on women from a psychological standpoint for their inability to appear appropriately feminine, and thus appropriately desirable, Vivian Mayer argued that mental health professionals exploited and oppressed fat women.

Mayer noted that instead of therapy providing a therapeutic outlet for these women to unload and discuss the toxic discrimination they faced, it became yet another institution telling them that they were failing, that their self-hatred led them down this path, and that if they just learned restraint, they would cease being unhappy and lose weight. Vivian Mayer had scoured medical journals for studies on weight – only to find that "nutritionists [had] been measuring fat people's calorie intake for over thirty years ... [and gave] no evidence of any relationship between (calorie) intake and body weight."<sup>25</sup> Fat people did not eat considerably more than their non-fat contemporaries – instead, she discovered that "mental health professionals grow up learning the same prejudices as everyone else, and they hand these prejudices back to us decked out as "scientific truths".<sup>26</sup> As a result, women of size spent thousands of dollars, yo-yoing between weights to no avail – all in a desperate attempt to "remove this offending body ...

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

[through] a personal solution not too different from suicide – dieting.”<sup>27</sup> For Mayer and other lesbian feminist fat activists, misogynist mental health professionals did violence to fat women and encouraged them to hate themselves. This previously unexamined critique should be considered a vital part of a broader lesbian feminist anti-psychology movement.

Lesbian feminist fat activists decried how the portrayal of fat women by feminists, lesbian feminists, and society in general, as being completely sexually undesirable often led to further cruelty at the hands of authorities and medical professionals in instances of rape.<sup>28</sup> Because fat women were seen as the antithesis of alluring femininity, they were considered extremely unlikely to ever be victims of rape. Lesbian feminist fat liberationists combined a lesbian feminist critique of patriarchal rape culture with a critique of looksist objectification and fatphobia in denouncing these attitudes. Lynn Mabel-Lois describes being brutally raped by a man, only to have the police look at her with disbelief – asking questions about whether she had invited him in – while medical professionals made fun of her body as they examined her for evidence of rape.<sup>29</sup> At this point in her life, due to the cruelty she had faced by other lesbian feminists regarding her body, she had chosen to be celibate. Upon recounting this to the detective, she writes that “he knew then what it took me years to find out. No fat woman is celibate by choice. We have no choice ... He knew lesbians would not be any more attracted to my body than he was.”<sup>30</sup> Mabel-Lois’ critique argues that lesbian feminists were complicit in the policing and denigration of fat lesbian bodies.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, “Fat Woman.” 1977. Lesbian Herstory Archive Subject Files 04660, Fat Liberation.

<sup>28</sup> For an articulation of the lesbian feminist critique of mental health institutions as anti-lesbian and women-hating, see Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

<sup>29</sup> Lynn Mabel-Lois, “Fat Dykes Don’t Make It.” *Lesbian Tide*. October 1974.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Lesbian fat activists worked from the idea that the desirable female body, whether perceived by straight men or lesbians, could not be the fat female body, to develop a complex critique of looksism and its connections to other forms of oppression in American society. The concept of being so undesirable that the threat of rape was nonexistent illustrated for them how the haven some women found in the lesbian feminist movement could not be attained easily for women of size and that this was true for many lesbians who were shut out of the movement and whose struggles were overlooked by other lesbian feminists because they did not fit a tacitly accepted lesbian feminist ideal. This awareness played an essential role in the development of a new movement to combat fat oppression. Judith Stein wrote that “Fat oppression is the systematic hatred, ridicule and discrimination against fat people by this society. It is based on the belief that fat people are not as good as thin people, and that fat people remain fat because we are lazy, eat too much, lack willpower, or are stupid. This belief is part of the social order which oppresses people because of their age, race, sex, sexual preference and physical abilities and disabilities.”<sup>31</sup> Stein here intersectionally connects ageism, racism, homophobia, ableism, and looksism in a complex argument.

## II. No Weight Limits: Fat Activism Spreads

Through networks of lesbian periodicals, such as *Lesbian Tide*, *Sojourner*, *off our backs*, *Amazon*, and *Sinister Wisdom*, lesbian feminist fat activists were able to create a network of fat lesbians across the country. With events catered to their communities, from pool parties to “fatlucks,” resource guides providing pertinent information about issues ranging from finding

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<sup>31</sup> Judith Stein, “Fat Liberation: No Losers Here.” *Sojourner* vol. 6, issue 6. Feb 1981.

and demanding safe medical spaces to clothing stores that would accommodate women of size, these women pushed back on the oppression they faced on a day-to-day basis, helped each other come into consciousness of their oppression, and claimed space in lesbian feminist communities.<sup>32</sup> Consciousness-raising was essential, as it helped lesbian feminist fat activists elucidate the systems and structures that continually shamed people of size while benefiting off that insecurity. At the same time, by acknowledging that, these women began to realize that not only were they a part of a larger fat dyke community in their struggles, but also that there was power in coming together to attack those systems that insisted on their second-class status, they just “[needed] each other’s support to feel strong, powerful, beautiful, and – most importantly – angry.”<sup>33</sup>

Lesbian feminist fat activists also worked extensively with non-lesbian fat activists, often through collaboration with the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (NAAFA). Founded in 1969 by William Fabrey, a thin man whose wife was discriminated against for her weight, NAAFA became the first organization to advocate for the civil rights of fat persons in the United States.<sup>34</sup> This early organization was heavily influenced by the work of Llewellyn Lauderback, particularly his book *Fat Power* that critiqued dieting and insisted “that American society was prejudiced against fat people.”<sup>35</sup> Still in existence to this day, NAAFA now exists as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance.

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<sup>32</sup> “Boston Area Feminist Fat Liberation is sponsoring FATLUCK: A Potluck for Fat Womyn (ONLY).” “Fat Liberation” Folder, 04700. Lesbian Herstory Subject Files.

<sup>33</sup> Laurie Ann Lepoff, “Fat Politics.” *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*. Iowa City: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Book Company, 1983. p. 205.

<sup>34</sup> Charlotte Cooper, “The Fat Rights Movement,” from *Fat and Proud: The Politics of Size*. London: The Women’s Press, Ltd, 1998. p. 130.

<sup>35</sup> Cooper, p. 130

In his book, Lauderback's rhetoric makes it clear he saw the discrimination of fat people as aligned with the struggles of other activism of the time – such as “early feminism, gay liberation and black power.”<sup>36</sup> The activism of NAAFA laid the groundwork for more radical, future fat activism, because like those other movements, the identities of those involved were not homogenous, but instead their treatment as fat varied dependent on a myriad of different factors, especially gender, sexuality, race and ability. In the early 1970s, as NAAFA focused on the plight of making heterosexual norms regarding family and desire accessible for fat people, many individuals grew frustrated with the organization as it progressed, left, and started other offshoot activist organizations.

Lesbian groups within NAAFA existed by the early 1970s, but as NAAFA remained reluctant to confront medical professionals about their misogynist malpractice and spread of misinformation, these women began to resist and to feel confined within the group.<sup>37</sup> Lesbian feminist fat activists articulated how women had a history of abuse at the hands of paternalistic medical institutions that insist on knowing what was best for them, and how best to control their bodies. Influenced by the activism surrounding women's reproductive rights from the second-wave feminist movement, fat lesbians called into question the discrimination and shame they felt at the hands of professionals.<sup>38</sup> Lesbian feminists were known to have disdain for established institutions, and fat women within lesbian feminism and NAAFA began to question the toxic “truths” they had been forced to believe their entire lives – through the media, their families and

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<sup>36</sup> Cooper, p. 131

<sup>37</sup> For instance, the Los Angeles group *Fat Underground* emerged in part from lesbian feminists involved in NAAFA. See an interview with Judith Stein and Rea Rae Sears, “The Political History of Fat Liberation: An Interview,” 1981. “Fat Liberation” Folder, 04660. Lesbian Herstory Subject Files.

<sup>38</sup> Judith Stein, “Fat Liberation: No Losers Here.” *Sojourner* vol. 6, issue 6. Feb 1981.

friends, and through those institutions that were supposed to advocate for their health, not push them into toxic habits and conformity.

