ABSTRACT

Queer-identified women have played a prominent role in fat activism since the inception of the fat liberation movement in the 1970s, and continue to do so today. While the presence and work of queer women in the fat acceptance movement is widely noted, recent scholarship in the emerging field of fat studies appears to accept the prominence of such women within the movement as axiomatic. Few fat scholars attempt to identify what precisely the connections between queer and fat activism are, or why queer women may be particularly empowered to participate in the fat activist movement.

The following project aims to map queer women’s influences in the fat activist movement by examining the recent work of queer fat women activists. Focusing in particular on two recent case studies—the work of San Francisco Bay Area-based performance troupe Big Burlesque, and FemmeCast, a New York-based Podcast billing itself as “the queer fat femme guide to life”—I examine the mixture of camp aesthetics, lesbian identity politics, and postmodern theories of the body that queer fat women have transported from their communities to fat activism. Queer fat women bring the language, performance media, and identity politics of their communities into their engagements with fat activism, in order to resignify fatness as the basis for a new, empowering, and potentially subversive identity position.

This process of resignification, however, is partial, incomplete, and carries ambiguous consequences. Queer fat women activists bring decentralized, postmodern, campy techniques to the movement that enable a critique of narrow health and beauty standards, without installing new standards in their place, and that recognize the necessity of self-acceptance as a prerequisite for greater collective action. At the same time, the transgressive potential of these tactics are often bounded by an appeal to a narrow identity politics, and by an overreliance on self-
determination that forecloses the possibility of collective, coalitional politics. Unless queer fat women activists learn to adequately historicize, and open the boundaries of, their identity politics, they may never be able to make the transition from a politics of self-empowerment to a strategy of confronting and transforming the fatphobic mainstream.
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INTRODUCTION

A 2002 San Francisco Chronicle article, authored by Jesse Hamlin, describes the Bay Area’s Big Burlesque troupe as “a burlesque show that fills the stage.” Praising a recent performance as an unpolished but enthusiastic success, Hamlin notes that while Big Burlesque drew an audiences of varied sizes and genders, the crowd “leaned toward the large and lesbian.”

The “large and lesbian”—and bisexual, and queer—have played a prominent role in fat activism since the inception of the fat liberation movement in the 1970s. Several of the movement’s most prominent activists are queer, bisexual, or lesbian-identified women. Even many fat women activists who do not experience attraction to other women—most notably, heterosexual fat activist Marilyn Wann—sometimes describe themselves as “politically queer straight chick[s]” in order to indicate the influence that queer women within the fat activist movement have borne on their fat identities and activist strategies (FemmeCast Episode 1, “The Queer Fat Femme”). The myriad contributions of queer women to the movement have led several fat activists—including fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco and the founders of the website Fatshionista.com—to describe fat activism as a particularly “queer-flavored” movement (Fatshionista.com), inspired on all sides by the actions, identity politics, and political language of queer women.

While the presence and work of queer women in the fat acceptance movement is widely noted, recent scholarship in the emerging field of fat studies appears to accept the prominence of such women within the movement as axiomatic. Noting, for instance, that one of the first major texts of fat activism, *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*, was primarily authored by lesbians, Le’a Kent declares that “the connections between lesbian
activism, feminist activism, and fat activism continue to the present day” (138). Kent does not, however, elaborate on what precisely these connections are, or why lesbians, in particular, may be empowered to make them.

To the extent that such explanations exist, they are largely anecdotal, or presented as equally self-evident. For example, in the documentary *Big, Beautiful Burlesque*, human sexuality scholar Lacy Asbill accounts for the large number of queer women both on the stage and in the audience of fat burlesque performance by explaining that lesbians have “greater acceptance of diverse bodies.” Certainly, the fact that queer women constitute a critical mass, possibly even a majority, of both fat activist performers and their audience suggests that they may be particularly receptive to activism that reconfigures the fat female body as both desirable and oppressed, rather than as abject and pathological. Asbill’s assertion, however, offers no evidence that the queer women she encountered during her research on fat burlesque are emblematic of queer women in general, or that queer women are necessarily more accepting of “diverse bodies” than other groups. Furthermore, even if queer women are especially sympathetic to the aims of fat activism, Asbill’s explanation still poses more questions than it answers: why might queer women be predisposed to accept body diversity, and by extension, the claims of fat activists? What are the connections between queer, lesbian, feminist, and fat activism, and what techniques do queer fat women activists employ to articulate these connections? How might these techniques, and their reception in the communities queer fat women inhabit, challenge dominant understandings both of body size and of fatness’ intersection with other facets of identity? Finally, are these techniques effective in confronting widespread fatphobia in American culture?
The following project aims to answer several of the above questions by examining the recent work of queer fat women activists. It is situated at the intersection of fat activism and several other activist discourses: feminist critiques of the body and beauty standards, the legacy of radical lesbian feminism, and queer activist movements. I define fat activism here as a social movement aimed at deconstructing the ways in which fat people are culturally positioned as excessive, immoral, undesirable, and abject (Braziel 2001; Kent 2001); fighting for an end to social, legal, and economic discrimination against fat people; and exposing the weight-loss industry as an unfounded and ultimately ineffective assault on the corpulent. Within the scope of this project, I do not claim to prove that queer women are better predisposed to accepting the claims and goals of fat activism than other groups. By examining the strategies of queer fat women activists, however, I observe that queer women bring the language, performance media, and identity politics of their communities into their engagements with fat activism, in order to resignify fatness as the basis for a new, empowering, and potentially subversive identity position.

Throughout this examination, I continually return to and critique the position of the “queer fat femme”: a configuration of identity positions specific to, and endemic in, queer women’s urban communities in the present day. Amongst queer women in urban centers, both fat activism and a revival of butch-femme identity politics are experiencing a surge in popularity. Femme activists are capitalizing on this popularity by uncoupling femme and butch, and reconfiguring femme as “a femininity that is transgressive, disruptive, and chosen” (Harris and Crocker 3) as opposed to simply butch’s normatively gendered other. For the majority of the activists I introduce in this project, the identity “queer fat femme” provides a productive means for addressing both femmes’ and fat people’s troubled relationships with the politics of visibility.
The purpose of this project, therefore, is to interrogate the ways in which lesbian feminist, queer, and femme discourses and strategies emerge in fat activism. In so doing, I wish to assess the political efficacy of these specific strategies on a number of levels. First of all, I am interested in the extent to which queer women’s contributions to fat activism grant individual fat women access to personal empowerment: the ability to “feel their own strength” (Reed 299) and, by extension, feel they are worthy of the social changes the fat activist movement demands. Secondly, I wish to interrogate the ways in which these particular strategies aid fat activists in creating a powerful and supportive movement culture. Finally, I will evaluate the ability of these strategies to effectively and productively confront a fatphobic, heterosexist, and misogynist American mainstream. I begin this project by tracing the ways in which fat-positive discourse emerges historically from both the lesbian feminist and queer movements, taking its cues from both.

Lesbian Feminism and Fat Liberation

One of the principal reasons previous fat studies scholars have failed to fully interrogate the connections between the fat and queer women’s movements is because many have assumed that fatness is intrinsically connected to queerness, prior to any activist’s attempts to theorize such a connection. Prominent fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco—herself a queer-identified fat woman—makes this claim in *Revolting Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*, when

1 The term “misogyny,” primarily understood to denote a hatred and fear of women, has taken on new meanings as both femmes and transgendered women have gained increasing prominence in queer women’s communities. Transsexual writer and activist Julia Serano is primarily responsible for this shift in meaning: her book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* points out that even within queer, feminist, and progressive communities, “people who are feminine, whether they be female, male, and/or transgender, are almost universally demeaned compared with their masculine counterparts” (Serano 5). Serano therefore argues for an expanded definition of misogyny that encompasses both gender identity and gender expression: misogyny as the “tendency to dismiss and deride femaleness and femininity” (14). Throughout this project, any references to “misogyny” follow Serano’s definition.
she asserts that the sexually active fat body is inherently queer due to fatness’s troubled relationship to sexuality. LeBesco writes:

> Queer acceptance/activism and fat acceptance/activism have much in common, given that fatness may be read as a mere subset of queerness. Because fat people are not supposed to be sexy or sexual, “any sex involving a fat person is by definition ‘queer,’ no matter what the genders of any partners involved” (LeBesco 88-89).

This reconfiguration of the fat body as inherently queer and subversive may enable some fat people to conceptualize their bodies as a source of personal and collective empowerment, and as such, it should not be dismissed out of hand. What such a discursive move may conceal, however, is the ambivalent reception queer women’s communities have given to fat bodies. LeBesco herself makes this clear later in the same essay, countering the popular belief that lesbians are more likely to find fat bodies desirable by noting, “one needs only to peruse the personal ads of the local progressive weekly to see that this is not necessarily the truth” (89).

Vivian F. Mayer, a principal figure in the women’s fat liberation movement of the 1970s, sings the praises of lesbian feminism’s influence on fat liberation, only to temper her praises with the following observation:

> The expectation [that fat women would be liberated under lesbian feminism] was satisfied up to a point. That point came when fat women sought lovers among other women. Then the “support” of slim lesbian feminists often revealed itself to be liberalism that easily turned into rejection (Mayer xiv).

The connections between queerness and fatness, therefore, are not intrinsic, nor are they universally recognized by women in lesbian and queer communities. What is more readily agreed upon within these communities is that where fat bodies are accepted, queer women display a tendency to “radically politicize” (LeBesco 90) the experience of being fat in a culture that reveres slenderness and demands a constant policing of the borders of one’s body. The history of the fat liberation movement, and its subsequent circulation in queer women’s
communities, reveals a rich body of theory that draws on the second-wave feminist adage that “the personal is political” to argue for greater acceptance of the corpulent.

The fat liberation movement of the 1970s did not originate within feminism. In the foreword to the famous 1983 feminist anthology *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings By Women on Fat Oppression*, Vivian F. Mayer writes that fat liberation preceded feminist attempts to theorize and challenge the prevailing politics of body size:

The feminist fat liberation movement is not the only alternative to weight loss groups. There are a number of fat people’s clubs around the world…. One in the USA, the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (NAAFA)\(^2\), pre-dates feminist fat liberation by a few years, and was involved in the movement’s early development (Mayer x).

NAAFA’s politics and methods, however, frequently came under fire by feminists, people of color, and other activists for being inadequately confrontational. Fat studies scholar Marcia Chamberlain writes that for early fat activists, “social revolution was not an option or a goal. Although they borrowed some of the strong language of the 1960s to talk about themselves, they were careful to define those words in ways that would make them seem safe and would make their movement seem harmless” (Chamberlain 105). Rather than adopt a politics of confrontation, NAAFA and other liberal fat activists focused primarily on advancing an agenda of self-acceptance, and on providing a social venue for fat people (Mayer xiii). One fat feminist, Judy Freespirit, dismissed this approach as “do[ing] volunteer work for the Cerebral Palsy Association to show fat people were nice” (Freespirit, quoted in Kent, 137).

What feminists did bring to the fat liberation movement were the first attempts to offer “a cogent and radical analysis of fat oppression” (Mayer x). Mayer describes the genealogy of fat liberation as follows:

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\(^2\) Now known as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance.
The fat women’s liberation movement… grew out of the blending of two sources, radical feminism and radical therapy…. Radical therapy is fiercely critical of mainstream psychotherapy. Such therapy is seen as an instrument of social control that upholds oppressive conditions… by convincing the victims that the problems lie within themselves. The proposed “cure,” is, in fact, to adjust to oppressive conditions. *Echoing the feminist slogan “the personal is political,,”* radical therapy seeks to relate ordinary “personal” problems such as shyness or anxiety to broad political injustices (x-xi; emphasis mine).

Mayer clearly demonstrates here that, while fat activism may have chronologically preceded feminist attempts to treat the politics of size, to the extent that fatness has been subjected to a radical political treatment, it has benefited from, and drawn on, feminist discourses. Furthermore, while radical fat activism took its cues from the fat acceptance, radical feminist, and radical therapy movements, it also sought to address gaps in those discourses. Mayer co-founded the Fat Underground, the first fat feminist organization, in 1972, as a response not only to the non-confrontational politics of NAAFA and other fat acceptance groups, but also as a response to prevailing beliefs in radical feminism and radical therapy—most notably summarized by *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* author Suzie Orbach—that fat was a consequence of pathological overeating, to which women were driven by sexist oppression. As an alternative to these assumptions, Mayer and fellow radical therapists presented the following points:

1. Biology, not eating habits, is the main cause of fat.
2. Health problems of fat people are not inherently due to fat, but are the result of stress, self-hatred, and chronic dieting.
3. Weight loss efforts damage health, almost never “succeed” except temporarily, and should not be used.
4. Food binges are a natural response to chronic dieting.
5. The role of a radical therapist is to help fat women feel good about themselves as fat women and stop trying to lose weight. To accomplish this, radical therapists should learn and teach accurate information about fat women’s health and nutrition. They should provide emotional support for women on binges to continue eating and stop feeling guilty! (Mayer xii).

Despite her misgiving about the ways in which fat women were received by lesbians as potential lovers, Mayer cites lesbian feminism—a movement she calls “the dominant creative
force in radical women’s liberation” (xiv)—as a primarily positive force in the early fat liberation movement. The terms on which she describes lesbian feminism’s positive influence, however, may reveal some of the gaps in second-wave lesbian feminist analysis, and determine why it often fell short in offering fat women the empowerment and sexual self-realization many of them craved:

Lesbian feminism goes beyond opposing sexism to affirming the community of women—a feminism based on the strongest and the most intimate bonds of love between women…. The companionship of other women offered fat women a social environment in which—often for the first time in their lives—they could be loved for their intelligence and personalities, and their “ugliness” according to conventional standards could be overlooked. Indeed, these conventional standards were attacked as oppressive to women. In theory, then, lesbian feminism offered a haven wherein a fat woman could affirm her beleaguered sense of womanhood and could almost forget that she was fat (xiv; emphasis mine).

Mayer attempts briefly in this passage to address the contingency and arbitrariness of contemporary beauty standards by emphasizing that the equation of slenderness with beauty is not absolute, merely “conventional.” She fails, however, to assert—and, possibly, even to imagine—that conventional beauty standards could be replaced with a new discourse that affirms the beauty and the sensuality of the fat female body. The best lesbians can hope for, Mayer assumes, is that women in lesbian feminist communities will so deeply love fat women’s “intelligence and personalities” that they will be able to “overlook” their “ugliness,” enabling them to “forget” they are fat. Lesbian feminist communities, by this understanding, are more welcoming to women than other feminist communities due to their ability to understand and deconstruct the imperative to slenderness, but they stop short of being able to fully embrace fat women as lovers.

A broader look at the lesbian feminist movement reveals that the advantages and disadvantages of lesbian feminism for fat women in particular, are the advantages and the
disadvantages of lesbian feminism more generally. Other prominent lesbian feminist thinkers, such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, proclaim the subversive power of women loving women, and of the adaptation of a lesbian identity, but fail to adequately account for the corporeal experiences of lesbianism. For example, Rich’s famous essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” argues that lesbianism is not merely an “alternative lifestyle,” but that “lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also an indirect attack on the male right of access to women” (Rich 25, 26). In other words, the simple act of identifying as a lesbian constitutes a confrontation of compulsory heterosexuality—of the “conventions” of womanhood. It offers women a “haven” in which they are not limited by conventional gender roles.

While Rich’s rhetoric may provide lesbians with a means to reconceptualize their identity in an empowering way, however, her account of lesbian identity suffers from inadequate attention to questions of lesbian embodiment. Citing Audre Lorde, Rich acknowledges that the erotic is part of the project of attacking “male right of access to women,” but she ultimately defines the erotic in strangely incorporeal terms:

As we delineate a lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself; as an energy not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has described it, omnipresent in ‘the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic,’ and in the sharing of work; as the empowering joy (Rich 27).

Rich’s contention that a feminist, empowering sense of the erotic may be “unconfined… solely to the body” enacts an evasion of the bodily dimensions of feminist eroticism. She contents herself with simply describing the erotic as “diffuse energy,” and spends no time discussing how such a sense of the erotic might also feel physically. Rich and her contemporaries tell us what it
may mean to take up a lesbian identity, but they do not tell us how it feels to inhabit a lesbian body.

The influence of radical lesbian feminism on the burgeoning fat liberation movement, consequently, carries both positive and negative effects. Lesbian feminism’s insistence that the personal is political, rhetorics that enable women to reconfigure their marginalized identities as both personally empowering and intrinsic challenges to the status quo, and the legacy of early feminist challenges to the weight loss paradigm persist in fat activism to this day. At the same time, as Mayer demonstrates, lesbian feminist evasions of the corporeal in favor of more diffuse definitions of the erotic leave fat women and their slender allies without a means to reconceptualize a new, positive relationship with their bodies, or with the bodies of other fat women. It is not until the emergence of queer activism in the 1990s, and the subsequent queering of fat politics, that the issue of the corporeal in fat activism becomes fully addressed.