Both the heterosexual goals of NAAFA and their failure to confront toxic medical professionals led to the emergence of the LA's Fat Underground in 1973 by notorious fat activist Judy Freespirit. There had been an interim period where fat lesbians engaged in a NAAFA affiliated group called the Radical Feminist Therapy Collective, but the desire for a more active and separate identity from NAAFA led to the creation of the Fat Underground.<sup>39</sup> Though membership in NAAFA and the Fat Underground was not mutually exclusive, their goals and methods varied immensely. The Fat Underground did not tolerate "sexism, job discrimination, an inaccessible public environment, health issues, stereotyping (particularly in humor and comedy), [or] health professional's detrimental towards fat people" in relation to nutrition and psychiatry.<sup>40</sup> They actively staged protests, confronting both medical professionals and diet clubs, distributed information relating to fat liberation and led demonstrations; following the death of musician Mama Cass, the Fat Underground "staged a public protest because [her death] was treated as a big joke that this big fat woman died."<sup>41</sup> Although never confirmed, they believed that a major cause in her death was the constant dieting that weakened her heart.

Although Fat Underground played a vital foundational role in the evolution of Fat Liberation, after a few years of the group's existence differences arose among its members and they began leaving the organization.<sup>42</sup> However, instead of this leading to a demise of fat lesbian feminist activism, the split actually facilitated the movement spreading across the country. The

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<sup>39</sup> Cooper, 134

<sup>40</sup> Cooper, p. 134

<sup>41</sup> "The Political History of Fat Liberation: An Interview." 1981. Lesbian Herstory Archive Subject File 04660.

<sup>42</sup> Cooper, 136



surprising reality was that one of the strongest early voices came from Vivian Mayer, a fat liberationist who left Fat Underground for New Haven, Connecticut. An extremely active member of Fat Underground prior to the split, Mayer was the founder of Fat Liberator Publications, a clearinghouse for materials related to lesbian fat liberation. The articles and pieces she wrote for nationwide lesbian periodicals, and the informational packets she compiled and sent out, were foundational to the emergence and growth of a lesbian fat liberation movement across the country.<sup>43</sup>

Although she was involved in activism nationwide, Mayer ironically struggled to create a community of fat liberationists locally. Writing to influential Bay Area fat lesbian liberationist and fellow former Fat Underground member Judy Freespirit, she admits that fat feminists of the “image-conscious, uptight, small town dominated by Yale” were reluctant to engage in a movement centered on the discrimination they faced due to size, instead preferring to simply identify as “compulsive eaters,” echoing Orbach’s problematic arguments in *Fat Is A Feminist Issue*.<sup>44</sup> Her struggle to form a community stemmed from this reluctance, as well as her own self-identified introverted personality. Mayer knew she was “based in theory, not social contact” and that this made it difficult for her to engage people and exhausting for her to continuously participate in local fat lesbian consciousness raising-groups when local fat lesbians remained hesitant about fat liberation rhetoric.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “The Political History of Fat Liberation: An Interview.” 1981. Lesbian Herstory Archive Subject File 04660.

<sup>44</sup> “Freespirit, Judy, 1979-1982.” Box 1 Folder 7. Letter dated April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1979. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut; “Freespirit, Judy, 1979-1982.” Box 1 Folder 7. Letter dated January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1980. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut.

<sup>45</sup> “Freespirit, Judy, 1979-1982.” Box 1 Folder 7. Letter dated April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1979. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut; “Freespirit, Judge, 1979-1982.” Box 1 Folder 7. Letter dated January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1979. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut

One important part of lesbian feminism was the development of ideologies of lesbian separatism. Lesbian feminists often saw the necessity to create their own space, free from men, and sometimes women who engaged with men as well. The idea was to create a lesbian feminist “safe-space”; however, separatism required a distinct guide to who qualified and who did not. These separatist tendencies affected the lesbian feminist fat liberation movement, raising important concerns about what qualified as ‘fat oppression’ and who was fat enough to be within the group. Though discussion of eating disorders and societal pressures that push women into them is an essential part of a larger feminist and lesbian feminist platform, those political analyses were not enough to convince lesbian feminist fat liberationists that women who they perceived as “slim” into the group. An employee at a women’s center where Vivian Mayer was holding a C-R group asked to participate in their discussion of binge-eating. However, though Mayer recalls realizing that “fat-hating has almost all women feeling that their desires for more than a smidgen of food are perverse,” she decided that “her presence was inhibiting, and we are now quite firmly excluding non-fat women.”<sup>46</sup> Although there came many attempts to define what ‘fat’ meant in as inclusive a way as possible, the closest was espoused by Elana Dykewomon, who reluctantly defines a fat woman as “a woman who weighs over 200 pounds at an “average” height, or a woman who endures one or more of these things: access problems in public places, job discrimination, random & frequent attempts at humiliation from strangers (or family & friends), having to go to special stores or catalogs to find clothes that might fit.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> “Stein, Judith, 1979-1980” Box 1 Folder 16. Letter dated June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1979. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut.

<sup>47</sup> Elana Dykewomon, “Travelling Fat,” in *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1983), 144-145.

Although important to maintaining a safe-space for women of size to be able to discuss their distinct positionality within the world and emphasizing the focus on fat oppression, this separatism came at the cost of excluding potential members that would have increased Fat Underground's numbers, and the numbers of feminists engaging in this activism in general. This separatism grew more flawed when it came to those women who had been previously fat, for this organizing was for those "who endure these things in the present."<sup>48</sup> This was one of the sharpest criticisms of early fat liberation, because in order to maintain a safe space for women of size to meet and discuss their oppression together, it seemed to many like the fat liberationists were excluding women who felt the societal pressure to be thin, to resist fat at all costs, who had struggled their whole lives with fluctuating weight and toxic diets. Writing of the separatism of the group "Life in the Fat Lane," one lesbian feminist criticizes, "how dare some of these fat lesbians presume that if I'm not their size I don't know about fat oppression ... A woman who says she hates her body should be taken seriously, no matter her size."<sup>49</sup>

Despite Mayer's lack of local community within New Haven, she was extremely well-connected with fat lesbian activists and fat organizing across the country. As the head and founder of Fat Liberator Publications, she compiled, printed and distributed packets of Fat Liberation articles (including her own writing), nationwide fat resource lists, and relevant nutrition findings that debunked the logic behind dieting.<sup>50</sup> Disenchanted by the lack of interest at the local level, she ultimately devoted much of her focus to her work on running Fat Liberator

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> R. Drew, "On Fat Liberation," in *Lesbian Contradiction* Summer 1983, Issue 3 (San Francisco).

<sup>50</sup> "Freespirit, Judy, 1979-1982." Box 1 Folder 7. Letter dated January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1980. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut; More information can be found within Box 2 Folder 31 of the Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, labelled "Meetings, Workshops, Conferences, 1973-1982."

Publications, corresponding with fat activists across the country, and pursuing a PhD in Metallurgy at the University of Connecticut.<sup>51</sup>

While Vivian Mayer was working on spreading the word about Fat Liberation from her small New Haven community, she was in correspondence with many fat activists across the country – in particular, the previously discussed Jewish lesbian feminist Judy Freespirit. Known for founding the dance troupe for lesbians of size known as Fat Chance in 1979, Freespirit had been engaged with fat activism within a community setting in the Bay Area for quite some time, having earlier led Fat Underground when she and Mayer had been in Los Angeles.<sup>52</sup> Well-loved and respected within her community, her work with Fat Chance forced people to engage with the idea that fat bodies could be athletic and that they could move without shame. After the filming of their performance at Berkeley, Freespirit excitedly wrote that, “Not only are we moving and dancing as if we had a right to do so, but we’re on film, bigger than life.”<sup>53</sup> For her, Fat Chance’s performance and the filming of it could play an essential role in consciousness-raising and spreading their politics to those who would have otherwise remained unreachable. Even though the troupe itself was short-lived, Freespirit continued to conduct her own solo performances which, though not intended to be political, there was no denying that “every time [she got] up on stage and [moved], it [was] political.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “Freespirit, Judy, 1979-1982.” Box 1 Folder 7. Letter dated January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1980. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut.

<sup>52</sup> “Freespirit, Judy, 1979-1982.” Box 1 Folder 7. Letter dated December 31, 1979. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut.

<sup>53</sup> “Freespirit, Judy, 1979-1982.” Box 1 Folder 7. Letter dated December 31, 1979. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut.

<sup>54</sup> “Freespirit, Judy, 1979-1982.” Box 1 Folder 7. Letter dated December 31, 1979. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut. For a moving photographic essay on Freespirit’s life and activism, see Cathy Cade, *A Lesbian Photo Album: The Lives of Seven Lesbian Feminists* (Oakland, CA: Waterwomen Books, 1987).

By the early 1980s, previous monolithic notions of what feminists fought for had been called into question. The pursuits of the women's liberation movement had centered largely on reproductive rights, equal pay, and a questioning of the apparent inferiority of women. However, though those issues had widespread appeal for American women, they did not account for the complexities of identity, struggles against oppression, or the lived experiences of different women. Reproductive rights for white women meant access to birth control and abortion, while for women of color, it often meant the end of forced sterilization. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminists and lesbians began to articulate new ways of conceptualizing their identities, leading to the emergence of a myriad of different avenues for activism – cultural feminism, third world feminism, womanism, lesbian studies within universities, queer self-awareness of racism within their movements, and much more.<sup>55</sup> It was not that these had not existed prior to the 1980s – groups such as the Combahee River Collective had been active in the 1970s – but the 1980s brought these issues to the forefront of feminist discourse; second-wave feminism could no longer ignore issues of diversity within women's networks elided by a belief that the struggle of white middle-class women was the struggle of all women.

### III. Formation of Black Lesbian Feminism

Black women had long been engaged with fighting for freedom, equality and justice -- a necessity when their lives were inundated with exploitation within capitalist, sexist, White America. They “organized and led struggles for suffrage, for antilynching laws, for full

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<sup>55</sup> Nancy Adamson, "One in Ten." *Feminist Review*, no. 15 (1983): 88-93; Missy Carney, Ann Gordon, Pat Halle, Anne Thompson, and Mardie Walder. "Lavender Left Conference." *Off Our Backs* 10, no. 7 (1980): 6-7; Pearlina Mills and Estelle Disch, "Common Differences: Third World Women and Feminist Perspectives." *Off Our Backs* 13, no. 7 (1983): 4-6; Toni White, "Lesbian Studies Flourish at National Women's Studies Conference." *Off Our Backs* 10, no. 7 (1980): 16-18

employment, and against Jim Crow laws,” making “the civil rights movement ... merely a continuation of that longstanding tradition [of activism].”<sup>56</sup> Notorious leaders include Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Frances Beale and Dorothy Height – women who were vital for the foundation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) -- worked closely with Martin Luther King Jr. and were at the forefront of leadership, organizing and protesting racial injustice.

Though well-respected, the reality was that these women faced casual, everyday sexism and discrimination within the Civil Rights Movement, often leading to their allocation to traditionally feminine jobs or hostility in leadership positions. During the Freedom Summer of 1964, many white activists went down South to work with SNCC, leading to many interracial liaisons – to be celebrated and encouraged only between black men and white women, rather than black women and white men, despite the new reluctance of black men to sleep with black women.<sup>57</sup> The tensions felt related to race and gender led to “an awareness of women’s subordination ... [that would later manifest as] stereotypes of weak white women who needed protection and strong black women who needed none.”<sup>58</sup> The inequity felt within this movement was later reflected in the more radical movements of the late 1960s, where “black-power separatists and young black armed revolutionaries ... replaced SNCC’s integrationist nonviolent

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<sup>56</sup> Deborah F. Atwater, "Editorial: The Voices of African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement," from *The Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 5 (1996): 539

<sup>57</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. New York: The Penguin Group, 2006: 105

<sup>58</sup> Rosen, 105.

idealists.”<sup>59</sup> As organizations like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) began to critique misogyny among the men in their ranks, discussions of women’s liberation began to emerge.

Although black women felt as if their own gendered issues were dismissed by their male compatriots within SNCC and the Panthers, they saw the emergence of second-wave feminism as “a white woman’s issue, or as a divisive threat to “liberation movements,” which led many women of color to see “women’s issues as a “secondary form of oppression.””<sup>60</sup> Outlined by Frances M. Beale in her “Black Women’s Manifesto” (1969), she writes of the “double jeopardy” that black women were forced to endure due to their race and gender. She proclaims that “if the black woman has to retreat to the position she occupied before the armed struggle, the whole movement and the whole struggle will have retreated in terms of truly freeing the colonized population.”<sup>61</sup> As the black nationalist movement collapsed in the early 1970s, black women began founded the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), “which, within a year, had spawned ten local chapters and [had] held a national conference.”<sup>62</sup> Although many black women wanted NBFO to have a nationwide appeal, divisiveness emerged as notorious lesbian Margaret Sloan became president, and loyalties were divided among a variety of organizations (i.e. “*Ms. Magazine*, Radical Lesbians, the Socialist Workers’ Party, [and] NOW”).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. New York: The Penguin Group, 2006: 97

<sup>60</sup> Rosen, 136.

<sup>61</sup> Frances M. Beal, "Black Women's Manifesto; Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" from Third World Women's Alliance in New York, 1969. Featured in the anthology, *Sisterhood is Powerful*. New York: Random House Publishing, 1970.

<sup>62</sup> Rosen, 282.

<sup>63</sup> Rosen, 283.

Exhausted with NBFO's conflicting allegiances and uneasiness towards lesbians within the movement, Audre Lorde and other black lesbians broke away from the group and established the Combahee River Collective in 1974, where they devoted their energies to writing "against racism, sexism, heterosexism and class oppression."<sup>64</sup> Although they never had a large membership, their anti-separatist emphasis and focus on intersectionality was a groundbreaking and influential stance, placing emphasis on "the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" and that "Black feminism [was] the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppression that all women of color face."<sup>65</sup> Following this, the female head of the Black Panthers began to reassess her former anti-feminism stance, coming into consciousness of the reality that "the value of [her] life had been obliterated as much by being female as being black and poor."<sup>66</sup> Later, Alice Walker would merge race and gender issues by utilizing the term "womanist" as opposed to "feminism" to differentiate between a woman-of-color centered feminism and one that brought to mind images of white women and their priorities.<sup>67</sup>

Black lesbians within organizations for black liberation and women's liberation often felt alienated, excluded or like they were an unwelcome member of that activism. The claim of lesbian or gay activists of color adopting the term of 'minority' was viewed as a way of delegitimizing the civil rights struggles, apparently calling into question who could really be a minority, and whose struggle should be prioritized.<sup>68</sup> However, the reality was that "homophobia

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<sup>64</sup> Rosen, 283.

<sup>65</sup> Rosen, 283.

<sup>66</sup> Rosen, 284.

<sup>67</sup> Rosen, 284.

<sup>68</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. (New York: The Penguin Group, 1991), 240.



[divided] black people as political allies, ... [cut] off political growth, [stifled] revolution, and [perpetuated] patriarchal domination,” as black lesbian feminist Cheryl Clarke articulates.<sup>69</sup> However, their adoption of lesbian-feminism was often coupled with an underlying belief that “it was their parent community that they would have to rely on for survival.”<sup>70</sup> For them, racism was the discrimination they had known before they had come into consciousness of their lesbian identity, and white lesbian-feminists seemed like they “were denying that race could be as much a source of women’s oppression as sex,” often treating race in a similar dismissive light to NOW’s original discrimination against lesbians within the movement.<sup>71</sup>

#### IV. Oppression and Celebration of Fat Black Women

As previously discussed, the ideal lesbian feminist seemed to be a thin, conventionally attractive, pants-wearing, typically long-haired, white woman. This description depicts heavily how even the most radical groups could regurgitate the same Western beauty standards that had long been a way of measuring women’s attractiveness for male consumption. Immediately, black lesbians did not fit this ideal, but that did not stop many of them from engaging in the lesbian-feminist community actively. It was not as if these descriptors of the ideal lesbian feminist woman were listed somewhere – it was an unspoken reality. Out of this intolerance for varied body types and failure to recognize oppression based on looksist attitudes that fat liberation emerged.

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<sup>69</sup> Cheryl Clarke, "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," from *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. (NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, Inc., 1983), 207.

<sup>70</sup> Faderman, 241.

<sup>71</sup> Faderman, 241.