Queering Fat Politics

The advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic—and of ACT UP, Queer Nation, the Lesbian Avengers, and other direct action groups founded in response to the epidemic—fundamentally altered the discourse and techniques of gay and lesbian organizing. Responding to the lack of governmental attention given to HIV/AIDS, and to the institutionalized homophobia that enabled government silence, newly emergent queer activist groups developed a political strategy of “semiotic warfare” (Reed 185) to call attention to homophobia’s deadly consequences. Uniting under the name “queer,” which “at once reminds those using it of its oppressive origins as a homophobic epithet, ressignifies it as a positive identity, and articulates a queering (blurring) of the lines between gay and straight, normative and oppositional” (Reed 185-186), groups such as
ACT UP worked to shift cultural understandings of same-sex desire and of the “normal” through a combination of provocative visual media and incursions into “public”—and thus, implicitly heteronormative—space.

Although ACT UP and other queer direct-action organizations are most frequently associated with gay men, lesbians were implicated at all levels of queer activist work from its inception. Social movement scholar T.V. Reed writes in his book, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle*, that “although they were among those least at risk for contracting HIV/AIDS, lesbians had gotten deeply involved in AIDS activism from the beginning, for reasons ranging from personal connections with gay men to solidarity in the face of homophobia that had done so much to worsen the crisis” (199).

Additionally, lesbians and feminists lent a sort of theoretical support to the queer movement, insofar as ACT UP’s attempts to challenge the medical establishment in particular drew “inspiration from the women’s health movement that grew out of second-wave feminism” (193). This material and theoretical interchange between lesbian feminists and the queer direct-action movements, while not always unproblematic or egalitarian, was continuously reciprocal.

Ultimately, the visual, discursive, and spatial techniques of queer activist groups influenced activism specific to queer women—and, by extension, to the fat activist movement via queer fat women.

Perhaps the most important legacy of queer activism for the fat activist movement was its insistence on reclaiming public space. Recognizing that “the longstanding, puritanical practice of keeping sex talk private was proving deadly,” and that public spaces “are precisely the points where (hetero)normativity is constructed” (Reed 200, 202), groups such as ACT UP consciously
chose to infiltrate public spaces, in order to demonstrate how both taboo and the presumed heteronormativity of the public sphere conspired to kill sexual minorities.

ACT UP’s most famous method of public space reclamation, public same-sex “kiss-ins,” reflects a new understanding in queer politics that acknowledging the corporeal experience of same-sex desire, and recognizing the political importance of the queer body, is crucial to shifting the often fatally homophobic discourse that surrounds same-sex desire and sexual acts. This emphasis on the corporeal also helps to address some of the theoretical gaps in lesbian feminism and women’s fat liberation, replacing a diffuse, incorporeal sense of the female erotic with a newfound insistence on the primacy of the body. Queer-identified fat activists, such as performance artist and zine author Nomy Lamm, have echoed this insistence in their writings:

> It’s not good enough for you to tell me that you “don’t judge by appearances”—so fat doesn’t bother you. Ignoring our bodies and “judging only by what’s on the inside” is not the answer. This seems to be along the same line of thinking as that brilliant school of thought called “humanism”: “We are all just people, so let’s ignore trivialities such as race, class, gender, sexual preference, body type, and so on.” Bullshit! The more we ignore these aspects of ourselves the more shameful they become and the more we are expected to be what is generally implied when these qualifiers are not given—white, straight, thin, rich, male. It’s unrealistic to try to overlook these exterior (and hence meaningless, right?) differences….

> And I don’t want to be told, “Yes, you’re fat, but you’re beautiful on the inside.” That’s just another way of telling me that I’m ugly, that there’s no way that I’m beautiful on the outside…. My body is me. I want you to see my body, acknowledge my body (Lamm 138).

While queer fat women activists, like their fat lesbian feminist counterparts, attempt to deconstruct conventions that equate slenderness with beauty, they do so in part by pointing out and critiquing the language by which the possibility of fat beauty is evaded. In the process, they point to the ways in which similar evasions in lesbian feminist discourse also create an impossible space for fat women. Rather than advocate for safe spaces in which fat women can be loved for their personality and “forget” that they are fat, queer fat women activists demand
that fat women’s bodies be recognized as beautiful and sexually desirable. As this project will demonstrate, they enact these demands in part through the deployment of public performance.

The fat activist movement also displays parallels to, and demonstrates the influence of, queer politics at the level of language, as well. Just as ACT UP and other organizations reclaimed the term “queer,” historically a hateful epithet, queer fat activists vocally insist on reclaiming the word “fat.” Although this reclamation precedes the current wave of fat activism—as we have seen, the women in the 1970s fat liberation movement chose this term, as well—present-day fat activism is marked by a much more vocal reclamation of “fat,” and by a pointed insistence that the term “fat” is meant to counter the prevailing, pathologizing discourse of the so-called “obesity epidemic.” Marilyn Wann’s famous zine, FAT!SO?, explicitly details why the term “fat” is preferable to terms such as “overweight” and “obese.”

Perhaps you resist the F-word because it doesn’t seem like a pleasant thing to say. I would argue that it’s actually the least offensive, simplest word on the subject. Consider the unpleasant alternatives:

**Overweight.** Over *whose* weight? Everyone has their own unique weight that’s right for them. The right weight for some people means being fat, just like other people are naturally thin. Even doctors, nowadays, admit that those height/weight charts are bogus, so there really is no weight to be over. Aside from being judgmental and mean, the word *overweight* is just plain meaningless.

**Obese.** This is a doctor’s fancy way of saying, “I’m looking at you, and I find you disgusting. Would you like to buy this ineffective but wildly expensive weight-loss treatment? If you don’t, you could die. Besides, my country club membership fees are due” (Wann 19; emphasis in original).

In this passage, Wann demonstrates three principal strategies that fat activism shares with the queer movement. First, by distributing this deconstruction of the rhetoric of fat via a zine—a self-penned, photocopied, self-distributed magazine—she demonstrates a commitment to “‘do-it-yourself” organizing” (Reed 200) that also characterized the work of groups like ACT UP. Secondly, her attention to the *language* of fat, and her insistence that reclaiming a term historically used to hurt is actually preferable to its more euphemistic counterparts, reflects a
queer preoccupation with the work that language can do, and espouses a similar faith in the power of reclaiming language. Finally, her objections to terms such as “overweight” and “obese” center on the ways in which the medical profession utilizes these terms in order to scientifically legitimate the marginalization of fat people and maintain the medical-industrial complex. In this way, Wann and other fat activists display “an understanding of the social construction of disease” (Reed 192) largely developed by HIV/AIDS direct action groups.

Fat activists have also adopted a “concern for the politics of outing” (LeBesco 92) from queer direct-action groups. To simply be fat, according to this discourse, is not enough. One must be “out” about one’s fatness; that is, one must “acknowledge [one’s] own fatness and… embrace it” (92). Fat activists specifically and deliberately appropriate the language of coming out; and a number of attitudes and actions, ranging from open self-acceptance to deliberate interventions in public, function as markers of having “come out” as fat.

The language of outing may appear problematic and unfairly appropriative to some, given the presumably visible nature of body size versus the relative invisibility of one’s sexuality. The use of the term, however, has not drawn the ire of queer activists whose politics do not focus on size. Furthermore, the work of several fat activists and queer theorists suggests that the relationships of sexuality and body size to visibility is not actually so straightforward; and in fact, that there are more parallels between the two than is readily apparent. Fat scholar Lesleigh Owen argues that fat people do not experience a constant sense of visibility due to their size, but rather, “alternating feelings of invisibility and hypervisibility” (Owen 2008) as a result of the fatphobia. British fat activist Charlotte Cooper expands on this idea by suggesting that vacillation between invisibility and hypervisibility fat people experience is due largely to their lack of power over how fat signifies. Cooper traces a media trope she deems the “Headless Fatty
phenomenon”: that is, the frequent accompaniment of mainstream media articles on the obesity epidemic with “a photograph of a fat person, seemingly photographed unawares, with their head neatly cropped out of the picture” (Cooper 2007). According to Cooper, the Headless Fatty phenomenon renders the fat body visible as a symbol, but invisible as a person:

[T]he body becomes symbolic: we are there but we have no voice, not even a mouth in a head, no brain, no thoughts or opinions…. [W]e are presented as objects, as symbols, as a collective problem, as something to be talked about [while] fat people’s own voices, feelings, thoughts and opinions about what it is to be fat are entirely absent from the discourse (Cooper 2007).

The glut of Headless Fatty images sends fat people the message that their bodies are the objects of constant surveillance and policing: that their images may be used at any moment, against their will, to represent epidemic, disorder, and disgust; and that they are powerless to prevent being thus represented. Fat people may be hypervisible objects, constantly subject to a prurient, disapproving gaze, but mainstream images limit their visibility as subjects.

In their famous essay on fat drag queen Divine, “Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little-Understood Emotion,” queer theorists Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggest that the language of “outing” is just as applicable to fat people as it is to queer people precisely because both groups share a similar relationship to visibility. Just as the Headless Fatty phenomenon denies fat people’s right to be the final arbiter of what their body signifies, the circulation of homophobic rumor places the ability to determine who is queer—a determination based not simply on desire, but often stereotypically inferred from mannerisms and modes of dress—as well as what that “queerness” means, outside the hands of queer people. Moon and Sedgwick argue that the closet and the coming out process are more about the circulation of knowledge than about visibility:

Gay people coming out to the people around us report, much more often than encountering a response of simple surprise, experiencing instead the relief that
one’s associates no longer feel entitled to act from the insolent conviction of knowing something about one that one doesn’t oneself know. The closet, that is, seems to function as a closet to the degree that it’s a glass closet, the secret to the degree that it’s an open one. Nonsensically, fat people now live under the same divisive dispensation; incredibly, in this society everyone who sees a fat woman feels they know something about her that she doesn’t herself know. If what they think they know is something as simple as that she eats a lot, it is medicine that lends this notionally self-evident (though, as recent research demonstrates, erroneous) reflection the excitement of inside information; it is medicine that, as with homosexuality, transforming difference into etiology, confers on this rudimentary behavioral hypothesis the prestige of a privileged narrative understanding of her will (she’s addicted), her history (she’s frustrated), her perception (she can’t see herself as she really looks), her prognosis (she’s killing herself). The desire to share this privileged information with the one person thought to lack it is more than many otherwise civilized people can withstand….

It follows from all this, however, that there is such a process as coming out as a fat woman. Like the other, more materially dangerous kind of coming out, it involves the risk—here, a certainty—of uttering bathetically as a brave declaration that truth which can scarcely in this instance ever have been less than self-evident. Also like the other kind of coming out, however, denomination of oneself as a fat woman is a way in the first place of making clear to the people around one that their cultural meanings will be, and will be heard as, assaultive and diminishing to the degree that they are not fat-affirmative. In the second place and far more importantly, it is a way of staking one’s claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of the representational contract between one’s body and one’s world (Moon and Sedgwick 305-306).

The language of coming out, applied both to queer people and to fat people, does not reflect a simple relationship to visibility, but rather, the willingness to engage in a struggle over representational power. In appropriating the politics of outing, fat activists display a recognition that renegotiating “the representational contract between one’s body and one’s world” is, under postmodern cultural conditions, inseparable from the project of gaining cultural visibility. The theoretical underpinnings of this recognition—namely, that various authoritative voices in a culture, such as the medical profession and the mass media work to “transform difference into etiology,” and that any attempt to counter fatphobic voices will require a media-savvy attention to image and narrative (Reed 183)—are directly inspired by the work of queer direct-action movements.
Overview

The remainder of this project traces specific rhetorical, visual, and media-based tactics queer fat women activists have deployed in order to challenge, and provide alternatives to, fatphobic discourse. All of the strategies I analyze benefit from lesbian feminist initiatives to politicize the personal and to reconfigure marginalized identities as empowering challenges to the status quo; and from queer emphases on the visual, the spatial, the corporeal, and the politics of representation. All of them refer, visually and rhetorically, to past moments in queer, gay, and lesbian history, in order to position fat politics as a valid issue both for queer communities and for American culture as a whole. The specific media, rhetorics, and theoretical assumptions of each tactic, however, radically affects its ability to provide a meaningful point of resistance to institutionalized fatphobia, and to expand its range beyond the borders of queer women’s communities.

My first case study, “Fat Camp: The Performance-Based Politics of Big Burlesque,” examines the work of the late fat activist Heather MacAllister, and her plus-size burlesque troupe, Big Burlesque. Though Big Burlesque was the first troupe of its kind, it inspired a larger fat burlesque scene, consisting of several fat burlesque troupes around the nation. Fat burlesque, I argue, constitutes an important contribution to queer fat activism, not merely because it is a tactic that foregrounds the beauty and sensuality of fat bodies, but also because of its reliance on the discourse of camp—a discourse historically associated with gay men, but also appropriated by feminists, that relies on artifice, plays with stereotypical mass media images, and foregrounds marginalized groups’ ambivalent relationships with the media. The camp techniques of Big Burlesque, I argue, create a pleasurable and effective medium within which queer fat women
may articulate their objections to the fatphobic mainstream, insofar as these techniques reveal as
artifice any attempts to instill an absolute standard of female beauty. At the same time, I argue
that because camp is an ambivalent discourse—one that relies on mass media stereotypes as
surely as it challenges them through play; one that simultaneously signifies alienation from and
resistance to dominant American culture—its abilities to provide a basis for the direct
confrontation of institutionalized homophobia. Big Burlesque resolves those ambivalences by
emphasizing resistance to the American mainstream over gaining access to it, creating in the
process an “abeyance structure” (Reed 305) that keeps the goals of fat activism alive in its
audiences until more direct resistance becomes possible.

The second case study, “‘You Know It When You See It’: Queer Fat Femmes and the
Fantasy of Fixed Visibility,” examines FemmeCast, a New York-based monthly Podcast—that
is, a downloadable online broadcast—that bills itself as “the queer fat femme guide to life.”
Using the Podcast to examine queer fat femme discourse more broadly, this case study explores
the emergent field of femme theory and its influence on queer fat women activists. Femme
history, I argue, indicates a troubled relationship to visibility similar to that of fat people and of
queer people more generally, and queer fat femmes manipulate the language of visibility in order
to reconstitute their fatness as a visual marker of femme defiance. In the process, queer fat
femmes challenge misogynist rhetorics that position the femme as a passive bearer of oppressive
gender roles within queer women’s communities. This challenge, however, ultimately depends
on what I call the “fantasy of fixed visibility”: the fantasy that queer fat femmes do not merely
have the agency to enter the struggle over their own representation, but can determine absolutely
the ways in which femme identity signifies. Although the fantasy of fixed visibility provides
individual queer fat femmes with a sense of empowerment through enabling them to present their
identity as inherently subversive, it thwarts their ability to pose a larger challenge to fatphobic discourse, by abjecting other forms of queer and straight femininity, by marginalizing the experiences of femmes of color, and by privileging self-help over collective action.

Ultimately, the queer fat femme strategies I examine in this project, as well as recent queer fat women’s activism more generally, privilege personal empowerment and community building over direct confrontation of the fatphobic American mainstream. The insular focus of queer fat women’s activism need not inhibit the fat activist movement more generally: it may, as I have argued, constitute an abeyance structure that galvanizes politically aware queer fat women in preparation for a future period of greater challenge to the dominant culture. Such communities may also establish a relative safe haven that activists can return to following periods of greater civil unrest. Finally, community establishment in and of itself can constitute a challenge to the mainstream: as T.V. Reed notes, movement cultures can “offer alternative models of what our collective and civil lives might be like, as part of their argument about the ways we have continually fallen short of creating a just, egalitarian community” (xv). I argue, however, that it is important that the construction of an insular queer fat women’s community not constitute an end unto itself: even as queer fat women build these communities, it is important to question how they will act in concert with other communities; how they invite or preclude alliance with other groups; and whether the emotional, cultural, and theoretical structures queer fat women build place them in a strategic position to confront mainstream opposition at a later historical moment. The interchange between fat activism and queer social movements is ongoing and constantly expanding to other activist communities. It will be the responsibility of queer fat women to maintain continued awareness of the dimensions and consequences of this interchange, and to ensure that it is as expansive and egalitarian as possible.
CHAPTER ONE
FAT CAMP: THE PERFORMANCE-BASED POLITICS OF BIG BURLESQUE

Queer women’s contributions to the fat activist movement do not benefit only from discursive frameworks employed by queer feminists to call attention to their own marginalization. They also make use of representational strategies employed by lesbians and feminists to articulate the political dimensions of their existence. Such strategies are frequently marked by the prioritization of challenging dominant cultural representations over seeking legal or economic change, and by the recognition that pleasure and artifice may be harnessed for activist purposes.

Prominent fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco argues that these strategies repeatedly emerge in the fat activist movement, and that they can be directly traced to the work of queer women’s direct action groups. In “Queering Fat Bodies/Politics,” LeBesco cites the Lesbian Avengers as a major source of inspiration for present-day fat activism:

[F]at activists plan events that focus less on official policy and more on repositioning fat in the cultural imaginary. They borrow tactics from the Lesbian Avengers… which aim to publicly present a fatness that is not the victim of bad genes or its own lack of will. Through this rubric, we can begin to envision fat play, rather than fat pathology (83; emphasis in original).