Black lesbians and their activism regarding beauty standards in the early 1980s did not manifest in the same way as their white lesbian-feminist counterparts. As atrocious as the treatment of fat lesbians was within the movement and outside of it, race played an important role in how bodies were viewed, and how the oppression felt for weight and sexuality was shaped by racial identity. For black women, standards of beauty and appropriate body-size could, at times, vary between mainstream ideals of femininity and the ideals supported by the black community. For example, the Freedom Summer of 1964 played an important role in how straight white women conceptualized their bodies and affirmed their sexual desirability, for “while white men had always “found [her] too large, ... black men assumed [she] was a sexual person,” creating an atmosphere where unconventionally-sized white women were viewed as “physically attractive to black men ... [where they] had never been attractive to white men.”<sup>72</sup> The more accepting nature in black community of bodies that did not fit the traditional thin mold was undoubtedly a reality, but women of size were not necessarily celebrated, fully accepted or without discrimination in black community – and definitely not within the lesbian-feminist community of the 1980s.

Racism has historically shaped how black women have engaged with lesbian community. In the 1930s and 1940s, for example, although lesbian bars emerged in port cities across the US and lesbians began to migrate to urban centers, segregation was still in full force, and thus access to those types of queer communities was inaccessible.<sup>73</sup> However, within black community, even though lesbians were ridiculed, their access to traditionally heterosexual social gatherings such

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<sup>72</sup> Rosen, 103.

<sup>73</sup> Faderman, 127.

as house parties allowed them a chance to meet with other black lesbians.<sup>74</sup> They were more likely to be tolerated for their sexuality within black community than in the hostile, segregated bar environment. This loyalty to the “parent oppression” of being African-American shaped how black women engaged with the women’s movement, as discussed, and shaped how their activism emerged within lesbian feminism. Just as feminism seemed to originally be the concern of white women and their issues, fat liberation emerged in the late 1970s and manifested more fully in the 1980s, but although espousing an intersectional approach, failed to acknowledge the intricacies that black lesbians of size faced due to race, sexuality and oftentimes class.

Although there were calls within fat liberation for engagement with black lesbians, the efforts made within the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s failed to appeal to potential fat black lesbians – largely because, like many lesbian feminist periodicals calling for lesbians of different races to engage with them and share their experiences, the organizations did little beyond stating their commitment to “race and class consciousness.”<sup>75</sup> In the 1983 collection, *Shadow on the Tightrope*, which serves as a cumulation of early fat liberation activism, it includes only two pieces by fat black lesbians, only one which looking critically at how the matrix of oppression shaped her experience of fat oppression. Even so, when looking at the table of contents, it is not clear from the title “There’s nothing to compare with how you feel when you’re cut cold by your own...” that race is the central discussion. In this piece by Nedhera Landers, she articulates the reality of being a black woman – that “[she] was raised to consider [her] Blackness before

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<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 42.

<sup>75</sup> "LFOC Principles of Unity," from *Les'beinformed*. (Minneapolis, MN. November 1979)

anything else [she] might be: a woman, a writer, a lesbian, etc. ... [She] was raised to know that, even if [she] didn't feel [her] Blackness as all-pervading, the predominant culture did."<sup>76</sup>

Being a black woman means living with “double jeopardy,” as articulated by Beale – but living as a lesbian of color means falling prey to “triple jeopardy,” outlined by psychologist Beverly Greene.<sup>77</sup> Living in a homophobic, racist, and sexist society means “being born an outcast in this land of bitter honey,” where “you’re likely to find that you are forever wanting to be someone other than yourself, or you are always wishing to be any place rather than where you are,” as black lesbian feminist Anita Cornwell describes.<sup>78</sup> The lack of racial and queer inclusivity within the women’s movement and the lesbian-feminist movement logically led to reluctance on the part of these women to engage in this activism initially, hence the delay in visible engagement and documentation of black lesbians of size activism. Landers’ piece is exceptional in that, as early as 1983, she clearly acknowledges the oppression she faced under this “triple jeopardy,” in addition to her size. When she engaged in a feminist organization, she was “one of two or three fat (and/or outcast) women who [were] allowed to do the shitwork [for they] weren’t attractive enough Amazons or movement beauties along the lines of Gloria Steinem.”<sup>79</sup> She finally felt like she had found a home in the lesbian movement, only to find that “most of the women were white and playing “dress down” (something [she] didn’t have to play at since [she] didn’t have the money to dress *up*),” demonstrating the obliviousness of early

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<sup>76</sup> Nedhera Landers, "There's nothing to compare with how you feel when you're cut cold by your own..." from *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1983), 223-226.

<sup>77</sup> Beverly Green, “Lesbian women of color: Triple jeopardy,” in L. Comas-Díaz & B. Greene (Eds.), *Women of color: Integrating ethnic and gender identities in psychotherapy*. (New York, NY, US: Guilford Press, 1994), 389-427.

<sup>78</sup> Anita Cornwell, *Black Lesbian in White America*. (US: Anita Cornwell, 1983), 18.

<sup>79</sup> Landers, 224.

lesbian feminism to grasp the realities of black lesbians and their experiences with class and racial structures.<sup>80</sup>

The emergence of black lesbian feminism seemed to provide a haven for Landers, a “warmth” she had not been able to find before – but even in those spaces, there was “still an emphasis on straight hair and ... as thin a body as possible.”<sup>81</sup> The toxicity of dieting and body shaming, Landers found, was “a natural result of the unnatural conditioning ... received while growing up in a patriarchal society,” which promoted stereotypes and dichotomies, such as the fat woman as either “Madonna or whore.” However, for her as a fat, young, childless black woman without a man or desire for one, she could not fit the mold of whore, thus eradicating her “right” to exist – for asserting her presence would have only make her “an object of ridicule.”<sup>82</sup>

Although she sees the flaws in fat liberation, Landers is insistent that at its core, it was “an attempt at eliminating stereotypes, exploding myths, telling the truth, and fighting back ... for [herself] and *all* [her] sisters because, now, *women* are [her] people, [her] own.”<sup>83</sup> For her, fat liberation was one of the many important battles she had to face to assert her right to take up space – however much space that may be – and for her fellow black women, her fellow lesbians, and her fellow fat women to be able to do the same. Aware that each of these battles and attributes were influenced by the others, instead of expressing hesitation about going forward in this activism, she decided instead to assert herself in all of her intersections.

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<sup>80</sup> Landers, 224.

<sup>81</sup> Landers, 224.

<sup>82</sup> Landers, 226.

<sup>83</sup> Landers, 226.

Nedhera Landers' piece emerged early in fat black lesbian feminist activism. That is not to say that black women were not celebrating their bodies, including those of fat black lesbians, during this period. Instead of engaging with Fat Liberation, these women used narrative and poetry to claim their space and celebrate their worth and that of the women they loved and their sexuality. Being a fat woman meant being perceived as "asexual," as a woman without desirability and without the possibility of engaging in intimacy with other women. To be a fat black woman came that same de-sexualization, but racialized with the "Mammy" stereotype, which is a "mythomaniac presentation ... [that] abets their cultural devaluing" through images such as Aunt Jemima, and more recently with the portrayals of "black welfare recipients and other poor black women."<sup>84</sup> These images were pervasive throughout American culture, and for fat black lesbians who were oppressed by them, they had to make an alternative space for themselves – often through literature.

The prime example of this redefinition comes from the writings of Audre Lorde. A self-proclaimed fat, black lesbian herself, her autobiographical *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name* explored her intimacies with other women throughout her life, many of which were women of size.<sup>85</sup> When she talks of their bodies and how they take up space, there is no inkling of a negative connotation. When talking of her mother, she describes "a very private woman, and actually quiet shy, but with a very imposing, no-nonsense exterior. Full-bosomed, proud, and of no mean size, she would launch herself down the street like a ship under full sail ... Not too many hardy souls dared cross her prow too closely."<sup>86</sup> The space she took up and commanded was not

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<sup>84</sup> M.E. Sharpe, *Double Burden: Black Women and Everyday Racism*. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1998), 111.

<sup>85</sup> Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. (Persephone Press, 1982), 25.

<sup>86</sup> Lorde, 17.

seen as a negative, but something of admiration. It is important to note that Lorde's mother was of African-Caribbean descent and could, on occasion, "pass" as white, but her presence as a fat woman of color laid important groundwork for how Lorde perceived her body, as well as the bodies of future lovers.

When Lorde was eighteen, she slept with a woman for the first time. Ginger was another fat woman of color, and her body was something Lorde found enchanting, as shown when she writes of "skin the color of well-buttered caramel, and a body like the Venus of Willendorf ... Ginger was gorgeously fat, with an open knowledge about her body's movement that was delicate and precise."<sup>87</sup> Lorde presents an alternative narrative to the corpulent, flustered stereotype of the Mammy. This woman was viewed as desirable *because* of her size, to that point that Lorde is affectionately recalling the "pads of firm fat upon her thighs, and round dimpled knees."<sup>88</sup> None of this is written with the intention of being cruel, but instead to depict the desire she had for this fat woman, whose "round body" was not a hindrance to intimacy, but instead something Lorde romanticized and adored.<sup>89</sup>

Throughout her story, Lorde casually acknowledges fat women of color in only the best light. She writes of meeting a woman named Diane, who "was fat, and Black, and beautiful, and knew it long before it became fashionable to think so."<sup>90</sup> This woman, Diane, was practicing self-love in a racist, sexist, fatphobic society long before the emergence of a fat liberation movement. Even as Lorde had intimacies with slender women, she recalls an instance with a woman where she found herself thinking that "she was bigger than she actually was, because

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<sup>87</sup> Lorde, 136.

<sup>88</sup> Lorde, 136.

<sup>89</sup> Lorde, 138.

<sup>90</sup> Lorde, 177.

there was a comfortable smell about her that [Lorde] always associated with large women.”<sup>91</sup> As an incredibly well-known black lesbian feminist, her depiction of fat women as being beautiful not in spite of their fatness, but that their body size contributed to that beauty, was a radical move for the early 1980s. Her accessible narrative stood a better chance of reaching a wide variety of women of color, and particularly fat lesbians of color, than the early fat liberation documents could have. Although they were well-intentioned and rife with information that had not been discussed before within lesbian feminist circles, they also appeared to only represent the fat white lesbian experience – particularly if one were to glance over a mention of them in one of the lesbian feminist periodicals.

Mentions of being both ‘fat’ and ‘black’ within the lesbian feminist periodicals of the 1980s often alluded to the works of Grace Nichols.<sup>92</sup> Although a straight, Guyanese woman in London, her collection of works proudly entitled *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* were influential in developing an early celebration of black women of size, and particularly a celebration within fat black lesbians themselves. Her collection opens with the statement that “Beauty/ is a fat black woman.”<sup>93</sup> Nichols did not dance around her point in any way – she was, as early as 1984, celebrating fat black women as the pinnacle of beauty. She eschewed the attempts of mainstream culture to define what fat black women could be, proclaiming “[that] this black woman ain’t no Jemima.”<sup>94</sup> Not only that, but her shortest poem within the collection, entitled “The Fat Black Woman’s Motto on Her Bedroom Door” was co-opted by fat liberationists when writing in

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<sup>91</sup> Lorde, 243.

<sup>92</sup> See *Matrix* (Santa Cruz, CA. April 1987) Vol. 12, Issue 2; Terri L. Jewell’s “A Dangerous Knowing,” from *Sojourner* (August 1988) Vol. 13, Issue 12; *The Women’s Review of Books* (Wellesley, MA. February 1986) Vol. 3, Issue 5.

<sup>93</sup> Grace Nichols, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*. (London: VIRAGO PRESS Limited, 1984), 7.

<sup>94</sup> Nichols, 9.



prominent lesbian periodicals.<sup>95</sup> This brief poem gets straight to the point, for in its entirety, it reads, “IT’S BETTER TO DIE IN THE FLESH OF HOPE/ THAN TO LIVE IN THE SLIMNESS OF DESPAIR.”<sup>96</sup>

Having Nichols’ work referenced and reviewed in lesbian feminist periodicals nationwide allowed for a newfound awareness and celebration of the fat, black, female body – a revolutionary move when the duality of being both black and fat led to a mainstream societal condemnation of being ugly and wholly undesirable. In particular, being fat for white women had meant a de-sexualization that took away from their femininity. For fat black woman, just being black was enough to attack the femininity and force them into a “mannish” light, for “the black women [has not been] permitted the dubious luxury of being feminine.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, the combination of being both fat and black meant a complete renunciation of what society saw as feminine, and thus desirable. Being a fat black lesbian entailed being completely outside of the realm of traditional beauty, and Nichols’ poetry was a radical move to reclaim and redefine beauty for herself and for other women of color.

## V. Activism, Accessibility, and Potential Coalition

One important element in this new appreciation for women’s differences was the development of a large-scale disability rights movement, including disabled lesbian feminists. Disability activism had existed in some iteration since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, though limited to

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<sup>95</sup> Carla Rice, “Flesh of Hope and the Slimness of Despair,” from *Rites for Lesbian & Gay Liberation*. (Toronto, Canada. June 1988) Vol. 5, Issue 2, 15.

<sup>96</sup> Nichols, 18.

<sup>97</sup> Joan Dickenson, “Some Thoughts on Fat,” in *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1983), 47.

specific types of disabilities or people.<sup>98</sup> By the 1970s, however, cross-disability activism began to emerge, first with the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities (ACCD) in 1973 and later, the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund in 1979.<sup>99</sup> Although Richard Nixon had argued for the inclusion of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, making it the first proposed piece of legislation to protect the rights of those with disabilities, the rights of disabled Americans did not receive critical attention until 1977. Until this year the revised sections of the Act which contained Section 504 remained unsigned, which meant that prior to this, there was no guarantee for the rights of those with disabilities against discrimination. Having been engaged in activism for over a decade and tired of the government's ineffectiveness, Judy Heumann and many other disabled activists staged a sit-in at the San Francisco Office of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, sparking sit-ins across the country. The San Francisco sit-in lasted a total of 28 days, and eventually, Section 504 became law.<sup>100</sup>

By 1980, feminists were finding new avenues for coalition between themselves and disabled activists – and increasingly seeing themselves as oppressed by ableism as well. In December of 1979, Judy Freespirit wrote to Vivian Mayer to discuss her new job at the Disability Law Resource Center, established in 1973 in Berkeley, California, one of the first radical civil rights organizations for disabled people.<sup>101</sup> As she worked to bring awareness to people with disabilities of their rights under Issue 504 and how to ensure employer compliance with the new regulations, she found that it was “getting clearer and clearer ... [that] there is a

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<sup>98</sup> Duane F. Stroman, “A Brief History of the Disability Rights Movement,” from *The Disability Rights Movement: From Deinstitutionalization to Self-Determination*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc. 2003. p. 50-64

<sup>99</sup> Duane F. Stroman, p. 65

<sup>100</sup> Richard K. Scotch, "Politics and Policy in the History of the Disability Rights Movement." *The Milbank Quarterly* 67 (1989): 392

<sup>101</sup> “Freespirit, Judy, 1979-1982.” Box 1 Folder 7. Letter dated December 31, 1979. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut.

heretofore unacknowledged link with disabled and fat people.”<sup>102</sup> For *Freespirit*, Issue 504 was a potential legal defense against job discrimination against fat people. When she was interviewed for the job at the Disability Law Resource Center, she was asked whether she considered herself disabled and answered that she “felt disabled by societal attitudes rather than [her] ability to physically perform.”<sup>103</sup> *Freespirit* touched on the fact that disability as a category is socially constructed and admitted that “it’s a sticky situation – like being bisexual and identifying with the gay movement to some extent.”<sup>104</sup> However, the reality was that, through her work and advocacy for the rights of people of different abilities, she came “to think less and less ... of the disabled movement as “theirs” and more and more seeing it as [hers]” for it is “society that disables people to keep the economic system intact ... [leaving] only a few at the top not disabled in some way.”<sup>105</sup>

Judy *Freespirit* not only found herself actively working around the country to help end the discrimination of disabled people by their employers, but was also coming into consciousness of how the social constructions around disability and fat lent themselves to the reinforcement of capitalist institutions – an analysis that is a crucial part of certain lesbian and socialist feminist critiques of institutional oppression. Vivian Mayer, after learning about Issue 504 from *Freespirit*, also drew a correlation between the treatment of fat and disabled people, particularly around the concept of the “therapeutic state” which “sees them both as needing to be cured.”<sup>106</sup> To be fat is to be viewed as ‘less than,’ where people assume that the person of size wants to be

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> “*Freespirit*, Judy, 1979-1982.” Box 1 Folder 7. Letter dated December 31, 1979. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut.