The emphasis on play as an antidote to the pathologization of fat bodies—repositioning fat bodies as a source of public pleasure as opposed to private shame—clearly does take its inspiration in part from the direct action queer politics of the past twenty years. Harnessing play and pleasure as a source of activist energy, however, is not a recent innovation within queer or feminist communities. What LeBesco actually describes here is the discourse of camp which, while present in the direct action techniques of the Lesbian Avengers, has a much longer
history—a history that connects feminism, gay and lesbian subcultures, and battles over the politics of representation.

Deployed as a political and pleasurable representational strategy since at least the early twentieth century, camp is normatively defined as a gay men’s discourse. Critics have, for the most part, assumed that by appropriating and parodying popular culture texts in which they have not been overtly or fairly represented, gay men use camp to articulate both their resistance of, and their desire for access to, culture-making apparatuses. While women icons—for example, Mae West and Madonna—figure prominently in texts identified as camp, their contributions to camp strategies have historically been either dismissed or ghosted. As film scholar Pamela Robertson points out in her book, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*, most critics of camp assume that

the exchange between gay men’s and women’s cultures has been wholly one-sided; in other words, that gay men appropriate a feminine aesthetic and certain female stars but that women, lesbian or heterosexual, do not similarly appropriate aspects of gay male culture. This suggests that women are camp but do not knowingly produce themselves as camp and, furthermore, do not even have access to a camp sensibility. Women, by this logic, are objects of camp and subject to it but are not camp subjects (5).

Robertson counters this assumption by asserting the existence of feminist camp, “which runs alongside—but is not identical to—gay camp” (6), in which women do consciously produce themselves as camp subjects and spectators. Women performers and consumers, Robertson argues, find camp appealing because of “its potential to function as a form of gender parody (10):

[C]amp’s attention to the artifice of… images helps undermine and challenge the presumed naturalness of gender roles and to displace essentialist versions of an authentic feminine identity. By this account, the very outrageousness and flamboyance of camp’s preferred representations would be its most powerful tools for critique, rather than mere affirmations of stereotypical and oppressive images of women (6).
While feminist camp makes use of artifice and flamboyance in much the same way as gay camp does, its aesthetic does not completely overlap with that of gay camp. Feminist camp is “rooted in burlesque,” a feminized theater genre that “articulates and subverts the ‘image- and culture-making processes’ to which women have traditionally been given access” (9; emphasis mine).

It is no surprise, then, that queer fat women activists frequently make use of the discourse of camp—and in particular of the burlesque genre—in order to play with and reposition previously oppressive images of fat women. One of the most renowned and respected groups to deploy camp and burlesque in such a manner is Big Burlesque, a San Francisco Bay Area-based burlesque performance troupe. Founded in 2002 by queer activist Heather MacAllister—known onstage as Ms. DeMeanor and Reva Lucian—Big Burlesque boasted a fat and predominantly queer cast. Big Burlesque, and its touring show, the Fat Bottom Revue, became known as the “only gender-inclusive, exclusively plus-size Burlesque ensemble” to tour nationally (BigBurlesque.com). The troupe performed and led fat burlesque dancing workshops across the country until MacAllister’s untimely death of ovarian cancer in February 2007. In its wake, Big Burlesque left behind a visual and discursive articulation of a distinctly queer and campy politics of the fat body—one rooted in pleasure, artifice, and a subversive flaunting of the excesses that mark stereotypical images of the fat woman.

The following chapter examines the camp strategies of Big Burlesque in order to analyze what the discourse of camp, and the artistic dimensions of queer and feminist activism more generally, have to offer a politics of fat acceptance. Camp and burlesque, I argue, offer fat activists the opportunity to deconstruct the discourse of the obesity epidemic—a discourse that presents itself as objective and timeless—by historicizing assumptions about body size, health, and beauty; and by strategically deploying excess and artifice in order to challenge the
mainstream boundaries of acceptable female sexuality and size without installing new boundaries in their place. At the same time, camp’s ability to confront is limited by its status as an ambivalent discourse—one that both legitimates and challenges the images and stereotypes it references, and that simultaneously promotes acceptance by and resistance to mainstream culture-making systems. By examining the specific techniques of Big Burlesque, we can understand what the advantages and disadvantages of camp itself are to the fat activist movement.

Productive Anachronisms and the Burlesque Genre

As an artistic and political strategy, camp is in part marked by, and useful for, its strategic deployment of the cultural products, genres, views, and stereotypes of previous historical eras. Robertson describes camp as “a mode of productive anachronism [and] a form of recycling” (142).

The camp effect occurs at the moment when cultural products (for instance, stars, fashions, genres, and stereotypes) of an earlier moment of production have lost their power to dominate cultural meanings and become available, “in the present,” for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste (Robertson 4-5).

While the productively anachronistic nature of camp reflects the marginal position of those communities who employ it for political purposes—a position that only enables them to gain interpretive power over given cultural texts once they “have lost their power to dominate cultural meanings”—the use of productive anachronism in camp may constitute a powerful means of critiquing present-day views and assumptions. By bringing the popular texts of previous eras to bear on current popular discourse, camp historicizes those texts, revealing their underlying assumptions to be tenuous and temporary. In the process, camp techniques point to the equally tenuous nature of present-day cultural meanings.
Beauty standards, including discourses specifying the proper shape and size of the female body, are one set of “cultural products” available for camp redefinition. Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo points out that not only are current demands for female slenderness a historically specific phenomenon, but that they are also tied to anxieties about women’s social gains:

[W]omen… are most oppressed by what Kim Chernin calls “the tyranny of slenderness,” and… this particular oppression is a post-1960s, post-feminist phenomenon. In the fifties, by contrast, with middle-class women once again out of the factories and safely immured in the home, the dominant ideal of beauty was exemplified by Marilyn Monroe… [and] the voluptuous, large-breasted woman (Bordo 141, 159).

Bordo goes on to conclude that “anxiety over women’s uncontrollable hungers appears to peak… during periods when women are becoming independent and are asserting themselves politically and socially (161). The imperative to slenderness is thus revealed to be not only a historically specific demand, but also a form of antifeminist backlash: the pursuit of slenderness, an intensely personal and time-consuming preoccupation, is intended to keep women focused on their own perceived shortcomings, rather than on the larger social injustices plaguing them.

The performers of Big Burlesque attempted to draw attention to the tyranny of slenderness as both a historically specific and an antifeminist phenomenon through their deployment of an anachronistic performance genre. Burlesque, due to its association with historical eras that valued fatness or curviness as beautiful, enabled the performers in the Fat Bottom Revue to expose the historically specific, politically toxic nature of size demands on women. In the troupe’s many interviews and press appearances, members cited this association as a major source of the genre’s political appeal. For example, Christina “Cookie” Woolner, who performed with Big Burlesque as Cookie Tuff, and who co-founded the burlesque duo Chainsaw Chubettes, makes the historical connections between burlesque, body size, and antifeminist anxieties explicit in the documentary *Big, Beautiful Burlesque*:
There was [sic] hundreds of women in something called the Amazon March—and this was in about 1860, 1861. Yeah, this is a great example of just how the women looked then. I mean, these were some big women. They were tall, they had thick, sturdy thighs, they were—and the bigger their thighs were, sometimes they would even pad their thighs—like, having big thighs and arms and big busts was kind of all about the day. They were really considered the height of beauty for their time.

This is actually a burlesque troupe where, for a while, the man who ran it only wanted to hire women who weighed over 200 pounds. And then later on it was only women who weighed over 150. Then the 20th century began, and the times started changing. I just think of bigger women taking up more space and that’s kind of threatening to—let’s face it, we still pretty much live in a patriarchal culture.

By bringing the camp discourse of burlesque into the present, Big Burlesque was able to illustrate the contradictions between women’s perceived social freedoms and their lack of freedom to take up physical space. Big Burlesque’s use of productive anachronisms enabled the troupe to envision a future in which women can occupy a larger body and fight for other forms of social advancement.

During an appearance on SPARK, an arts and culture program on KQED, a San Francisco Bay Area-based public television channel, Heather MacAllister defined burlesque simply as “the art of the striptease.” This seems to have been an accepted definition of burlesque within the troupe, and to the extent that Big Burlesque members understood burlesque as “the art of the striptease,” they foregrounded the overt display of fat bodies and sexualities in their explanations of Big Burlesque’s transformative potential. It is, however, important to tease out the specific history of burlesque as an art form in order to understand why the members of Big Burlesque might favor a more anachronistic form of striptease performance over its more recent manifestations.
In fact, the history and nature of burlesque is more complicated than the phrase “art of the striptease implies. Film scholar Eric Schaefer’s essay, “The Obscene Seen: Spectacle and Transgression in Postwar Burlesque Films,” explains that while “the striptease dance is generally considered the single most distinguishing feature of burlesque theater… it did not become a standard element in burlesque until the mid-1920s. It is this period, from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, that is paradoxically considered as both burlesque’s ‘golden age’ and an area of ‘nudity, smut, and decline’” (Schaefer 43). Burlesque’s history, however, reaches at least back to 1860—roughly the same time that the Amazon March Woolner describes reaches the height of its popularity. At that time, burlesque was primarily understood as a form of comic entertainment that included “parodic critiques of various types of theatrical entertainment and acting styles, as well as inversions and exaggerations of gender roles… grounded in an aesthetics of transgression, inversion, and the grotesque” (Robertson 28).

Burlesque’s investment in parodic critiques of gender and genre becomes more important when one considers that burlesque “was the most thoroughly feminized form of entertainment in the history of the American stage” (ibid). In addition to playing all the roles and constituting the visual spectacle of burlesque theater, women were “frequently the sole… writers of the material” (Buszek 144); consequently, burlesque constituted one of the few spaces in the Victorian era within which women could make their voices heard. According to art historian Maria-Elena Buszek, burlesque performers utilized this space to promote “a female based critique of modern society” (155). Burlesque performers deployed a series of techniques, both on- and offstage, that enabled them to create, negotiate, and mark as desirable a spectrum of bourgeois female identities between the binary poles of prostitution and domestic “true womanhood.” In particular, the pin-up photographic genre—a genre heavily used and manipulated by burlesque
actresses as a form of self-promotion—aided burlesque performers in not only disrupting binaries of bourgeois womanhood, but also of moving these transgressions out of the theater and into the public sphere.

Burlesque, and its photographic representations, constituted a space in which women could construct and promote what one actress called “awarishness” (142): sexual self-awareness, and a sense that one’s sexual identity and image “can be self-constructed, self-controlled, and changing” (160). At the height of burlesque theater’s popularity in the Victorian era, before the paparazzi made such a process impossible, burlesque actresses enjoyed a great deal of control over their image and the means of their self-promotion. This enabled them not only to construct self-images imbued with sexual agency, but also to manipulate public discourses that considered photography “scientific and objective proof of the subject’s essential personality” (157) in order to create “objective” images of themselves as multi-faceted and ever-fluctuating. In an era during which, as Bordo reminds us, a more voluptuous body ideal may have come at the expense of women’s restricted social influence, burlesque granted women a stage from which to enact a pleasurable and comic critique of their social status.

Big Burlesque, however, did not frequently cite the Victorian era of burlesque theater as its inspiration—their equation of burlesque with the striptease suggests a greater affinity with the burlesque films of the mid-twentieth century. While this era of burlesque has been equated with the genre’s decline, film scholar Eric Schaefer argues that the same principles of awarishness, parody, and female-based critique that carried the genre during the nineteenth century, persisted in the post-World War II era. Despite its emphasis on the striptease, he claims, the postwar burlesque film was a surprisingly transgressive genre:

The display of women for erotic contemplation might seem, at first glance, to fit within certain normative gender patterns of the 1950s, when dominant social and
cinematic practices worked to contain female sexuality and to naturalize gender roles based on an active/male and passive/female construction while negating other forms of desire. However… in their original historical context burlesque films displayed considerable ambiguity rooted in the variability of gender distinction and the polymorphous quality of desire conveyed by the films. As such, the burlesque film contained the potential for social transgression, clearly revealing that we cannot immediately or always assume that “the gesture of stripping in relation to a female body is already the property of patriarchy” (Schaefer 42).

According to Schaefer, postwar burlesque challenged 1950s notions of female sexuality as intrinsically passive. The burlesque striptease invoked an exhibitionistic rather than a voyeuristic scopic regime: it was a genre in which the film “was directly confronting viewers with the sight of women who were uninhibited in their sexual expression,” and in which “the woman on screen met the gaze of the spectator, acknowledged that gaze, and defiantly invited him [sic] to look further” (53). In burlesque films, female strippers, performing under exaggerated, campy stage names, appeared onstage in outrageous, “hyperfeminine” (55) costuming, which was then progressively, though rarely entirely, removed. In this sense, what is displayed, parodied, and deliberately taken off by the burlesque performer is “a construction, the feminine, which is valued by the dominant society” (57). By exaggerating the display of, and ritualistically removing, the accoutrements of femininity, the burlesque performer exposes gender as spectacle, performance, and artifice. At the same time, however, because she rarely removes all of her clothes, the burlesque stripper refuses to replace that spectacle with another female “essence.” This makes her both a desirable and a frightening figure.

During its heyday, Big Burlesque played with this flaunting and removal of feminine signifiers in several ways, utilizing the striptease as both a form of feminism camp criticism and as a means of deconstructing fatphobic discourse. Sometimes, in the course of launching this critique, they drew on aesthetics and discourses less readily available to “classic” burlesque
performers. For example, during an April 2003 performance at the Knockdown Dragout Curvalicious Cabaret in San Francisco, performer Cherry Midnight, lampooned contemporary postfeminist obsessions with the ass-kicking girl and the woman who can “have it all” by donning, and then removing, a Wonder Woman costume. Much present-day burlesque performance, however, relies on aesthetics more conventionally associated with classic eras of burlesque. In the process of citing these aesthetics, Big Burlesque deployed them in new ways, in order to critique and expose as artifice current discourses about the discipline and proper contours of the female body.

Corsets are particularly instrumental in this critique. Chavé Alexander, who has performed with Big Burlesque and with Oakland-based burlesque troupe Harlem Shake as Allota Boutté, discusses the significance of the corset in fat burlesque:

The fun thing about performing is that you can choose your costume; you can morph your body. I can put on a corset, and have psycho hourglass. Or I can not wear the corset, and drape fringe underneath my belly roll, and let it all shake, and have everybody scream for it (Big, Beautiful Burlesque).

In Alexander’s description, the corset, historically used to tame and confine the female body into the “proper” shape, becomes just another accessory to be removed, imbuing its wearer with the potential to play with a standard of feminine that is ultimately revealed as excessive and artificial—hence Alexander’s use of the term “psycho” to describe the hourglass shape her corset gives her. Corsets, and the discourse of proper feminine shapes and boundaries they imply, are deployed, only to be cast aside later—either through the striptease, or through subsequent performances in which the performer may choose costuming that accentuates her belly roll or other features of her “improper” fat body. In the process, the fat burlesque performer exposes discourses of proper femininity, proper sexuality, and proper body size as spectacle and artifice.
The burlesque genre’s emphasis on feminine artifice and female agency makes it a particularly useful performance genre for fat women attempting to negotiate their bodies and sexualities. Because burlesque does not demand nudity of its performers, it is up to the individual performer how much she shows her audience. This not only provides a safety net for the fat woman performer still struggling to take joy in her body, but also grants performers and audiences alike access to a full-bodied eroticism: an eroticism that celebrates the entire body, and not just certain culturally overdetermined parts. Cookie Woolner describes her reaction as a viewer of burlesque to the full-bodied eroticism burlesque offers:

I saw this one woman… and I’d never been so excited to see someone just take off a glove. Like the time she took to take it off, and the way she was just, like, caressing herself and touching herself and teasing the audience just to take off one glove, it was—I was on the edge of my seat, and I didn’t realize that, like, anything like that—something so simple could, like, make me feel so excited or so, like, “I can’t wait to see!” You know, I just knew she was going to have a hand underneath.

Because burlesque, and particularly fat burlesque, is a genre where the capacity for sexual agency and “teasing the audience” is marked as more sexually desirable than the simple exposure of body parts, it is a genre in which the entire body—even a hand or a belly roll—can be imbued with power and sexual desirability. By citing anachronistic standards of what constitutes the erotic, Big Burlesque was able to critique present-day beauty standards, lending itself to the project of aiding fat women in claiming a sense of positive embodiment and the right to take up space.

The Femme-Butch Aesthetics of Big Burlesque

Big Burlesque billed itself as a multi-gendered burlesque troupe—as, indeed, one of the only multi-gendered burlesque troupes in the nation. During her keynote speech at the 2006
conference for the National Organization of Lesbians of Size (NOLOSE), Heather MacAllister highlighted the multi-gendered nature of the troupe in order to emphasize its difference from other fat burlesque troupes:

There were other “plus-size” burlesque dancers performing in New York [prior to the formation of Big Burlesque], but the difference was almost coastal—in New York, they had a height requirement—no it wasn’t 4’11”, you had to be at least 5’8” to audition for the Glamazon Girls, and they were strictly feminine. San Francisco style, we had ‘em short, tall, femme, butch, trans, and Glenn [Marla, a performance artist and self-described “tranny superstar” who is well-known in queer fat activist circles].

While this is technically true—Big Burlesque did feature some butch and transgendered performers, such as Rudan Raunchee—the public face and aesthetic of the troupe was overwhelmingly female, and overwhelmingly femme. The rise of fat acceptance in queer women’s communities is contemporaneous with a revival within these communities of butch-femme aesthetics, and the discourses and techniques of butch-femme communities permeated the work of Big Burlesque, as well as the work of queer fat women’s activism more generally.

What unites both burlesque and butch-femme practices is “the discourse of camp” (Case 36). Just as burlesque utilizes stylized and anachronistic practices in order to enable women to play with and thus distance themselves from stereotypical images of women, the play of gendered signifiers taken up by butch-femme cultures constitutes an effective means of “ironizing and distancing the regime of realist terror mounted by heterosexist factions” (37). In other words, butch-femme exposes heterosexuality and its attendant gendered positions as spectacle and artifice, just as burlesque exposes the artificiality of hegemonic femininity. Consequently, the combination of feminist, queer, and fat camp embodied by a fat burlesque troupe that incorporates butch-femme aesthetics enabled Big Burlesque to do two things. First, it enabled the troupe to question prevailing discourses regarding gender, sexuality, and body size
without installing new, equally narrow discourses in their place. Second, it enabled queer fat women to pursue sexual currency without foregoing sexual agency. I discuss the dimensions and consequences of both techniques below.

Resisting Realism

Camp is a representational strategy that ironically distances and even actively resists realism, recognizing it as a hegemonic project that seeks to essentialize and thus fix marginalized identities. Camp differs markedly from other representational strategies taken up by marginalized peoples, in that it does not take as its objective the production of more “realistic” or “accurate” portrayals of those peoples. Consequently, it sidesteps the pitfalls of the politics of visibility outlined by performance scholar Peggy Phelan—pitfalls that stem from what Phelan describes as the conflation of the “representational” and the “real” (106). She writes:

The relationship between the real and the representational… is a marked one, which is to say it is unequal…. [T]he always already unequal encounter nonetheless summons the hope of reciprocity, and equality; the failure of this hope then produces violence, aggressivity, dissent. The combination of psychic hope and political-historical inequality makes the contemporary encounter between self and other a meeting of profound romance and deep violence (107).

Equating the representational with the real is a violent act because the “real” always exceeds the scope of the representational. Representational strategies that advocate greater realism in the portrayals of marginalized communities run the risk of perpetuating marginalization within the communities they seek to render visible, placing those communities under further scrutiny, and replacing narrow stereotypes with equally narrow community standards.

For fat women, this equation of the real with the representational has additional insidious effects. In the mass media, female corpulence is frequently contained within the discourse of the “real woman”: most notably in the film Real Women Have Curves and Dove’s Campaign for
Real Beauty. Fat women are “real” women, but the objective of the mass media is to promote ideal beauty and to encourage women to, as Lacy Asbill claims, “experience their bodies as projects that they work on through their whole lives” (Big, Beautiful Burlesque). In this discourse, the “reality” of fat women is precisely what confines them to the margins.

The performers of Big Burlesque thus consciously employed camp techniques in order to distance themselves from any claim to “real” womanhood. One of the most obvious examples of this use of camp as a distancing technique is troupe members’ adaptation of stage names. These stage names are blatantly artificial constructions, and range from the outrageously punny (Cyndi Irresistible, Mia More) to the brazenly sexual (Pussy Flambé). Some performers utilize multiple pseudonyms for multiple personas: for example, Heather MacAllister performed both as Ms. DeMeanor and Reva Lucian. Combined with the dramatic changes of costume, music, and demeanor from one striptease routine to the next, this use of blatantly artificial stage personas allowed Big Burlesque performers to deploy a representational politics that asserted the urgency of multiplying images of fat sexuality and agency—sometimes multiplying these images several times on the same body—in order to argue for the validity of these images without standardizing or fixing them.

Such techniques both fuel, and are fueled by, a discourse that defines taking up a femme or butch mode of self-expression as inextricable from learning to embrace one’s fat body. For example, during her interview in Big, Beautiful Burlesque, Cookie Woolner observes that her journey as a fat burlesque dancer is connected to her process of coming out as a femme.

I remember going to a gay pride march in New York City, and there was [sic] all these girls there who were so cute, and they were all shaved, and they were—you know, shaved their legs, shaved their armpits, had all this makeup on—and I was so confused, because I was like, I didn’t think that lesbians and queer women did that. By the time I moved out here [to the Bay Area], I started—you know, you move out here, and if you’re queer, there’s kind of a butch-femme scene here.
And I slowly started kind of identifying with femme. I was feeling much more comfortable with myself, and how I presented myself. So, I mean, it’s definitely been a long, you know, journey and struggle to, you know, be a fat burlesque dancer. You know, it’s not like, oh, since the day I was born, I knew I could do that and it would be no big deal. I mean, obviously, you know, it takes a lot of courage and guts to get up on stage and show your stuff when, you know, you’re bigger than a size 8.

Here, Woolner unites her struggle for self-acceptance as a fat woman with the revelation that she could take up feminine modes of expression in a queer context via the theme of “feeling comfortable with herself”. While identifying as a femme is crucial to this sense of comfort, however, Woolner describes her femme identity not as feminine essence, but as a process and as a chosen mode of self-presentation. In so doing, Woolner draws on a discourse of fat femme identity that emphasizes sexual and gendered agency rather than fat women’s access to an externally defined femininity. This emphasis on gaining access to sexual currency by changing the terms in which desirability is defined, I argue below, is characteristic of the techniques of Big Burlesque, and of fat femme activism more generally.

Redefining Sexual Currency

In her essay “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” performance scholar Sue-Ellen Case traces the history of butch-femme culture and its relationship to lesbian feminist movements. Noting that femme and butch modes of gender expression fall into disfavor among feminist communities at the height of feminism’s second wave, Case argues that “the growth of moralistic projects restricting the production of sexual fiction or fantasy through the antipornography crusade” (33) is largely responsible for the repression of butch-femme identities as possible feminist subject positions. At a historical moment where “the production of sexual fiction or fantasy” was assumed to limit and oppress women, lesbian feminists prioritized attempts to
transcend the artificialities of a sexist gender system via androgyny. Within this schema, butches and femmes, who, in Case’s words, “constantly seduce the sign system, through flirtation and inconstancy into the light fondle of artifice (Case 32; italics mine), were denied status as feminist subject positions, precisely because of the ways in which they gloried in their role play, flaunted the artifice of their gendered positions, and steeped themselves in a discourse of sexual fantasy.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that the move to reclaim butch and femme identities as valid queer subject positions coincides historically with the end of antipornography feminisms’ dominance of feminist discourse. Third wave feminisms are more likely to promote “the production of sexual fiction or fantasy” as a feminist strategy, enabling butches, femmes, and other members of marginalized sexual cultures to redefine themselves as politically empowered, resistant, and feminist. The visual language of butch-femme enables queer women to foreground discourses of sexuality and sexual desirability in their activism, in a manner that critiques patriarchal assumptions about sexuality, widens the available range of sexually desirable subjects, and both disrupts and parodies subject/object binaries under compulsory heterosexuality.

The primary objective of Big Burlesque, as well as of many other queer women’s forays into fat activism, was to promote fat women’s bodies as sexually desirable. During her appearance on SPARK, MacAllister famously said, “One of my ultimate callings is to give fat women’s bodies a sexual currency, the same as thin women’s bodies.” The premium placed on the promotion of fat women’s sexual currency repeatedly emerges in Big Burlesque’s work: not only via their deployment of the burlesque striptease as a means of displaying fat women’s sexual desirability, but throughout the many television appearances, keynote speeches, and interviews given by MacAllister and her fellow performers. MacAllister’s desire to render fat
women’s sexual currency equivalent with that assigned to thin women, however, should not be misread as a simple attempt to grant fat women access to the mainstream discourses and assumptions by which sexual desirability is judged. Rather, Big Burlesque aligned itself with a wide variety of radical and marginalized sexual subcultures in order to question the terms by which sexual desirability and respectability are judged.

In addition to butch-femme subcultures, Big Burlesque allied itself with BDSM, fetish, and sex workers’ communities, in order to advocate simultaneously for fat women’s access to a sexual currency and for a radical expansion of viable sexualities in American culture. Heather MacAllister frequently indicated that she thought of her troupe’s performers as sex workers: her interview for the SPARK segment ends with the declaration, “I want my dancers to shake the biggest part of their body in someone’s face and get paid to do it.” Additionally, in 2004, Big Burlesque performed at a benefit for St. James Infirmary, a San Francisco-based clinic that, in the words of the announcement on the Big Burlesque website, “provides Free healthcare for bay area sex workers (including burly dancers)” (bigburlesque.com). The use of strong, confrontational language (“burly dancers”; “shake the biggest part of their body in someone’s face”) to describe both the work of fat burlesque dancers and their commonalities with sex workers, indicates not only an affiliation of Big Burlesque with sex radical communities, but also a determination to move the transgressions of these communities, and of the bodies of the people who inhabit them, out of the margins.

A similar visual language of confrontation emerges in some of Big Burlesque’s performances, through dancers’ uses of BDSM and fetish imagery. For example, the SPARK segment on Big Burlesque shows an excerpt from a performance featuring Mia More and Pussy Flambé. The performance begins with Mia More, clad in a black corset and a red feather boa,
twirling alone on the stage. Shortly thereafter, Pussy Flambé enters, holding what appears to be a leather leash. Flambé waves the leash in the air as More coyly bends over, and smacks More on the ass with it. The message in this performance is clear: the fat women of Big Burlesque want their audiences to view them as sexually desirable, but they also reserve the right to redefine the sexually desirable, and to move certain visual elements and discourses out of the margins of sexual respectability in the process. The discourse of camp, which prioritizes the production of fantasy over promoting a more “realistic” understanding of women’s sexuality, enables Big Burlesque to question the margins of respectable sexuality without instilling new, equally repressive margins.

The Ambivalence of Camp

The camp strategies of burlesque refer visually to a pre-Stonewall historical moment, in which both women and gay men utilized camp to indicate their alienation from, and desire for access to, the dominant culture. As Robertson points out, however, it is important to historicize camp: to understand how camp operates and is perceived in different eras. In *Guilty Pleasures*, she notes that queer camp after the Stonewall riots underwent several changes that complicate its operations and efficacy as a political discourse.

Camp has undergone two important changes since the 1960s to become a more overt, more public sensibility, and a mainstream fashion. The first is the “outing” and “heterosexualization” of camp, its virtual equation with first pop and then postmodernism…. The second is a more recent shift to overtly politicized camp and radical drag, dating back to gay camp’s changed status following Stonewall and the 1970s gay liberation movement, and its revitalization in the 1980s with the onset of AIDS and “queer” politics (Robertson 119).

As gay communities and social movements reach the attention of the American mainstream, a kind of cultural tug-of-war takes place over the meaning of camp. Gay communities and camp
discourses, freshly liberated from the closet, gain a new potential for disrupting heterosexist norms; but at the same time, are appropriated by the producers of mainstream mass culture. Camp becomes reconfigured as a pop discourse accessible to all, rendered separate from its origins as a reaction to institutionalized homophobia. This appropriation, in turn, triggers a reaction in gay communities, who re-imagine camp not as a means of signaling “desire for access to the dominant culture, but rather, “difference and alienation from the dominant” (129).

Camp, then, is understood in many present-day queer subcultures as a means of resisting assimilation into the heterosexist mainstream. Its deployment of anachronistic cultural products, genres, and assumptions, however, indicate that camp is “always already parasitic” (122) on the dominant culture, depending on it for its own intelligibility. Consequently, the use of camp as a queer political strategy in the present day raises a number of questions: Is it possible for activists who rely on camp strategies to balance the simultaneous desire to maintain a unique identity and to gain access to dominant cultural apparatuses; and if so, how?

Feminist camp faces similar dilemmas. In particular, feminist camp’s reliance on the redeployment of stereotypes about women raises questions about the extent to which feminist can effectively utilize camp to loosen the power of those stereotypes:

If camp is the weapon of “the woman without scruples,” it is also, often, sadly, almost inevitably, the weapon we use against her. Camp may appropriate and expose stereotypes, but it also, in some measure, keeps them alive…. Camp depends on our simultaneously recognizing stereotypes as stereotypes to distance ourselves from them and the same time recognizing, and loving, the power these stereotypes have over us (Robertson 142).

Camp’s potential as a double-edged sword for the women who revel in it becomes obvious when one examines the lives of female camp icons. Women, such as Mae West and Joan Crawford, who may have functioned as desirable camp icons at one point in their career, may be redeployed later in their career as grotesque camp figures (53). That this transition occurs as a result of
women aging suggests that camp may police the boundaries of culturally sanctioned womanhood just as surely as it flaunts the crossing those boundaries. The excess that is celebrated by women who deploy camp strategies in one context may, in another context, be used to contain them (105).

Furthermore, the camp strategies used to contain women in general may also pose specific problems to fat women. Because the fat female body represents excess and bodily anxieties in American culture, the flaunting of excess that characterizes camp may serve to contain fat women rather than free them. According to Petra Kuppers, camp strategies that aim to distance fat women from a “realistic,” essentialist account of their bodies, may unintentionally invoke and legitimate those accounts:

If [fat women’s] performances try to reclaim the “body out of control” as the site of transgression and empowerment without attempting to question… assumptions of fertility, grossness, carnival, and the grotesque, their work can easily fall back into the stereotype, still allowing no space for inscriptions of subjectivity. Instead of showing the problems with the essentialist account of fat, they embrace the large woman as caught up in her (culturally determined) fat (Kuppers 278).

In other words, just because queer fat women utilize camp techniques in order to distance themselves from the stereotypes that work to contain them, does not mean that they will be read as political resistance by a post-Stonewall mainstream audience who has learned to equate camp with pop. The use of a discourse that is the subject of a cultural tug-of-war is dangerous: while it invokes histories that may be useful and empowering to certain marginalized communities, it cannot ever guarantee that those communities will remain the final arbiters of what that discourse means.

Camp, therefore, is always an ambivalent political strategy. It is haunted by several simultaneous needs: the need to resist incorporation and marginalization by dominant cultures, the desire for equal access to cultural apparatuses, and the possibility that the stereotypes that
render camp intelligible will ultimately work to contain camp as a mode of resistance. These ambivalences and power struggles show up, over and over again, in Big Burlesque’s history. The work and words of MacAllister and other troupe members indicate a desire to spread the message of fat women’s power and desirability to a wider mainstream audience, in constant tension with the anxiety that camp discourses familiar to their queer audiences will, once spread, act to delegitimize and contain the subversive potential of their work.

At several points during the troupe’s history, Big Burlesque attempted to address the ambivalences of the camp strategies it deployed in order to widen its cultural influence. For example, in October of 2004, Big Burlesque presented a “Spooky Burlesque Halloween Show” in Oakland, which they titled “Demons are a Girl’s Best Friend” (bigburlesque.com). The show’s title, an obvious reference to the song performed by Marilyn Monroe in the 1953 film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, simultaneously invokes several discourses relating to camp, body size, and sexual desirability. The title’s invocation of Marilyn Monroe—who’s curviness marks her as both a productive anachronism and a frequent touchstone of mainstream debates over the arbitrariness of female beauty standards—in a film scene that flaunts female materialism, reiterates Big Burlesque’s demands for fat women’s place in the sexual currency, as well as MacAllister’s assertions that fat burlesque dancers are legitimate sex workers. Meanwhile, the playful notion that demons, rather than diamonds, are a girl’s best friend plays with the potentially subversive discourse that marks fat women as monstrous, while challenging that discourse’s attempts to contain fat women. The title of show offers two implications: first, that fat women are not themselves demonic, but that stereotypes attempting to demonize them may become their “best friend” in the fight to challenge fatphobic stereotypes. Second, demons are
not simply a fat girl’s best friend, but *any* girl’s best friend—in other words, attempts to cast fat
comen as monstrous have dire implications for all women of every size.

While such attempts to counteract the monstrous fat woman stereotype are important,
however, they were few and far between, and appreciated mostly as an in-joke between the
troupe and its queer female audiences. Big Burlesque’s encounters with the predominantly
straight media reflect a different strategy. In these appearances, troupe members mostly attempt
to contain the influence of this stereotype by neglecting to mention it, and by repeatedly
emphasizing both the professionalism of the troupe and the sex appeal of fat women in general.
The ambivalence reflected by these disparate strategies is most noticeable in Heather
MacAllister’s interviews and public speaking appearances. For example, during her interview on
SPARK, MacAllister advocates the belief that her troupe’s performances are acts of political
subversion by saying, “Just being on stage and doing burlesque—you know, the art of the
striptease—is a completely radical thing to do if you don’t have a size 2 body, or even a size 12
body.” She follows this assertion, however, with one that downplays her fellow performers’
size: “We’re not a joke. We’re professionals and we’re dancers, and we also happen to be
large.” Big Burlesque performers did not “happen to be large,” of course; their size was integral
to the troupe’s identity and political strategies. MacAllister’s attempts to simultaneously
emphasize and downplay Big Burlesque’s identity as a fat performance troupe to members of the
mainstream media, rather, reflect the ambivalence of the camp medium and techniques Big
Burlesque adopted: techniques that necessarily vacillate between resisting and petitioning for
access to the mainstream.