<sup>106</sup> *Freespirit*, Judy, 1979-1982.” Box 1 Folder 7. Letter dated January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1980. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut.

skinny and does not like their body as a result. This shame around their appearance is reinforced by advertisements, medical rhetoric, and is used to exploit them at the hands of capitalist institutions, engaging in surgeries and diets all for the hope of fitting the constructed ideal of appropriate femininity – something inaccessible to both fat women and disabled women. However, just because it is ultimately inaccessible, the exploitation of these women financially in an attempt to attain this imagined state of femininity manifested in discriminatory practices such as “denial of jobs, adequate healthcare, acceptable public accommodations, their sexuality, lovers, respect and pride.”<sup>107</sup>

Job discrimination was a harsh reality for both able-bodied fat women and disabled women. Disabled women faced the stigma of being considered inferior to tasks due to their disability, as well as the complete failure of most employers to accommodate disabled persons – whether that meant their own employees or clientele. However, with fat women, that discrimination was based upon the belief that they were choosing to make themselves unemployable. Thus, their treatment forced them to be “widely regarded as disabled – as less capable than slim people, less healthy,” except the truth behind these claims was not necessary for weight to be “the basis of discrimination.”<sup>108</sup> Prior to the utilization of the 504 regulations, any discrimination faced by women based upon their weight was brushed aside as them asking for it, for it was a choice on their own part, and they had the power to remedy that situation.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> “The Politics of the Fat Underground.” *Lesbian Tide*.

<sup>108</sup> “Discrimination, 1977-1980.” Letter to Roma Stewart, director of the Office for Civil Rights at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare from Vivian Mayer. Dated May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1980. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*.

The links between disability and fat activism within the lesbian feminist movement only increased throughout the 1980s. Although Judy Freespirit appears to be the first to articulate the link, the conception of fat as being a “[disability] that many women deny” began to pervade lesbian feminist periodicals.<sup>110</sup> Even when referring to the oppression they faced, fat activists began to adopt ability-related rhetoric, such as “anti fat able-ism.”<sup>111</sup> The treatment of fat women was being discussed. The assumptions around the ability of fat women and disabled women were echoed in dismissive remarks that often included ableist rhetoric – where being either fat or disabled meant immediate assumptions about one’s capabilities. The chief difference with this rhetoric, however, was while using open slurs against those with disabilities was no longer tolerated in lesbian feminist circles, dismissive treatment of fat oppression remained appropriate – even when not directly attacking fat women themselves. A core example of this is the self-deprecation manifested by women who found themselves complaining to their fat lesbian feminist sisters about weight gain – despite the body size between the two women of being drastically different, but assuming the same level of oppression. Writing in 1989, fat lesbian feminist Tabor wrote that, “if you moan to me about your ten pounds of horrible fat too much, I may ask you to wear this really great sweatshirt that says “Hi! I’m a Lesbian!” for a few years. Then, when you know what it is to be a moving, visible target, we’ll talk about those ten pounds.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Connie Panzarino, “Review: With the Power of Each Breath: A Disabled Women’s Anthology,” in *Off Our Backs*, Vol 14, No 9 (October 1985), 23.

<sup>111</sup> *Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance Newsletter*, 1986, 3; In reference to an organization known as the Fat Dyke Auxiliary, which sought female membership of those who were “fat, anorexic, bulimic, or [who loved] someone that was.”

<sup>112</sup> Tabor, *Richmond Lesbian Feminist Flyer*, Volume 15 Issue 2, February 1989.

Although the justification for discrimination of fat people and people with disabilities varied, Judy Freespirit articulated early on how an important coalition could be made to unite in a mutual struggle against oppression within and as a result of medical institutions and malpractice. She argues that “certainly there is more understanding about medical fuck-ups [within disabled community] since these people are subject to it at least as often, and probably more than most, and many of them are disabled as a result of medical fuck-ups.”<sup>113</sup> Although she was aware that disabled people could be as “fatphobic as everyone else ... [they were] much more open ... to hearing about ... the psychological, social and physical barriers portions of our politics.”<sup>114</sup>

#### VI. Emergence of Jewish Feminist and Jewish Lesbian Feminism

Anti-Semitism, in some shape or form, has remained a persistent persecution since before the Middle Ages. From absurd anxieties around host-desecration to the supposed weakening of Germany prior to WWII, Jews have played a vital role as one of history’s favorite scapegoats.<sup>115</sup> Even with the global raised awareness of the atrocities committed in the name of racial purity and anti-Semitism only a few decades prior, when feminism began to diversify into different types in the 1970s and 1980s, the legitimacy of Jewish feminism was called into question – both by non-Jews and even Jewish women themselves.

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<sup>113</sup> “Freespirit, Judy, 1979-1982.” Box 1 Folder 7. Letter dated December 31, 1979. Vivian Mayer Fat Liberation Archives, University of Connecticut.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Denise L. Depres, “Immaculate Flesh and the Social Body: Mary and the Jews,” from *Jewish History*, Vol. 12, No 1. (Spring 1998), 52.

Whether in Orthodox practices or outside of that, Judaism is a patriarchal religion where “the traditional, textual Jewish past is concerned with the centrality of the male position, with the man’s role within Judaism and his importance to the hegemonic structure, which must constantly be replayed in rituals of sanctification.”<sup>116</sup> Active participation in the faith, particularly in Orthodox practices, would have remained largely inaccessible to women without the activism that emerged by Jewish feminists. Their work directly contributed to the growing trend of women occupying “Jewish leadership positions and ritual equality in the synagogue.”<sup>117</sup> Outside of religious institutions, Jewish feminists fought to combat the expectations placed on their presentation and trajectory in life. Written early in 1971, Jewish women in the *Brooklyn Bridge* detailed how Jewish women exist in a very particular double bind,

“We are expected to grow up assimilating the American image of “femininity” – soft, dependent, self-effacing, blonde, straight-haired, slim, long-legged—and at the same time be the “womanly” bulwark of our people against the destruction of our culture ... Jewish men demand that their Women be intellectual sex objects. So Jewish families push their daughters to get a good education. The real purpose is not to be forgotten however. While PhDs do make Jewish parents proud of their daughters, the universities are recognized as hunting-grounds for making a “good” marriage. Grandchildren assure the race.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Rachel S. Harris, “Introduction: Sex, Violence, Motherhood and Modesty: Controlling the Jewish Woman and Her Body,” from *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues*. No. 23, “The Jewish Woman and Her Body,” Spring-Fall 2012. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012: 5.

<sup>117</sup> Dina Pinsky, *Jewish Feminists: Complex Identities and Activist Lives*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois, 2010: 16.

<sup>118</sup> *The Brooklyn Bridge*, February 1971. Featured in: Anne Lapidus Lerner, ““Who Hast Not Made Me a Man”: The Movement for Equal Rights for Women in American Jewry,” from *The American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 77. (1977), 5.

As unsettling as that is, prior to the emergence of second-wave feminism and their activism within that, Jewish women had a rich history of activism within the United States. Throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “Jewish women participated in and led successive movements for social change in America – as garment workers, trade unionists, suffragists, campaigners of birth control and reproductive rights, anarchists, socialists, communists, civil rights activists, peace activists ... antiwar protesters, and so much more.”<sup>119</sup> As politics grew more radical in the 1960s, both Jewish men and women engaged in the “civil rights, student, antiwar, and New Left movements” in diverse ways – but deemphasized “their ethnicity or religion ... [as having] motivated their social action.”<sup>120</sup>

While many Jewish women were active in the women’s liberation movement, the reality was that their visibility as an “Othered” group was questioned, often due to their ability to “pass” as just being white within the United States. However, in Europe, “Jews were, and in some places still are, defined as racial others.”<sup>121</sup> It is vital to draw attention to the reality that by the time this activism was emerging, WWII and the atrocities associated with it were only mere decades away. The Nazi regime had celebrated their anti-Semitism and used eugenics to delineate ethnic worth, and a worldwide war ensued. To dismiss the struggle of Jewish people as a minority is a bold move in this historical context, if not all historical contexts.

Although Jewish identity within the women’s movement varied from woman to woman, for some expressed a desire to eschew that difference from their identity as a feminist, other

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<sup>119</sup> Joyce Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*. (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 5.

<sup>120</sup> Dina Pinsky, *Jewish Feminists: Complex Identities and Activist Lives*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois, 2010), 14.

<sup>121</sup> Dina Pinsky, *Jewish Feminists: Complex Identities and Activist Lives*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois, 2010), 13.



women struggled to get recognition for their distinct oppression as Jewish women from the larger women's liberation movement. This is particularly unsurprising when considering the focus of the women's movement on those issues more centered around the lives of white, heterosexual women and their experiences under patriarchy. However, unlike identifying as a racial other that is more visible, these women ran the risk of claiming their identity in feminist spaces – and having the outcome be a complete delegitimization of their feminist stances.<sup>122</sup> As a result of this casual anti-Semitism, Jewish feminism began to emerge.

Jewish Feminism as it took shape in the 1970s was often treated with disdain from the larger Jewish community, much like mainstream feminism within American patriarchal structures overall. However, as “religious Jewish feminists successfully critiqued ancient patriarchal customs, women's liberationists [began to] support their attempts to overhaul masculinist systems within Jewish religion and community life.”<sup>123</sup> Even with this recognition on occasion, Jewish feminists and their concerns were largely brushed aside until the following decade. As the 1980s began, a newfound concern in the women's liberation movement began where mainstream feminists became fearful and critical of their own anti-Semitism within the feminist community.<sup>124</sup> This concern coincided with popular culture's shift to deemphasizing anti-Semitism in public discourse, likely causing feminists to reconsider their own biases and prejudices, for often the struggles deemphasized in patriarchal popular culture were taken up within feminist circles. The result of this new concern was heated debate among radical feminists about anti-Semitism in various arenas, such as conferences, “meetings at home and abroad and in the feminist press.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Antler, 9.

<sup>123</sup> Antler, 9.

<sup>124</sup> Antler, 10.

<sup>125</sup> Antler, 10.

As Jewish identity and how it fit into feminist activism and discourse began to be more seriously contemplated, the reality was that many feminists who were Jewish maintained a reluctance to admit their Judaism in various arenas of their activism – or at least to deemphasize it in order to better legitimize another struggle. This occurred for largely two reasons – feminists of Jewish descent who felt the “Jewish-ness first” methodology “masked the privileges of whiteness” and those who knew that proudly claiming their Jewish identity in interlocking ways with other oppressions ran the risk of delegitimizing their argument, due to the reality of both underlying anti-Semitism and the privileges that arose from being able to pass as white.<sup>126</sup>

Being a lesbian complicated Jewish feminism for several key reasons. The original disdain for lesbians within the women’s movement as best articulated with Friedan’s claim of them as a “lavender menace,” in addition to the struggle for recognition of Jewish oppression within the feminist movement, made their struggle as lesbians distinct. Within Jewish community, homophobia manifested in culturally-specific ways. In most Jewish community, LGBT folk were not welcome in synagogues, Jewish law failed to acknowledge that lesbians could even exist, and there was an underlying belief that a woman’s purpose centered on her ability to marry well and have children – to be the stereotypical “Nice Jewish Girl,” as the Jewish lesbian feminist anthology alludes.<sup>127</sup> Invisibility within the feminist activism and within Jewish groups “[had] a trivializing, disempowering and ultimately debilitating effect on its members.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Antler, 20.

<sup>127</sup> *Nice Jewish Girls*, ed. Evelyn Torton Beck. (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, Inc., 1982).

<sup>128</sup> Evelyn Torton Beck, "Why Is This Book Different from All Other Books?" from *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*. (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, Inc., 1982), xiv-xv.

Jewish lesbian feminism raised awareness for the myriad of discrimination forced upon them due to their intersectional identities. The aforementioned anthology, a culmination of this early Jewish lesbian feminist activism, highlights aspects of this oppression. The editor Evelyn Torton Beck describes that for many Jewish lesbian feminists, the best tactic against this anti-Semitism was to “remain silent ... [for] ... possibly then things won’t get much worse.”<sup>129</sup> She, herself, had done just that – but lesbian feminist culture kept perpetuating cruel stereotypes of Jewish women. For example, Beck recalls how in *Rubyfruit Jungle*, the preeminent and essential lesbian novel, the narrator describes “the fat Jewish girl Barbara Spangenthau as someone who “always had her hand in her pants playing with herself, and worse, she stank. Until I was fifteen I thought that being Jewish meant you walked around with your hand in your pants.”<sup>130</sup> Although this had unsettled her early on in her lesbian feminism, Beck feared risking being divisive, for “[she] wanted too much to belong.”<sup>131</sup> Even as she was on the brink of publishing this anthology, she struggled to muster the courage to protest the 1981 book Noretta Koertge’s *Who Was That Masked Woman?*, despite its intensely anti-Semitic depiction of Jewish people as “ostentatiously rich, superficial, and sexually promiscuous.”<sup>132</sup> Even with this anti-Semitism in celebrated lesbian literature, that underlying belief that Jewish women should keep quiet about this discrimination pervades – for their struggle was not as obvious as that of Black lesbian feminists, and they had the “luxury” of passing as white – which Beck questions, “Why is the possibility of “passing” so insistently viewed as a great privilege open to Jews, and not understood as a terrible degradation and denial?”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Beck, xxiii.

<sup>130</sup> Beck, xxiv.

<sup>131</sup> Beck, xxiv.

<sup>132</sup> Beck, xxv.

<sup>133</sup> Beck xxiv.

For many of Jewish lesbian feminists of this anthology, “the experience of coming out as lesbians was a crucial step toward ... coming out as Jews.”<sup>134</sup> Beck articulates that “the experience of being outside the bounds of society as a lesbian makes a woman more willing to acknowledge other ways in which she is outside. It becomes increasingly harder to ignore the signals of outsiderhood.”<sup>135</sup> These women came from various backgrounds, locations and experiences, but the “single most insistent theme ... directed at non-Jewish lesbians and non-lesbian Jews, is the desire ... to be “all of who we are.””<sup>136</sup> For these women, they did not want to hide their identity, but instead embrace it, and to not be made to feel ashamed that because they could “pass” as white, they should tolerate anti-Semitism – whether that entails direct regurgitation of Jewish stereotypes or complete delegitimization of their oppression as Jewish women within radical feminist movements.

## VII. Fat Liberation as Jewish Lesbian Feminist

Within the lesbian feminist fat liberation movement, the overwhelming majority of activists and leaders involved in the late 1970s and the early 1980s were Jewish women. Vivian Mayer, Judith Stein, Judy Freespirit, Rearae Sears, Lynn Mabel-Lois, Elana Dykewomon, Elly Janesdaughter – they were all Jewish lesbian-feminists. Though their devoutness varied, these women shared that common origin of Jewish community and culture. It is not that being a Jewish woman lent itself to being overweight. However, unlike being a lesbian or being Jewish, there is no way to simply “pass” as being thin. Weight is visible, tangible and society makes sure to

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<sup>134</sup> Beck, xv.

<sup>135</sup> Beck, xv.

<sup>136</sup> Beck, xxx.

remind women when they have it, so that they could never even mentally pass as being appropriately sized. The belief within Jewish lesbian feminism to radically claim “all of who we are,” likely laid essential groundwork for the emergence of fat liberation. Similar to the dismissal of anti-Semitism within the lesbian feminist movement, the protestations of fat lesbian feminists often became delegitimized under the pervasive belief that it was a “choice,” and the heinous stereotypes which surround fat people – in particular, fat women.

Published in 1983, *Shadow on a Tightrope* was an anthology describing the experiences, realities, oppressions and truths about living as a fat woman.<sup>137</sup> Though many of the arguments and facts verge on being universal to fat women across the board, the reality was that the majority of these pieces were written by Jewish women. Though not all of them are from Jewish lesbian feminists, for at least two of the Jewish women were married to men at the time they were writing, there is a definite demographic in the authorship. The essays in the book, according to Mayer, represent “the first ten years of the fat feminist liberation movement.”<sup>138</sup> With the vast authorship being Jewish lesbian feminists, it is safe to say that the emergence of this newfound awareness to fat oppression within feminist circles was started through the concerns of Jewish feminists, and only grew from there.