To her queer audiences, MacAllister constructed Big Burlesque predominantly as a form
of resistance to mainstream assumptions surrounding gender, sexuality, and size, rather than an
attempt to gain access to a wider sexual currency for fat women. In her NOLOSE keynote speech, she emphasizes burlesque as a medium of resistance by prioritizing her performers’ sexual agency over the public nature of their performances, or the reactions of the audience:

It is how we enact our sexuality, I think, that makes the difference. We have agency and autonomy—it’s like in my burlesque troupe—it is my dancers, not the audience, who decide what they will or won’t show or share…. The sexual drive doesn’t even need an outside audience: it is sexual power simply for the sake of sexual power, its very existence inhabited in the body of a fat person.

MacAllister’s assertion in this speech illustrates the pitfalls of conceptualizing camp exclusively as an act of resistance. Her insistence that the dancers’ agency—their ability to choose “what they will or won’t show or share”—is more important than the display itself indicates that Big Burlesque wishes to grant fat women access to a sexual currency, not by petitioning for an externally defined acceptance, but by emphasizing each woman’s own ability to determine what is sexy. This assertion configures Big Burlesque not as a new standard-bearer for female beauty standards, but as a troupe that models what self-confidence and sexual agency might look like.

MacAllister’s statement extends the goals of Big Burlesque beyond the troupe itself, declaring that all people already possess legitimate access to beauty, sexuality, and confidence.

At the same time, however, MacAllister takes this assertion to its extreme conclusion, arguing that “the sexual drive doesn’t even need an outside audience.” Prioritizing the sexual agency of Big Burlesque’s performers over audience reactions, to the point where the audience is even deemed unnecessary, poses two problems. First, it sabotages the very purpose of Big Burlesque, raising the question of why public performance of queer fat women’s sexuality is important. Secondly, the problems of monstrousness and containment continue to haunt Big Burlesque, despite troupe members’ attempts to de-emphasize or ignore it, and downplaying the importance of the audience enables these problems to persist, largely unaddressed. While not all
troupe members followed MacAllister’s lead in arguing that outside audiences are not important, Lacy Asbill notes that many performers cope with this conflict by legitimating the reactions of one audience—queer women—while delegitimizing other audiences—in particular, straight male fat fetishists:

The performers that I spoke with did speak a little bit about fetishization. And, um, they really drew a line between the sort of, like, creepy fetish which was really about, um, viewing the fat body as something that was so monstrous that it provoked desire. And these women tended to really shy away from those kinds of people who would come to the performances. On the other hand, they felt especially that a queer audience of lesbian women who would come to these performances, who, you know, had greater acceptance of diverse bodies… and were there [to] support them, not as necessarily fat and monstrous, but as really fat and beautiful (Big, Beautiful Burlesque).

On stage, Big Burlesque performers prioritized their own joy in burlesque performance over audience reactions; and to the extent that such reactions were noted, the favorable responses of queer women were recognized as more central to the troupe’s intervention in queer, feminist, and fat politics than the sometimes questionable reactions of other groups. Off stage, MacAllister and other performers tended to cast burlesque performance as an act of political subversion when speaking to queer audiences, while frequently downplaying the political dimensions of their work in conversations with the mainstream, predominantly heterosexual media. In so doing, the troupe emphasized its camp strategies as a means of maintaining a unique, resistant queer identity, and thus as a way to build confidence in other queer fat women, rather than as a collective attempt by such women to directly confront the limits of mainstream culture.
Conclusion

Big Burlesque disbanded in 2007, following the death of its founder, Heather MacAllister, of ovarian cancer at the age of 38. In its wake, it left a number of smaller local fat burlesque troupes, and a new vision of fat female desirability. While these interventions into discourses surrounding gender, sexuality, and size are important, they did not venture far beyond the borders of urban queer women’s communities. Big Burlesque effected change primarily on the small-scale, personal level, and according to Lacy Asbill, its greatest legacy was the sense of empowerment and confidence it bestowed upon viewers and performers alike:

I think a lot of them talk about feeling an increased confidence. Just, um, not necessarily always about sexuality, but just feeling, um, an increased confidence in themselves and their bodies after doing performance. One woman in particular—um, her pseudonym is Tonsa Tush—she has this great quote where she says, you strip, you take command of the stage. And then you realize in your everyday life that you can do other things. Like, you can wear this shirt. Or you can walk out in public and kind of claim some space for yourself. You can walk through the streets of San Francisco and feel the mist on your skin and realize that you feel a lot of pleasure in your body (Big, Beautiful Burlesque).

Small-scale, often intangible changes to the lives of fat women, such as “increased confidence” or feeling entitled to wear a new shirt, may not seem like substantial or adequate challenges to the rampant fatphobia, heterosexism, or misogyny that permeate American culture. Certainly, the changes wrought by Big Burlesque and other fat performers in the lives of individual women do not constitute a radical transformation of the greater society, and have yet to manifest as widespread structural change. These small changes are, however, a start, and it would be a mistake to declare Big Burlesque a failure simply because it did not radically disrupt mainstream norms. T.V. Reed underlines this point in his book The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle. Arguing against accounts of social movements that measure those movements’ success solely in terms of tangible legal and
economic changes, Reed asserts that the cultural productions of social movements are important subjects of study because they “can move a person out of the individual self, to feel the strength of a group,” help individuals “feel their own strength,” “express or reinforce movement values, ideas, and tactics,” and “provide respite from the rigors of movement work through aesthetic joy” (Reed 299-300). Even when the cultural products of social movements never manage to effect change on a large social scale, they can aid in the formation of what Reed calls “abeyance structures”: structures that keep “movement values and goals alive until a new phase of movement activity proper can emerge” (305). Big Burlesque’s ultimate legacy is the formation of such an abeyance structure. While the troupe never launched large-scale assaults on the fatphobic structures and policies of dominant American culture, it did articulate the values and challenges of the nascent fat activist movement, and spread those values across as many queer women’s communities as possible via its nationally touring Fat Bottom Revue. In so doing, Big Burlesque kept the values of the movement alive in the hopes that it would one day reach sufficient critical mass to launch the challenges that the troupe alone could not, and through its national tours, helped to build that critical mass.

Big Burlesque’s performances focused predominantly on promoting the confidence and desirability of individual fat women, as opposed to offering larger confrontations of structural fatphobia. During her public appearances, however, Heather MacAllister made clear that she understood the promotion of fat women’s desirability as the beginning of a larger movement, and not the movement itself. Near the end of her life, MacAllister began to openly advocate moving beyond simply creating a sexual currency for fat women’s bodies, and asked queer women what it would take to create a wider-ranging movement. These questions, and this preoccupation, are particularly apparent in her 2006 NOLOSE keynote speech:
I think and hope that we are starting to move away from what I perceive as a somewhat singular focus on sexuality. I definitely don’t agree with a lot of the criticism from some movement feminists of what they perceive as too much of a focus on sexuality in the fat lib movement. As anyone who has attended previous years [at the NOLOSE conference] can attest, I am a big fan of sexual liberation and activity at this event. But I don’t want our sexual liberty at the expense of other fat liberations. What other liberations do we seek? How do we achieve a sensual, physical liberation that truly comes from the inside out, so that our sexuality is an organic outpouring of how great we feel about ourselves, rather than a forced or manic overlay that we try to “achieve” this one magic weekend a year?

In addition to her own work in Big Burlesque, MacAllister advocated archiving the history of queer fat women’s activism, health advocacy for fat people, and ensuring that the fat activist movement shifted from its predominant focus on personal empowerment to an agenda of radical social change. While she felt that personal empowerment was an important and necessary component to manifesting radical social change, she acknowledged the pitfalls of making it the focus of the fat activist movement.

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

Heather MacAllister never lived to see the wider-ranging social movement she advocated as her life drew to a close. But her words and her art make clear that such a movement is not possible unless a critical mass of fat people begin to believe that their bodies and their space are worth defending. Her work, and the work of her fellow Big Burlesque performers, provided a medium that enabled fat women both on- and offstage to take pleasure in fat bodies, and through
its use of camp discourses, to begin to make emotional and political connections between body size, feminism, and queer social justice movements. In so doing, Big Burlesque helped to lay the foundation for a larger fat activist movement.
CHAPTER TWO

“YOU KNOW IT WHEN YOU SEE IT”: QUEER FAT FEMMES AND THE FANTASY OF FIXED VISIBILITY

The rise of the fat activist movement in present-day queer women’s communities is contemporaneous with a revival within these communities of butch-femme identity politics. Though butch-femme apologists have for decades challenged lesbian feminist advocacy of an escape from sexism via universal androgyny, the political landscape of the current butch-femme renaissance differs from its previous iterations in several ways. First, the end of the sex and pornography wars of the 1980s has given way to a third-wave feminist discourse in which gender expressions other than androgyny are no longer considered anathema to queer and feminist projects. Additionally, the increased visibility and acceptance of transgendered individuals in queer women’s communities has opened up a discourse in which gender presentation is rendered radically separate from gendered essence, and hence, the proliferation of gendered subjectivities on a range of female bodies is considered a valid feminist strategy. These shifts in queer feminist strategy have led to a shift in butch-femme discourse, where for the first time, femmes as well as butches are positioned as autonomous, activist figures.

This valorization of femme expression and identity has in recent years been increasingly taken up by queer fat women activists as a means of exploring issues of identity, agency, and the body as a site of cultural inscription and resistance. Several prominent queer fat women activists identify as queer fatennes—among them Big Burlesque founder Heather MacAllister, Fat Girl Speaks organizer Stacy Bias, NoFauxxx.com founder Courtney Trouble, and punk rock singer Beth Ditto. It appears that, for many queer fat women, femme discourse and aesthetics provide a
means of articulating an activist strategy that encompasses a critique of size, gender, and sexuality.

The following chapter explores the ways in which queer fat femmes deploy the connections between their sexuality, gender expression, and body size to challenge fatphobia, heterosexism, and misogyny both within their communities and in American culture at large. In particular, I focus on FemmeCast, a monthly Podcast hosted by New York City-based comedienne, performer, and “femme-cee” Bevin Branlandingham. Launched in April 2008, FemmeCast bills itself as “the queer fat femme guide to life.” FemmeCast, I argue, galvanizes the queer fat femme as a coherent and viable identity, and articulates both its strength and its limits as a means of resistance to oppression. In the sections that follow, I analyze FemmeCast not simply as a Podcast in isolation, but as representative of queer fat femme discourse more generally. I ultimately argue that queer fat femme discourse provides a potent and effective way for some queer fat women to positively reframe their fatness, and can help facilitate an individual sense of empowerment as well as possibly locating a supportive community. As it currently stands, however, abjections and fantasies that form the foundation for queer fat femme discourse—in particular, what I call the fantasy of fixed visibility—limit queer fat femme identity politics’ ability to form a basis for alliance or collective action. I conclude by offering alternatives to the fantasy of fixed visibility, and suggesting ways of rethinking queer fat femme discourse that will allow it to function as a basis for a broader, more confrontational political movement.
Femme History and the Politics of Visibility

The issue of visibility, and the ways in which femme bodies, aesthetics, and politics have historically been interpreted by people both inside and outside queer women’s communities, provide a useful history and template for the present-day discourse of the queer fat femme. Femmes, like fat people, frequently vacillate between invisibility and hypervisibility (Owen 2008), both within their communities and in relation to mainstream American culture. Femmes also share with fat people a historical lack of control over what their visibility (or invisibility) signifies: just as the silent, headless fat body has stood in for larger debates in Western culture about the connections between health, morality, labor, consumerism, and corporeality (Cooper 2007), femme bodies, both deprived of their voices and alienated from the historical and cultural contexts in which they have operated, have been made to symbolize anxieties in queer women’s communities over gender, sexuality, and agency. Queer fat femme discourse, as exemplified by FemmeCast, makes use of femme history to highlight common concerns in both the femme and the fat activist movements, and to offer possible sites of intervention against homophobia, fatphobia, and misogyny.

In her essay “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” Sue-Ellen Case observes that the condemnation of lesbians who identify with butch-femme role play is “an outgrowth of the typical interaction between feminism and lesbianism since the rise of the feminist movement” (Case 33). As early as the 1950s, lesbian rights organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) attempted to appease heterosexual feminists and gain the tolerance of mainstream culture through a politics of assimilation and upward mobility. This strategy encouraged lesbians to shift their senses of identity and community away from the predominantly working-class bar scene to the overwhelmingly white and middle class setting of the early women’s movement, and
in the process, to “erase butch-femme behavior, its dress codes, and lifestyle from the lesbian community” (ibid).

According to this schema, butch-femme aesthetics and behavior endanger the projects of feminism and lesbian rights in two principal and contradictory ways. First, butches’ and femmes’ refusal to adhere to prevailing gender norms endangered all lesbians’ access to the privileges of mainstream society. DOB founders Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon noted in their book *Lesbian/Woman* that one of their organization’s principal goals was “to teach the lesbian a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society [because] we knew too many lesbians whose activities were restricted because they wouldn’t wear skirts” (Martin and Lyon, quoted in Case, 34). Simultaneously, butch-femme relationship dynamics were considered a form of imitation heterosexuality inimical to the development of early lesbian feminism. For the most part, the butch was upheld as the snarling and savage, but politically mute, symbol of the dangers of inadequate assimilation—a symbol alluded to in Martin and Lyon’s accounts of early lesbian feminism through their attempts to convince all lesbians to wear skirts. Femmes, on the other hand, were considered “lost heterosexuals who damage birthright lesbians by forcing… their butches to play the man’s role” (ibid): portrayed simultaneously as passive recipients of sexist dogma and as symbols of the relentless, violent dangers of the patriarchy.

Early lesbian feminist assumptions about butches and femmes persisted well into the 1970s and 80s. Many second wave lesbian feminists, grappling with the demands and injustices of compulsory femininity, tended to conflate hegemonic deployments of gender with gender itself. Consequently, the prevailing lesbian feminist politics of the time “endorsed an escape from gender through androgyny” (Galewski 185), continuing in the process to condemn butches and femmes for imitation heterosexuality and for their presumed adherence to an inherently
ophressive gender system. This continued condemnation of butches and femmes relied on what Case calls “the ghosting of the lesbian subject” (Case 33): the closeting of certain lesbian voices and subject positions in order to achieve ostensibly greater feminist causes. Gender, understood by many second wave lesbian feminists as always already oppressive and as escappable via androgyny, required the disappearance of butches and femmes as visible political agents. In order for butches and femmes to signify passivity to an oppressive gender regime, they could not be allowed visibility or voice.

In the 1980s, however, butches and femmes began to demand a fairer accounting of their lives and identities in feminist circles, and “a body of literature appeared… that challenged the necessity of lesbian-feminist androgyny and celebrated the possibilities of the butch-femme dyad” (Galewski 185). Butch-femme theorists of the 1980s argued that androgyny, enforced as a necessity, constituted not a freedom from the repressive effects of gender, but a new, equally repressive gender schema. By contrast, they argued, the butch-femme dyad offered an alternative, sexually charged image of feminist power and agency which called into question the naturalness and inevitability of patriarchal, heterosexual femininity.

While several theorists of the early butch-femme renaissance, of which Sue-Ellen Case is a part, argued that “the butch-femme couple inhabit [this] subject position together” (Case 32), in practice most highlighted the butch alone as a symbol of “‘visible,’ ‘public,’ and hence ‘political’” (Galewski 186, emphasis mine) gender subversion. According to Elizabeth Galewski, the readily visible departure of butch lesbians from hegemonic gender norms led many butch-femme theorists to conclude that “merely by walking down the street… the butch exposed the fiction of the sex-gender system. In this way, [butch-femme] theorists figured the butch as an interruption in expected gender roles, living proof that female bodies are not always fated to be
feminine” (Galewski 186). If the butch’s subversion primarily consists in proving that “female bodies are not always fated to be feminine,” however, the relationship of femme bodies and aesthetics to queer and feminist projects of gender subversion remains in question. At best, the femme’s insubordination to gender norms consists solely in her willingness to “give” her femininity and sexuality to another woman instead of to a man, and she is only visible as a symbol of subversion when hanging on a butch’s arm. At worst, femmes were “implicitly conflated with weakness, passivity, and even complicity in the face of oppression” (ibid).

Although butch-femme theory challenged the primacy of androgyny in lesbian-feminist circles, it nonetheless held up a visible departure from femininity as its primary signifier of feminist gender subversion. Consequently,ennes remained invisible as political agents capable of challenging the inevitability of hegemonic gender norms.

It is understandable, therefore, that as femmes have begun to speak apart from their membership in butch-femme dyads, and demanded to be recognized as political agents unto themselves, that visibility constitutes a major concern and theme in the emerging femme movement—a concern exemplified by the recent publication of an anthology of personal essays entitled Visible: A Femmethology. Because femmes have historically been both “ghosted” from queer and feminist debates and considered politically suspect because their challenges to dominant gender schemas are considered less “visible” than those offered by butches, they have primarily intervened in these debates by attempting to render themselves visible and by challenging the social forces that further their invisibility in queer communities.

Visibility appears particularly important to queer fat femmes, whose gender presentation and body size are both utilized in discourses that position them as questionable and dangerous symbols of larger social forces, but deny their political agency.
Correspondent, speaks extensively about the connections between visibility and queer fat femme empowerment in “Episode 3: Self-Esteem”:

For me, self-esteem is very much linked to visibility. I can for sure say this is true when looking at… my comings out as queer, later as femme, and even later as proudly fat. All of these evolutions of self are bound by the need to make my desires, my queer gender, my body, visible, celebrated, and again, mine. And with visibility comes access to community, dialogue, friendship, and self-awareness.

For Genne and the other FemmeCast correspondents, visibility is linked to greater personal and collective political power. The process of “coming out” as a queer fat femme—a process described by Social Justice Correspondent Zoe Femmetastica in Episode 5.5 as “own[ing] your own fatness… dismantling a lot of the self-hatred you have around being fat, and staring to reclaim it and embrace it, let alone celebrate it”—involves not only accepting one’s gender, sexuality, and body size, but also demanding visibility as a queer fat femme person, as opposed to an inert symbol of the purported evils of femininity and obesity. In making these assertions, the correspondents of FemmeCast draw on an increasing body of work, originating in the 1990s, that attempts to make femme identity and experience central to queer and feminist debate by emphasizing femmes’ visibility, agency, and insubordination to gender norms. I outline that body of work, and its effects on queer fat femme discourse, below.

Fat Femme-inism

The body of femme theory that emerged in the 1990s is not merely an outgrowth of the butch-femme theory of the 1980s, but has roots in several feminist discourses. Case argues that both bodies of theory clearly reflect the values of feminism’s emerging third wave. Rejecting the “growth of moralistic projects restricting the production of sexual fiction or fantasy” that constituted the legacy of feminist debates over sex and pornography (33), third wave feminists...
embraced the production of sexual fantasy as a possible feminist strategy. Femmes and butches, through their association with the sexually charged setting of lesbian bar culture, became available as feminist identities due to this shift.

Femme theory in particular draws on the insights of postmodern feminist theorists such as Judith Butler. Butler’s insight that gender is constituted not by internal essence, but via a series of performative acts that produce the illusion of an “inner” gender, has been widely utilized by femme theorists in order to reconfigure femmes as “‘gender rebels,’ ‘gender traitors,’ and ‘gender warriors’” (Galewski 188). Laura Harris and Liz Crocker articulate this process of reconfiguration in their renowned anthology, *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, by arguing that femmes take on “a femininity that is transgressive, disruptive, and chosen” (Harris and Crocker 3). In this schema, femmes strategically deploy the signifiers of femininity in order to multiply its meanings and challenge assumptions of femininity as uniformly weak and in thrall to patriarchy. Through this deployment, femme theorists argue, femmes become every bit as “‘loud,’ ‘visible,’ ‘public,’ and hence, properly activist” (Galewski 189) as butches, drag performers, transgendered people, and other “gender rebels.”

Once again, present-day femme theorists’ advocacy of femme as a position of gender rebellion hinges on the deployment of *visibility*: on the understanding that femme is a form of visible gender subversion, and that it has not been detected as such because both mainstream culture and previous iterations of feminism have failed to see it. Consequently, while femme theorists repeatedly assert that there is no one right way to be femme, and warn that femme is a “sustained gender identity” (Harris and Crocker 5) whose dimensions and effects cannot be reduced either to roles or to aesthetics, several femme theorists identify femme as a noticeable, visible departure from “conventional” modes of femininity. Harris and Crocker begin their
anthology by noting that “many femmes would not appear properly or conventionally feminine” (3), while Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri open their anthology, *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*, by describing femme as “*femininity gone wrong*”—bitch, slut, nag, whore, cougar, dyke, or brazen hussy. Femme is the trappings of femininity gone awry, gone to town, gone to the dogs. Femininity is a demand placed on female bodies and femme is the danger of a body read female or *inappropriately feminine*. We are not good girls—perhaps we are not girls at all (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 13; emphasis mine).

Femme theorists’ articulations of femme as insubordinate, inappropriate femininity are echoed in the budding field of fat studies—and, in particular, in recent attempts to articulate fat women as inhabiting a feminist subject position. In her essay, “Sex and Fat Chics [sic]: Deterritorializing the Fat Female Body,” Jana Evans Braziel observes that in mainstream American culture, “the fat female body is defined as a site of sexual masquerade—conveying both an excessive salaciousness and a hyperbolic derision of that prurience” (Braziel 233). Fatness is figured not only as excessive sensuality and corporeality, but also, via femininity’s associations with the body in Western metaphysical thought, as “*excessive feminine*” (232; emphasis in original). While corpulence thus figured constitutes a source of fear and contempt in the cultural mainstream, Braziel argues that the cultural meanings circulating around the fat female body can be harnessed for feminist purposes. Female fat, representing the triumph of femininity over masculinity and of the body over the mind, “catalyzes insubordination to the binaristic thought of Western, patriarchal knowledges and discourses” (ibid).

If femme theorists define femmes’ gender rebellion as a brazen, visible departure from the conventional codes and restrictions of patriarchal femininity, and fat feminists identify the fat female body as a site of excessive, insubordinate femininity constantly threatening the binarisms of Western metaphysical thought, then female corpulence may be redefined by queer fat femmes
as a visual marker of femme defiance. In FemmeCast, queer fat femmes’ tendency not only to physically exceed the boundaries of acceptable femininity, but to defiantly maintain their queer fat femme identities in the face of a society that condemns queerness, corpulence, and femininity, is repeatedly cited as evidence of femmes’ gender rebellion. Sarah J. from Philadelphia clearly articulates this point in “Episode 1: The Queer Fat Femme,” during a montage in which listeners are asked to define the term “queer fat femme”:

What I’ve been thinking about most recently about that identity, queer fat femme, is for me I see it as a deviant identity, as a radical identity. The reason that feels important to me right now is that I think there’s a lot of sentiment with regards to butch women, trans women, trans men, being really radical, and that identity being seen as doing the opposite, or doing something different than what society has told you to do. And I think that there’s a lot of femme-phobic rhetoric that would assert that being femme is really just a woman-assigned, woman-identified person presenting in the way that society tells them to present. But I would argue that being queer and being fat and being femme are all really, really brave things to be. And I think that a lot of times, that’s what we’re talking about when we talk about being deviant, and being radical, is we’re talking about bravery. In a fatphobic, homophobic, misogynist culture, being a queer fat femme is absolutely an act of bravery.

Sarah J.’s final assertion here—that simply identifying as a queer fat femme in a fatphobic, homophobic, misogynist culture constitutes a radical act of bravery—is repeated by Branlandingham and her fellow correspondents in several episodes of FemmeCast. Moreover, Sarah’s conflation of bravery, deviance, and radical politics in this quote illustrates the more general ways in which both fatness and femme identity are politically reconfigured by queer fat women activists. Here, queer desire, fatness, and possessing the “bravery” to celebrate both in a society that demands women’s participation in diet culture and the heterosexual matrix, are collectively defined as a “deviation” from “a woman-assigned, woman-identified person presenting in the way society tells them to present.” The queer fat femme is presented here as a paragon of inappropriate femininity, and by extension, as a radical figure.
The primary success of FemmeCast, then, is its ability to provide feminine-presenting queer fat women with a discourse that reframes both femininity and body size as courageous, politically charged acts of insubordination. It also provides a schema in which fatness and femininity complement one another: fatness emerges as a form of feminine deviance, rendering the bearer visible as a femme and, thus, part of a full-scale assault on heteropatriarchy rather than a “failed” woman. By offering queer fat femme discourse as an alternative to prevailing mainstream attitudes regarding fat women, Branlandingham, her correspondents, and her guests thus offer their audience a potentially empowering way to understand their lives and their bodies—one that may lead to greater self acceptance and an ability to openly challenge larger fatphobic, homophobic, and misogynistic attitudes.

Abjections, Alliances, and the Limits of Queer Fat Femme Discourse

Sarah J.’s apologia for queer fat femme identity operates in part by comparing, and ultimately aligning, femmes with other queer subject positions whose “deviance” and gender rebellion she assumes to be less disputed. In particular, she argues that the “bravery” femmes display by maintaining their identities in a hostile culture is comparable to that exuded by “butch women, trans women, [and] trans men.” By understanding femme as a gender identity comparable to these other radical queer identities, queer women can differentiate, and ultimately separate, it from assimilationist gender identities—namely, “woman-assigned, woman-identified [people] presenting in the way that society has told them to present.”

In her essay “Figuring the Feminist Femme,” femme theorist Elizabeth Galewski observes that the strains of femme theory that have predominated since the 1990s have performed the same alignments and exclusions advocated by Sarah J. in order to render femme
identity visible and political. Responding to postmodern feminists who foreground butches, drag performers, and trans people as examples of feminist opportunities for gender subversion, most femme theorists have provided an account of femmes that compares them favorably to these gender identities, such that “femmes’ feminist contribution hinges entirely on the extent to which they can be said to perform those other roles” (Galewski 193). At the same time, the delineation of a subversive femme identity creates its own margins, causing other gender identities to be “abjected anew, perceived yet again as dubious contributions to feminism” (ibid).

Queer fat femme discourse, like much femme theory, renders the queer fat femme visible as an insubordinate gender position by abjecting other forms of femininity. FemmeCast host Bevin Branlandingham makes this clear at the beginning of the first episode, where she defines the queer fat femme by confirming, first and foremost, what she is not:

So, let’s start at the beginning: what is a queer fat femme? Well, it’s sort of a “you know it when you see it” kind of thing. You can’t say exactly that the L-Word characters are more lipstick lesbians by happenstance, and not femme with a capital F. But you just know.

Following the lead of several femme theorists, Branlandingham abjects the femininity of the ‘lipstick lesbian,’ rendering her void of political potential in order to enable the femme to occupy a space of subversion. The lipstick lesbian is understood in this Podcast, and in femme revisionist discourse more generally, as a woman who “revels in being ‘straight acting’”, who “in no way seeks to disrupt femininity or normative heterosexual practices” (Maltry and Tucker, quoted in Galewski, 195). That lipstick lesbians are abjected from femme discourse to the extent that they are considered “straight acting” implies another, more primary abjection: femmes, first and foremost, are not straight women. Displacing accusations of complacency, passivity, and invisibility onto the figures of the lipstick lesbian and the heterosexual woman allows femmes to reinvent themselves as “deviants” and “gender warriors”: as unconventional, defiant, visible
women whose rebellion against the strictures of gender is as valid as that of butches, drag
performers, and trans people.

Thus, while queer fat femme discourse may serve as a source of personal empowerment
to the extent that it allows those who take on the label to understand their identity as inherently
radical, it contains two major pitfalls that limit its effectiveness on a grander political scale.
First, the abjections at the heart of queer fat femme discourse limit queer fat femmes’ ability to
forge coalitions and alliances across identities. Transferring the accusations of passivity and
political inertness historically leveled at femmes to straight women effectively bars the
possibility of femmes allying with heterosexual communities. This in turn severely limits queer
fat femmes’ ability to directly confront, and therefore transform, either the larger feminist
movement or mainstream American culture.

Moreover, queer fat femme activism’s dependence on the abjection even of the lipstick
lesbian and other forms of queer femininity contributes to the creation of an insular community
who may only make a larger cultural impact by sheer chance, if at all. For example, in “Episode
3: Self-Esteem,” Branlandingham interviews Chelsea, a member of the Toronto Fat Femme
Mafia, who participated in an action in which queer fat femmes jumped rope in bikinis in a
Toronto’s Trinity Bellwoods Park. The jump-roping action was filmed, placed on YouTube, and
ultimately posted in Rosie O’Donnell’s blog. During the course of the interview,
Branlandingham asks Chelsea how she reached a level of self-esteem that enabled her to wear a
bikini in public and star in an online video. Chelsea replies:

Well, I don’t know, it’s kind of weird. I think when I’m shooting this kind of,
like, public performances, or sort of like activist initiatives... I totally shut down.
I sort of disassociate. So especially, I remember doing that when I shot that,
because it’s not that I’m, like, not comfortable with myself. It’s just that—
because I obviously am; if not I couldn’t go and do that—but. Or, I’m
comfortable doing it, but I—I am not able to engage with the public sometimes,
because they have strong reactions to seeing fat chicks in bikinis jumping rope, and doing it without shame. So, I love doing that kind of thing, but there is a sense of sort of shutting off when I do it, because I can’t engage with the public when I’m doing something like that.

Chelsea goes on to explain that the jump-roping action was filmed in a section of Toronto that is “very artsy and artist-based, so it’s not unusual per se to see some weird stuff going on in that park.” This suggests that the insularity demanded by the abjections of queer fat femme discourse creates an alarmingly skewed definition of “activist initiatives” in which the activist does not need to physically confront, or even psychologically acknowledge, the public such initiatives are presumably meant to challenge. By abjecting and disassociating from people outside of certain accepted queer subject positions, queer fat femme discourse positions the majority of the public as always already unable to learn from their activism, and by extension, undermines the efficacy of queer fat femme activism. That the Toronto Fat Femme Mafia was able to reach the greater public at all through their jump-roping action turns out ultimately to be a matter of chance—of Rosie O’Donnell watching the right YouTube clip at the right time.

Secondly, underlying the need to abject certain forms of queer and straight femininity is a utopian fantasy of both choice and unproblematic visibility. I have argued above that both fat people and femmes vacillate between hypervisibility and invisibility, and that this vacillation is often a function of the forms of discrimination both groups face. Neither fat people nor femmes are always, finally, in control of the level of visibility or invisibility they embody. Queer fat femme discourse, however, enacts the fantasy of a fixed visibility that is always an effect of the political actor’s conscious intent. As Branlandingham claims, “you just know” that a person is a femme and not a lipstick lesbian; “you know it when you see it.”

The belief that “insistent and articulate ‘rhetoric can control discourse’” and fix visibility (LeBesco 12), implicit in the assumptions of Branlandingham and of queer fat femme activists
more generally, undoubtedly enables many queer fat women to question discourses supporting their oppression, and to work to shift the political landscape of size, gender, and sexuality. Fantasies of fixed visibility, however, privilege the femme’s reading of her own body over the myriad and contradictory ways in which her body is read by those around her, constructing the body as a site of individual self-determination rather than as a site of social struggle. According to feminist philosopher Susan Bordo, privileging individual intent over larger struggles for meaning is part of a larger postmodern strain in feminist thought, which aims to “textualize” the body… as giving a free, creative rein to meaning at the expense of attention to the body’s material locatedness in history, practice, culture. If the body is treated as pure text, subversive, destabilizing elements can be emphasized and freedom and self-determination celebrated; but one is left wondering, is there a body in this text? (Bordo 38).

To the extent that queer fat femmes envision the body as a text, they tend to insist on the power of authorial intention to determine interpretation. This insistence, combined with the disavowal of queer fat femmes’ vacillations between visibility and invisibility, seriously compromises queer fat femme identity as a basis for alliance or for effective collective action, in two principal ways. I outline these ways below.

Performance, Gender Voluntarism, and the Individualist Approach to Politics

Galewski claims that the strategies enacted by present-day femmes “ground femme identity in the logic of performance” (190). She traces femme theorists’ assertions that femme identity constitutes a consciously “disruptive, transgressive, and chosen” and hence politically charged femininity to the work of postmodern theorists such as Judith Butler, whom she erroneously dubs “performance theorists” (186). This error is telling, as the conflation of performativity with performance it implies informs much queer fat femme identity politics. It is,
therefore, important to understand why Butler’s theory of gender performativity is not a theory of conscious, voluntary gender performance, in order to understand why queer fat femme fantasies of fixed visibility undercut that identity’s ability to create social change outside the insular communities in which it operates.

To claim, as Butler does, that gender is performatively constituted, is not to advocate an understanding of gender as voluntary and self-determined. Rather, Butler, following Foucault, argues that gender is produced by operations of power that provide norms determining what constitutes an intelligible gender, and which demand forms of bodily discipline that, when repeated and interpreted through the lens of power, create the illusion of a gendered essence. While a person may, willingly or unwillingly, fail to repeat these performative acts in a way that produces a coherent or “acceptable” gender, it does not follow that a person may “choose” a gender from an endlessly proliferating list of choices. Nor does it follow that one can choose a gender that, by its very existence, topples regimes of gender intelligibility as they are currently understood.

In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*, Butler writes:

The paradox of subjectification… is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms…. As a result of this reformulation of performativity, (a) gender performativity cannot be theorized apart from the forcible and reiterative practice of regulatory social regimes; (b) the account of agency conditioned by those very regimes of discourse/power cannot be conflated with voluntarism or individualism, much less with consumerism, and in no way presupposes a choosing subject (Butler 1992, 15).