Some of these early Jewish lesbian feminist fat liberationists proudly and openly claimed their identity of being both a Jewish lesbian feminist and a fat lesbian feminist liberationist. Prolific activists such as Judith Stein openly engaged with the Jewish feminist and lesbian feminist communities in conferences throughout the 1980s.<sup>139</sup> She wrote extensively throughout

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<sup>137</sup> *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writing by Women on Fat Oppression*, Ed. Lisa Schoenfelder and Barb Wieser, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1983).

<sup>138</sup> Vivian F. Mayer, “Forward,” from *Shadow on the Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1983), x.

<sup>139</sup> Lesbian Herstory Archives Subject Files, “Jewish Lesbians: Conferences, July 17, 1979 – June 24, 2001.” Folder 07240.

the 1980s, “[publishing] a number of articles on fat and Jewish Feminism, and [writing and circulating] an information sheet about fat liberation at the Jewish Feminist Conference.”<sup>140</sup>

Elana Dykewomon, a prolific writer, editor of *Sinister Wisdom* and activist, was another essential part of early Jewish lesbian feminism and fat activism.<sup>141</sup> She decried the anti-Semitism that was rife in the lesbian feminist community at the time, drawing attention to the reality of the KKK’s continued attack on Jewish spaces.<sup>142</sup> Judy Freespirit, the original founder of Fat Underground in LA, core member of Fat Chance, the dance group for lesbians of size, and active organizer in fat liberation, constantly found herself ““coming out,” taking stands, as she [dealt] with each facet of her own oppression.”<sup>143</sup> Writing and performing throughout her life, she never shied away from her identity, notorious for proudly proclaiming, “Yes, I am a fat woman. Yes, I am a lesbian. Yes, I am an incest survivor. Yes, I am a Jew.”<sup>144</sup> Freespirit aggressively lived being all that she was, representative of that underlying thread of the Jewish lesbian feminist ethos of being “all that [you] are.”<sup>145</sup>

Not all of these women were initially out and proud about being a fat, Jewish lesbian feminists. Whether they were aware of their exclusion of this facet of their identity or not, many of the key players of fat liberation did not address their identity as fat women in their works. The most jarring example of this is Vivian Mayer. The founder of Fat Liberator Publications, she was instrumental for the widespread dispersion of fat liberation info packets and the organizing that

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<sup>140</sup> Charlotte Cooper, *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*. (Bristol, England: HammerOn Press, 2016), 133.

<sup>141</sup> Noelle Hannerhan, “Sinister Wisdom Moves West,” in *Bay Area Women’s News & Community Calendar*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, p. 25. May-June 1987 (Oakland, CA).

<sup>142</sup> Elana Dykewomon, “Dear Dykes: Enclosed Is a Poem, Fifteen Minutes from the Kar Kare Clinic,” in *The Lesbian Insider/Insighter/Inciter* Issue 9, December 1982, p. 28 (Minneapolis, MN)

<sup>143</sup> Cathy Cade, *A Lesbian Photo Album: The Lives of Seven Lesbian Feminists*, (Oakland, CA: Waterwomen Books, 1987), 88.

<sup>144</sup> Cathy Cade, 88.

<sup>145</sup> Beck, xxx.

followed them. However, she did not mention her Jewish identity at all within this material. Much of her work was based in the late 1970s and early 1980s, around that tremulous time where lesbian feminists were negotiating whether they saw anti-Semitism as a real oppression when so many Jewish women could “pass” as just being white. Although she was in contact with many Jewish lesbian feminists of size, her work centered around solely the concepts of fat oppression and providing scientific analysis behind the supposed “facts” of the diet industry and the medical profession. It was not until the mid-1980s that her religion and cultural background even came to light, but under quite different circumstances.

Writing in *The Lesbian Inciter* in 1984, Mayer describes how she “[has] begun to identify strongly with religious Jewish women – there is more on the side of the *mehitza* (curtain) than meets the eye... but these are clearly not lesbians.”<sup>146</sup> For Mayer, engaging in connection and activism with those women who did not fit the woman-identified woman mold of lesbian feminism, who actively engaged in heterosexual society, was important for her identity as a Jewish woman – even at the cost of having to renounce the separatism of lesbian feminism. However, she goes on to express that she hopes her “change in affiliation won’t discredit [her] work in fat liberation in the eyes of fat dykes, but if it does, that’s a growing pain for [them] both.”<sup>147</sup> For Mayer, as vital as fat activism was to her identity, her loyalties could not only be with women. The Jewish community and the women within it played an important role in her identity and her sense of home. This withdrawal of Mayer from a distinctly lesbian feminist fat activism is emblematic of a shift overall in how fat liberationists negotiated their separatism.

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<sup>146</sup> Vivian Mayer, “Dear Women,” from *The Lesbian Insider/Insighter/Inciter*, Issue 12, p. 10. (Minneapolis, MN: February-March 1984).

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

### VIII. Separatism to Sisterhood: Fat Oppression vs. All Women

Throughout the latter half of the 1980s, the call for dyke-only participation in consciousness-raising groups and organizing against fat oppression began to shift. As early as 1986, the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Archives (ALFA) began adopting the rhetoric of Judith Stein and calling for people to join this activism who were “fat, anorexic, bulimic, or [loved] someone who [was] (of course, women only).”<sup>148</sup> This trend toward a more inclusive, yet “women’s only” space emerged across the US in the late 1980s, where “women of all sizes [were] welcome” at events hosted by lesbian organizations.<sup>149</sup> Though this shift was not immediate, the fact that strict separatism loosened to include the oppression of fat women as a whole details how pervasive the fat liberation movement was, and how their rhetoric – even if nearly a decade old – was incredibly influential throughout the 1980s for both lesbians and otherwise.

The activism of these fat lesbian feminists laid essential groundwork for the fat activism of the 1990s and the eventual emergence of the body positivity movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By aggressively asserting their right to take up space and exist, at first within the lesbian feminist movement and then out in the world, they were able to reclaim their identity for themselves from a society that assumed their capability on first glance. Their ability to romanticize themselves, to celebrate their worth and the worth of the women around them was distinctly woman-identified and was essential for fostering the community ethos necessary to spread fat activism. Patriarchal society runs on the belief that women must be desirable in traditional ways and must compete with one another to attain that desirability. These women questioned what it meant to be

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<sup>148</sup> Pam M., “Fat Liberation,” from *The Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance Newsletter*, (Atlanta, GA: 1986), 3.

<sup>149</sup> *The Newsletter*, Vol. 6 Issue 9. (Durham, NC: February 1987); See also Gwyn Marilyn’s piece in *Sojourner* Vol.14 Issue 4 (December 1988); “Fat Dykes Erotic Show” in *The Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance Newsletter* (1987), 50 and 53.



appropriately feminine, desirable, Jewish, black, lesbian, and a myriad of other identities and ideals that were entrenched in the pervasive fatphobia of mainstream society.

The coming decade would bring greater awareness to the struggles of women of size. Important periodicals and activist groups emerged all over the country in the 1990s, even going as far as Alaska with *Klondyke Kontakt*. While much of the fat activism of the 1980s still seemed divided along racial and ethnic lines, the coming decade led to the emergence of periodicals and zines like *FaT GiRL* for those of “fat dyke identity,” but the definition was broad enough that it could include “genderqueer and trans identities.”<sup>150</sup> Fat activists even began to push the envelope by depicting fat women as sexual identities, engaging in erotic activities and being seen as desirable in radical ways.<sup>151</sup> Important to this, however, is that though this activism celebrated the fat female form, it still maintained a core ethos of being decidedly queer.

The women of Fat Liberation lived in a world where fatphobia ran rampant. To this day, it plays a major role in how people of size engage with the world. However, they faced extreme discrimination, ostracization, alienation, humiliation and a myriad of other terrible realities for trying to legitimize their struggles as fat, lesbian women. Even within the most radical of movements, the prejudices learned from a young age shaped how radical these movements could actually become. For these women to fight to claim their right to exist, to protest discrimination in the workplace, medical institutions and their communities, to adamantly claim their fat identity for themselves and make it their own took courage and vulnerability. Their activism had an immense impact for decades to come, and they should be celebrated for their strength and

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<sup>150</sup> Charlotte Cooper, *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*. (Bristol, England: HammerOn Press, 2016), 147.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

determination, and for redefining what it means to be a woman – appropriate femininity be damned.