What renders resistant gendered acts intelligible are the norms that govern, however imperfectly, what constitutes a coherent or acceptable gender. There is, therefore, no gendered position that subverts or evades the strictures of gender simply by existing, nor does theorizing gender performativity mean theorizing a free-floating subject who can choose, create, or opt out of any
gender. Rather than theorize gender in terms of the discourse of individual choice, Butler argues, attempts to resist social mores that unfairly privilege people judged to have an “acceptable” gender must include attention to changing historical and cultural contexts, as well as “considerations of what makes gender intelligible, [and] an inquiry into its conditions of possibility” (Butler 1990, xxi). Queer fat femmes must, in other words, take into account the ways in which their bodies are interpreted by people around them, rather than privileging their own interpretations alone.

The correspondents and guests of FemmeCast, however, assert the very premise Butler warns against: that one “performs” one’s gender consciously, and can “build” the gender of one’s choice. Guest Deb advances this view when she describes her gender identity in “Episode 3: Self-Esteem”:

I wouldn’t call myself a high femme. I’d maybe just be a performative femme. So, like, when I’m being seen, I’ll put on my femmeness. Like, I’ll wear my tits out. It’s like a costume. (emphasis mine)

Here, “performative” takes on the meaning of a conscious (and intermittent, in Deb’s case, though her comment suggests that high femmes may do the same thing on a more constant basis) performance, meant to be seen by others, which presumably reveals the trappings of femininity to be artifice—a “costume.” Deb’s description of her femmeness as a costume is reflected in a larger theme that emerges in several places throughout FemmeCast, in which “performing” one’s gender is conflated with how one dresses. Social Justice Correspondent Zoe makes a similar point in “Episode 5.5: Femme Conference”:

Even though I identified as femme earlier than identifying as fat, to me, when I finally came out as fat, it really helped me embrace my femmeness more, because all of a sudden, I stopped thinking things like, “Oh, I can’t wear that, you know, it won’t look good on my body, it’s too tight, I need to hide myself,” or whatever. You know, “I’d be able to wear something like that when I lose weight.”… So coming into my fatness allowed me to come more fully into my femmeness in a
way that really resonated with who I felt like I was inside, and who I wanted to be, the way I wanted to perform my gender. (emphasis mine)

Although bodily adornment is not incompatible with, and may in fact constitute part of, successful feminist and queer activist initiatives, it is important not to reduce gender to a simple performance, or a simple choice of clothes. To do so is to cite, while simultaneously concealing, the ways in which mainstream discourses of gender and the body are bound up in the logic of consumer capitalism. According to Susan Bordo, postmodern consumerist logic portrays “life as plastic possibility and weightless choice, undetermined by history, social location, or even individual biography” (Bordo 250-251). Consumerist logic advances the idea that one may, through avid consumption, build any body, lifestyle, or identity one wants from an endlessly proliferating list of choices, while concealing the fact that “one cannot have any body that one wants—for not every body will do. The very advertisements whose copy speaks of choice and self-determination visually legislate the effacement of individual and cultural difference and circumscribe our choices” (250).

Queer fat femmes obviously do not intend to efface individual and cultural difference via their rhetoric or their clothing choices. The correspondents and guests of FemmeCast clearly wish to call attention to the fatphobia, homophobia, and misogyny that shapes and limits the lives of queer fat femmes, and to offer both analysis and solutions. Unfortunately, the reliance of queer fat femme discourse on a series of abjected others who are understood to be always already oblivious, if not downright hostile, to queer fat femme activism suggests that there is no point in offering a collective strategy of confrontation to what is, nonetheless, considered a collective problem. Rather, voluntaristic, even consumerist, identity discourses predominate, and much of FemmeCast is therefore dedicated to providing individualist solutions for coping with larger social systems of oppression.
The individualist approach to collective problems is particularly apparent in “Episode 2: Breakups.” Self-Help Correspondent Genne opens this episode by explaining why it is important to dedicate an entire FemmeCast episode to breakups, and to dialogue concerning breakups:

So why talk about breakups, particularly in a collective sense? Why should Bevin devote an entire episode to the topic and discussion of breakups? Well, here’s why. In sharing our observations about the way we live, the way we love, and the way we hurt, and also our changing perspectives and perceptions of ourselves and the world, we contribute to and make more visible both the individual and collective experience of queer people, specifically that of queer femmes…. If you’re heartbroken in the wake of a breakup, you might have to deal with—on top of sadness and pain and anger, or, you know, fill in the blank, whatever it is that you’re feeling—the impact of your already existing marginalization as a queer can make it suck even more. Folks who may never have validated your relationship in the first place, chances are, won’t feel particularly inclined to validate or recognize your heartbreak, and that can be like adding salt to a gaping wound. As a queer femme who may often only be recognized as queer alongside a visibly queer partner, maybe you’re dealing with issues of invisibility as well in the aftermath of a breakup.

In classic feminist form, Genne politicizes the personal in this introduction, noting that misogyny, homophobia, and femme invisibility make breakups a collective as well as a personal issue. Genne does not, however, go on to offer collective, activist solutions that may prevent systems of oppression from compounding an already painful situation. Instead, she advocates self-reflection as a solution to both the collective and the personal dimensions of breakups.

So here are some helpful things that I’ve learned. I’d say that after a painful breakup, you may be desperately trying to frame your experience in a way that makes sense to you, trying to grasp meaning…. If you’re floundering, maybe it would be helpful to think of the painful period after a breakup as a time to have a certain level of self-reflection, self-analysis in your life that you might not take time for otherwise.

While certainly necessary in dealing with the emotional fallout of breakups, it is unclear what self-analysis may offer in terms of confronting the structural problems of homophobia and misogyny Genne points out in this introduction. This solution does, however, make sense in the context of a discourse that offers identity politics and self-determination as the ultimate answers.
to the problems of fat femme invisibility and marginalization. If, as Sarah J. argues in Episode 1, simply identifying as a queer fat femme is a radical act of insubordination, then it follows that anything one does to reflect upon one’s identity, and any acts of self-help that may make it easier, however temporarily, to survive as a queer fat femme in a hostile culture, constitutes a radical activist initiative as well. In order for these acts to continue registering as radical, however, larger structures that enable fatphobia, homophobia, and misogyny must remain in place. As a result, the individualist, identity-based solutions to oppression offered by FemmeCast can only offer a temporary sense of empowerment. Queer fat femme discourse offers little room for the discussion of collective solutions to structural problems.

Race, Intersectional Politics, and the Challenge to Fixed Visibility

The sole exception to the individualist, identity-based discourses of fixed visibility offered by FemmeCast arises wherever race constitutes a primary topic. For example, in “Episode 5: Femme Sharks,” activists Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Zuleikha Mahmood introduce their “Femme Shark Manifesto,” a work that, in Piepzna-Samarasinha’s words, aims to place “women of color, and trans women of color, people of color in general, right at the center” of femme theory. The “Femme Shark Manifesto” covers much of the same ground as femme theory authored predominantly by white authors: it rails against the invisibility of femmes in queer communities, and advances the notion that femmes differ from other forms of “conventional” femininity in a way that renders them visible and hence appropriately political. At the same time, however, Piepzna-Samarasinha and Mahmood take care to advance femme visibility by pointing out the material and historical contributions of femmes to queer, feminist, and anti-racist movements:
WE RECOGNIZE THAT FEMMES ARE LEADERS OF OUR COMMUNITIES.
WE HOLD IT DOWN, CALM YOUR TEARS, ORGANIZE THE RALLY,
VISIT YOU IN JAIL, GET CHILDCARE HOOKED UP, LOAN YOU TWENTY DOLLARS....
FEMME SHARKS WERE THERE WHEN FRIDA KAHLO HOOKED UP WITH HER GIRLFRIENDS
WHEN JOAN NESTLE, CHRYSTOS, JEWELLE GOMEZ, ALEXIS DE VEUX, SYLVIA RIVERA, DOROTHY ALLISON, MINNIE BRUCE PRATT AND AMBER HOLLIBAUGH MADE QUEER FEMME HISTORY
WHEN ZAPATISTA WOMEN HOOKED UP
WHEN OUR COUSINS WERE MAKING OUT IN THE WOMEN'S SECTION OF THE MASJID
WHEN OUR GRANDMAS AND QUEER AUNTIES SNUCK OUT AT NIGHT DIDN'T GET MARRIED TIL LATE- OR AT ALL
HAD A BEST GIRLFRIEND AND STOOD UP FOR HER
FEMME SHARKS WERE THERE. (Piepzna-Samarasinha and Mahmood 2008)

By linking the identities and work of “femme sharks” to political movements and to historical figures, the Femme Shark movement acknowledges that femme identities and bodies are produced in a collective context. And while they ultimately advocate self-determination over how one’s body is interpreted, they observe that the self-determination they advocate is never fully separable from the histories, communities, and legacies of sexism, heterosexism, and racism that inform and circumscribe one’s choices.

Discussions of race in FemmeCast problematize the idea that queer fat femmes’ interpretations of their own body supersede the ways in which those bodies are interpreted by the cultures they inhabit. “Episode 7: How to Ask For Help” features a Femmes of Color Roundtable, in which participants repeatedly articulate the difficulties of maintaining a sense of sovereignty over the interpretation of their bodies and identities. Femme Conference founder Christine de la Rosa opens the roundtable with a meditation on how race, gender, and sexuality intersect to limit her autonomy:
There’s certain ways that I construct femme that in a femme community that are very readable and understandable about what I’m doing, right, what I’m trying to portray. But when I get out into my other communities… I’m sexualized in this way of being, like, the hot Latina woman….

And it makes me uncomfortable, actually. It makes me quite uncomfortable to be in those spaces. Why it feels so uncomfortable when somebody else is reading me in this way: because they’re not queer, but I am. And I’m like, oh, it’s not for you. I’m not doing this for you.

While de la Rosa discusses the difficulty of being interpreted as she interprets herself outside of queer femme communities, dancer Miasia observes the opposite: that racism and exotification in predominantly white queer femme settings prevents her from feeling the kind of power over her visibility that white femmes claim in similar spaces:

It’s funny that you say that you feel like the exotification happens more in heterosexual culture for you, Christine, because I feel like I experience almost the complete opposite. That because my body actually feels very normal among African Americans except for my extremely large breast size, it’s when I’m in queer community, and in particular because I spend a lot of time in white queer community, that I feel like I really experience my exotification.

While many of the white correspondents of FemmeCast emphasize the queer fat femme community as a site of empowerment and self-determination, most of the femmes of color featured on the Podcast argue that this is not necessarily a workable solution for them. For these women, the legacy of racism, misogyny, fatphobia, and homophobia manifests as an inability to feel at home in any single community, a point that anti-racist activist and Fatshion and Beauty Correspondent Tara Shuai emphasizes:

Most places in the world, I can only bring a small part of myself. And… that fracturing has really influenced who I am and how I walk in the world. And how painful that can be to constantly feel like only part of you is acceptable at this point in time.

Because of racism in predominantly white queer and femme communities, misogyny and heterosexism in communities of color, and fatphobia in both, queer fat femmes of color must walk in several communities at once, and are read in very different ways depending on the
community they inhabit at any given time. This suggests that the fantasy of fixed visibility—the belief that a queer fat femme can ever fully determine the means of their visibility or the intelligibility of their identity—is a function of white privilege. Because white queer fat femmes are less likely to feel pressure to split their identity among several different communities, they are more likely to find spaces in which they feel their bodies and identities are legible, and to cite that legibility as a basis for political subversion.

Shuai’s comment emphasizes the painfulness of inhabiting a body and an identity that feels fragmented between several different communities. Elsewhere in the Podcast, however, Miasia suggests that being read differently in the different communities she inhabits need not only constitute a source of pain. She tells the following story about her encounters with older African American women:

When I’m home, or when I’m walking down the street, I definitely—I have had—I have this experience with, you know, definitely the slut. You know, ‘Why is she dressed like that? Let me walk over to her and button up her buttons for her’ from little old ladies. But it’s also, and kind—I have to say, like, I have different feelings about it, because sometimes I feel like it—I know where that comes out of. That, you know, we [African Americans] have to represent ourselves well, and I want you to be representing yourself, you know, the way we all represent ourselves. I’ll get that from, like, you know, the black women in my office and stuff like that. But at the same time, there’s a feeling of home about it, and kind of a feeling of care. Even, you know, when I was younger, it used to just piss me off. And now I can kind of see where it’s also about, you know, them feeling like this is not a way to hold your body as sacred. And I can disagree with them (laughs), but I can also, you know, experience what they are attempting (laughs) to pass on to me.

Miasia’s story offers an alternative understanding of having a body subject to multiple meanings—one in which being interpreted in contradicting ways by the cultures one inhabits is not always already painful or oppressive. In discussing her experiences with older black women who want her to cover up, she observes that she can appreciate the historical and social contexts of certain readings of her body, taking from those readings what is useful to her, without fully
subscribing to the normative demands of those readings. Visibility, according to this schema, is not a battle to prioritize one’s own interpretations over others’, but an ongoing dialectic between one’s own needs and the needs of the several communities in which one belongs.

Thus, by insisting on the “author’s” absolute power to generate her body as a legible text, much queer fat femme discourse not only marginalizes the often “fractured” experiences of queer fat femmes of color, but also ignores the ways in which those experiences offer alternative strategies and ways of thinking about the body as a site of political struggle. By integrating the experiences and words of queer fat femmes of color with the strategies of predominantly white fat femmes, it is possible to generate a new political strategy which understands queer fat femmes’ interpretations of their own bodies as inseparable from the interpretations generated by the myriad communities they inhabit, and which realizes that recognizing those other readings may be empowering or politically useful.

Conclusion

The term “queer,” used almost exclusively by present-day fat femme activists who may in previous eras have been labeled lesbian or bisexual, has undergone a gradual but unmistakable change in meaning since left-wing activists of the LGBT movement redeployed the term in the late 1980s. In recent years, as the primary issue pursued by mainstream LGBT rights organizations has shifted from AIDS activism to marriage equality, “queer” has taken on a more solidly anti-assimilationist, separatist meaning. Sarah J.’s quote in Episode 1 exemplifies, and the cast of FemmeCast repeatedly demonstrates, that the present wave of queer activism defines “queer” as radically differing from, and resisting, heteronormativity. For them, simply
identifying as a queer fat femme is a deviant, revolutionary act: one that ultimately leads to
greater self-care and a focus on developing a closely-knit queer fat femme community.

This definition of “queer,” however, differs considerably from the ways in which the
term was deployed by ACT UP and other queer activist organizations in the late ‘80s and early
‘90s. For these activists, the term “queer” articulated “a queering (blurring) of the lines between
gay and straight, normative and oppositional” (Reed 186). Although radical difference from
both the straight mainstream and from more moderate gays was prized in this era of queer
activism, ACT UP and related communities also recognized the political utility of being able to
“pass” as straight. Theirs was not a politics of separatist community building, but of mainstream
infiltration. In this context, being able to pass was not only pragmatically useful for ACT UP’s
direct action techniques, but also theoretically useful, as it “sent a message about the ubiquity of
gayness and the contingency of ‘normal’ identity” (Reed 188).

I close my exploration of queer fat femme discourse by advocating a return to this
meaning of “queer”: a meaning that embraces both radical difference from and ability to blend
with mainstream norms. A queer politics that celebrates both is a politics that can remain
sensitive to the myriad ways in which fat femme bodies are interpreted in the historical eras,
cultures, and communities they inhabit, and instead of regarding these differing interpretations as
a liability, embrace and manipulate them in a wider ranging politics of confrontation.
Recognizing that the same body may, in shifting contexts, appear radically different from and fit
mainstream expectations may provide queer fat femmes with greater opportunities to confront
fatphobia, heterosexism, and misogyny, and reconfigure femme invisibility as a potential
strength—as “working the weakness in the norm” (Butler 1992, 237) rather than simply
capitulating to it.
A shift in focus from individual readings of the body to the workings of discursive regimes that favor certain bodily interpretations over others frees queer fat femmes from the fantasy of fixed visibility. Though this may initially seem like a relinquishing of the hard-earned visibility femmes and fat people have fought for in recent years, it actually paves the way for a wider range of femme and fat self-expressions, as a rigid identity politics that places the burden of proof of subversion on the individual femme gives way to a more collective understanding of the workings of gender and body norms. This shift additionally allows for a more inclusive movement, one more able to integrate the insights of femmes of all races, and to forge alliances across sexualities, with straight women and lipstick lesbians.

Though queer fat femme rhetoric, as it currently stands, provides a context in which the individual queer fat femme can understand her own body as acceptable and possibly powerful, it currently does little to change the structural limits that require her to rethink her body in the first place. A shift away from identity politics, and toward understanding and infiltrating the norms, customs, and discourses that label some bodies acceptable at the expense of others, will empower queer fat women even further.
CONCLUSION

The specific movements and tactics I have outlined in this project—the emergence of fat acceptance from the feminist, lesbian, and queer movements; the camp and performance-based activism of Big Burlesque; and the identity politics of FemmeCast—demonstrate that queer women in the fat activist movement have to date been less concerned with fomenting political and economic change, and more involved in that vaguely defined arena known as “cultural activism.” In outlining the tactics and dimensions of cultural activism amongst queer fat women, I echo, and provide case studies informed by, the theoretical concerns of social movement theorist T.V. Reed. Reed’s excellent analysis of cultural activism, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle*, observes that the changes social movements have wrought on American culture and values are the changes that are least studied and most overlooked:

[S]ocial movements as forces of cultural change have been relatively neglected. One key reason for this is that culture is a messy business; it is a less easily measured object of analysis than Supreme Court rulings, congressional bills, or income patterns. But to ignore a whole terrain and its impact just because it is not easily quantifiable seems highly unscientific, if not downright strange (xvi).

It is not simply the “strangeness” of neglecting an entire dimension of social movements and their impact that renders such limited analyses suspect. In fact, it is impossible to accurately quantify the effect of a given social movement upon mainstream American culture without examining the production of activist cultures—“culture,” in this case, meaning both artistic expression and the community structures and values that make up a movement—and the extent to which they diffuse into mainstream society. Recognizing the consciousness-raising that takes place within movement cultures, the production of works of art, the development of community
structures and values, and the ways in which all these aspects of a given movement circulate (or fail to circulate) into the dominant American culture, is at least as crucial to understanding the impact and success of social movements as the legislative and economic changes they inspire, if not more so.

I have demonstrated that the fat activist movement was politicized largely by radical lesbian feminists in the 1970s, and continues to receive a great deal of material, tactical, and rhetorical influence from the feminist, lesbian, and queer women’s communities. As such, it makes sense that the examples of queer women’s work in fat activism I have recorded in this project work predominantly at the level of culture, in every sense of that word. Reed points out that feminist activism, in particular, has been instrumental in critiquing the divide between the “cultural” and the “political”:

The modern women’s movement has never fit the mold of social movement theory very well, partly because that theory still holds to the division between the cultural and the political that the women’s movement has done so much to challenge…. Culture was a prime “instrument” of change for the movement, not some decorative, “expressive” addition. So-called cultural activity, or what might more accurately be called “cultural politics,” created changes in consciousness that provided the basis for calls for legislative and other forms of political change (78-79).

The fat activism practiced by groups such as Big Burlesque and the correspondents of FemmeCast have clearly followed in this vein, using culture not simply as a means of expressing grievances that can only be addressed through legislative changes; but rather, demonstrating through the cultures they create that the political is always already implicated in the cultural.

Having thus demonstrated the importance of queer fat women’s cultural activism, the question becomes: how do we measure the efficacy of a given cultural intervention? Reed argues that “the most important dimension of a social movement’s impact may be the diffusion of its culture out into the putative cultural ‘mainstream’” (312). If we accept Reed’s measure of
movement success, how, then, do we analyze queer fat women’s tendency to participate in, and create, insular or even separatist communities that foreground their specific identities and cultural values? As Vivian F. Mayer mentions in the foreword to *Shadow on a Tightrope*, fat women have historically taken part in, and found some strength in, radical lesbian separatist communities. Present-day queer fat femmes, such as those behind the production of FemmeCast, do not necessarily consider themselves separatist, due to the fact that they frequently share their community with butch women, genderqueer-identified people, and trans people of all genders\(^3\). I argue, however, that because many queer fat women’s communities contain stringent rules about which gender expressions do and do not constitute meaningful resistance to the matrix of fatphobia, homophobia, and misogyny; and by extension, which gender expressions do and do not belong in queer fat women’s spaces, it is accurate to describe them as separatist communities. Clearly, the creation and maintenance of separatist communities has long formed a significant component of queer fat women’s activism.

The formation of these communities, in and of itself, does not inhibit the work of queer women seeking to end fatphobia. As Mayer reminds us, separatist communities can be a “haven” (Mayer xiv) for queer fat women, in which for the first time, they can feel their own power and worth—a sense of empowerment that, the work of Big Burlesque demonstrates, is essential for launching larger activist initiatives. As movements grow, separatist communities can function as spaces in which movement participants can re-energize between actions. Furthermore, separatist communities are spaces in which activists can discuss, experiment with,

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\(^3\) This shift in community borders toward inclusion of people other than cisgendered women is reflected most clearly in the changing name and focus of the organization NOLOSE. Originally known as the National Organization for Lesbians of Size, the organization has since changed its full name to the National Organization for Queer Women and Trans People of Size, though it has retained the original acronym. NOLOSE’s biannual conference, once restricted to lesbian- and bisexual-identified women, has now extended admission to all queer women and trans people regardless of gender identity or anatomical sex, refusing admission only to cisgendered men (nolose.org).
and model the values they wish to bring to the culture at large. These communities can form part of movements’ theories about the shortcomings of the dominant culture and the need for activist intervention (Reed xv).

In forming separatist communities, however, it is important to keep in mind what these communities are and are not capable of providing for movement participants, lest they lose their ability to function as a positive force for activists and the dominant culture alike. Vivian F. Mayer’s reflection on the rejection of fat women as potential lovers in lesbian separatist communities reminds us that these communities are always problematic spaces. Separatist communities are not hermetically sealed spaces; they are never fully cut off from the mainstream culture that causes their advocates to feel they are necessary. Community members bring prejudices that they have learned from mainstream culture into separatist spaces—hence the fatphobia circulating in separatist communities of the 1970s, and the racial marginalization that often takes place in present-day queer fat femme groups. Furthermore, the formation of identity-based separatist groups often depends on a series of marginalizations and exclusions—for example, queer fat femmes’ abjection of lipstick lesbians—that are at best problematic and, at worst, inhibit the community’s ability to form alliances and confront the dominant culture.

Separatism as an activist tactic, then, is only effective to the extent that it is understood as a temporary and incomplete reprieve from certain larger cultural prejudices, and as a starting point from which to enact “the diffusion of its culture out into the putative cultural ‘mainstream.’” Separatism cannot be an end unto itself; even as identity-based separatist communities can be healing, confronting and transforming the dominant culture must remain the ultimate goal. In order to achieve that goal, activist groups such as the queer fat women’s movement must develop tactics that enable them to forge alliances with other groups, to examine
the ways in which their communities perform their own acts of marginalization, and to theorize and articulate the inevitable connections between their own community and the culture at large.

I conclude this project by giving an overview of the ways that queer fat women’s movements have moved beyond the project of separatism and self-acceptance, and have simultaneously failed to do so. Comparing Big Burlesque and FemmeCast, I look at the specific roles of ideology and historicization in the tactics of both groups, and ultimately argue that the work of queer fat women is reaching a point of transition. Fat activism, particularly in the forms queer fat women promote and enact, is beginning to diffuse into the mainstream culture, albeit in limited and problematic ways. In order to further this process of diffusion, and to ensure that the tactics the dominant culture appropriates are indeed fat-positive, queer fat women activists need to rethink many of their identity-based separatist ideologies, and to recognize that activist techniques focused solely on the formation of insular communities are no longer viable.

**Diffusion, Defusion, and Ideology**

One principal difference between the tactics of Big Burlesque and FemmeCast involves each group’s deployment of ideology. As a performance troupe whose chosen art form requires few words on the part of the performer, and whose media appearances typically involved little more than sound bites, Big Burlesque’s work prioritized an expressive over an ideological approach. Conversely, while FemmeCast’s episodes include some expressive features—a typical episode contains three songs—the audio talk format of the Podcast is ideal for the development and discussion of movement ideologies.

According to Reed,

movement cultures function best when they both express and move beyond ideology. Ideologies—elaborated key ideas and values—are crucially important
to any movement. But they are also often the points of contention that pull movements apart. The very vagueness of “culture” that has kept many social scientists from examining it seriously as a movement force is precisely one of its values (294).

Activist work that moves beyond ideology is crucial to the success of a given social movement for two reasons. First, such work articulates the values of a movement in a pleasurable manner that may, however, temporarily, smooth over ideological conflicts within a movement, enabling activists from varying factions to feel a sense of solidarity. Secondly, the expressive works of a social movement are more likely to find its way into the cultural mainstream than their overtly ideological counterparts.

Big Burlesque presented a blend of the artistic and the ideological that enabled it to be, at least partly, diffused into the cultural mainstream. Heather MacAllister and her fellow troupe members favored an activist strategy that emphasized performing fatness over articulating fat activist ideologies. To the extent that they did articulate their connections to a larger fat activist movement, Big Burlesque members tailored their responses to predominantly straight and predominantly queer audiences differently: emphasizing the professionalism of their dancers and the arbitrariness of present-day beauty standards in straight settings; positioning their work as part of the larger fat activist movement in predominantly queer ones. This chiefly expressive, audience-sensitive approach paid off in mainstream exposure: Big Burlesque made several appearances in local media, including the San Francisco Chronicle and local arts show SPARK; received national exposure in a brief clip for television show Entertainment Tonight; and upon her death, MacAllister’s obituary appeared in the New York Times.

Big Burlesque’s work and media exposure paved the way for a greater diffusion of fat activist values into the cultural mainstream. This diffusion has, however, proven to be limited and problematic. Big Burlesque’s cultural contributions are, in this sense, typical of most
instances in which movement values are appropriated by the dominant culture: Reed argues that the reality of social movements’ diffusion into the mainstream is obscured by the inherent contestation between normative institutions and extra-institutional movements… which means that movements almost never get credit for the political, social, or cultural changes to which they contribute. Those changes are always mediated and indirect. And when they are not indirect, they tend to be superficial (312).

The legacy of Big Burlesque is perhaps most visible in a spate of recent television shows, most notably plus-size dating reality show *More to Love*. This television show, in which several fat (heterosexual) women vie for the attentions of an equally fat (male) bachelor, not only obscures its indebtedness to the work of fat activists like MacAllister, but appropriates the ideology of fat activists in superficial, problematic ways. In addition to the ardent heterosexuality of the show, *More to Love* suggests that fat women can only register as beautiful in comparison to, and in the eyes of, equally fat people. Furthermore, although the show does not require weight loss of its contestants, it frequently emphasizes the near-impossibility of fat people finding appreciative partners, and positions the show as the female contestants’ last chance at love. For all these limitations, however, it does bear the mark of activists such as MacAllister, who pioneered a visual language of fat women’s sexual desirability, and who paved the way for popular culture depictions of fat people that are not always already simultaneous with the imperative for weight loss.

The extent to which fat-positive discourse is mediated, made superficial, and severed from its activist roots as it is diffused into the mainstream, brings into relief the need for principally ideological forms of activism. As Reed argues, the constant deployment of ideological approaches is necessary, in order to ensure that the more expressive forms of
movement culture, when appropriated by the dominant culture, are not mediated beyond recognition:

The central paradox is that the energies of radical movement cultures and the cultural forms they generate have their greatest impact when they are diffused in a less overtly ideological way into the larger social arena via cultural movements. But that impact is largely defused unless self-consciously ideological social movements continue their work (313; emphasis in original).

In other words, while the fat activist movement requires groups such as Big Burlesque in order to enable the diffusion of its values into the mainstream, it also requires groups that focus predominantly on the production and distribution of movement ideology in order to prevent activists’ more expressive, less ideological work from losing its political edge.

A group such as FemmeCast, who focuses mainly on consciousness-raising and the circulation and development of ideology, could theoretically provide the pressure necessary to prevent the defusion of activist goals following the diffusion of fat-positive art into the mainstream. Unfortunately, because it adopts a politics that emphasizes, not what work needs to be done or values espoused in order to create a size-positive society, but rather what identity one must have in order to comprehend fat politics, FemmeCast forecloses its ability to provide formidable social pressure. While a political discourse that positions the queer fat femme as a self-evidently radical gender and body outlaw who always determines the nature of her own visibility may provide some women with a sense of individual empowerment, it is insufficient for dealing with the reality of a societal mainstream that is already absorbing and defusing some of the values of fat activism. In order to further the cause of fat activism, separatist elements within the movement will need to confront this reality, and alter their political strategies in order to respond to it.
The Issue of History

It is arguable that the relative insularity of many queer fat women’s communities represents a necessary phase in the life of all social movements. Inner reflection and self-acceptance are, after all, important first steps in the coming out process. And as I have demonstrated, “coming out” is a useful and frequently deployed metaphor within the fat activist movement. The question becomes, however, how long the self-acceptance phase is expected to predominate within a movement.

One of the functions of culture within a social movement is to historicize—to “invent, tell, and retell the history of the movement” (Reed 300). Unless a social movement has a strong sense of its own history, it runs the risk of losing its access to the foundational work of previous generations, and having to reinvent the initial “coming out” phase anew with each new generation of activists. If a movement has to constantly re-enter the initial phase of self-acceptance, it can never achieve an adequate sense of its own power to confront and meaningfully change the dominant culture. In order to prevent this from happening, social movements must devote a significant portion of their work to preserving and telling their history.

To date, queer fat women activists have undertaken the work of historicizing their movement in very limited ways, if at all. I have argued previously that Big Burlesque strategically deployed what Pamela Robertson calls “productive anachronisms” in order to historicize female health and beauty standards. Additionally, the troupe’s appropriation of camp style referred to previous generations of queer and feminist activism, connecting the project of fat acceptance to these larger movements. Big Burlesque did not, however, devote much energy to historicizing the fat activist movement, let alone queer women’s specific contributions to it.
Throughout her life, Heather MacAllister viewed this lack of historicization as an impediment to fat activist success, and spoke out in favor of more and better attempts to archive and retell queer fat women’s history. For example, in her 2006 NOLOSE keynote speech, she said:

Since early on in NOLOSE, I have been begging someone, anyone, to start getting our fat dyke history recorded. I feel like we keep reinventing the wheel; that each generation comes along and feels like we are the first ones to invent fat liberation. And frankly, we can get a little bit snotty about it.

In this speech, MacAllister spoke not of the potential problems that may arise from a failure to historicize queer fat women’s activism, but of the problems that have already arisen as a result. The lack of a clearly recorded, retold history in queer fat women’s communities has resulted in a movement that constantly “reinvents the wheel”: that repeatedly reproduces the initial self-acceptance phase of the movement without rebuilding on it. The “snotty” attitude MacAllister refers to here is indicative of a lack of communication between generations of queer fat women activists. Younger generations of activists do not acknowledge the work of older women, and approach fat activism with the sense that they invented it—all, MacAllister suggests, because there are not accessible histories in place to remind them that they did not invent it.

FemmeCast displays even less concern for historicizing queer fat femme identities and activism. Only one episode, “Episode 5: Femme Sharks” places significant emphasis on the importance of locating queer fat femmes historically. As I have previously discussed, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Zuleikha Mahmood’s Femme Shark Manifesto, read in full during the course of this episode, advances femme visibility and activism in part by retelling the history of femmes’ contributions to the communities and social movements in which they have participated. In retelling these stories, Piepzna-Samarasinha and Mahmood call attention to the ways in which queer fat femme identities are produced in part by the forms of systematic
oppression that have limited and shaped them, as well as by the communities and social movements in which they have participated and found a sense of empowerment. The Femme Shark Manifesto, however, is also an attempt to call attention to and counter the marginalization of femmes of color in predominantly white queer communities, which promote the idea that individual femmes are the sole arbiters of their own visibility. To the extent that femmes of color are marginalized within queer fat femme communities, their historicized approach to queer fat femme identity remains marginalized, as well.

Later in the same episode, FemmeCast host Bevin Branlandingham conducts an interview with famous queer fat femme author Dorothy Allison—the only intergenerational conversation between femmes that takes place in the entire Podcast to date. During the course of the interview, Branlandingham asks only one question about Allison’s long history as a femme in the lesbian and queer women’s movements:

Tell me about coming out as femme, and what that was like for you, um, coming out. Especially from the lesbian ‘70s. I know Leah [Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarsinha]’s talked to me about how sort of anti butch-femme things have been.

The remainder of the questions focus on Allison’s own individual identity labels, and the steps that she as an individual has taken to ensure her visibility as a queer fat femme.

Throughout the interview, Allison attempts to historicize her responses to Branlandingham’s questions. For example, when Branlandingham asks her what it means to her to be a queer fat femme, Allison responds:

Um, well, I’ve always identified as queer because I—I was a lesbian, and then I was a dyke, and then I was a lesbian feminist, and then I was a crazy dyke, and then I was a leatherdyke. And sexually, I’m still pretty much all of those things. But I started using queer thirty years ago because I felt like a queer dyke within the queer community… and I was. I was working class, and I was into rough trade, and I was troublesome, and. And my concepts of, um, what it meant to be feminist and autonomous were always on the edge of where other people were willing to let the definitions slide. (Laughs.) So, mostly, that’s how I would
identify. And then everybody started saying “queer,” but people meant so many different things by it. So for a while, I abandoned it because it was just so generalized, it had lost meaning. But I think it’s back.

The different ways in which Allison and Branlandingham invoke history over the course of the interview reveal the limited communication that takes place between generations in present-day queer fat femme communities, and its consequences for the efficacy of queer fat femme activism. For Allison, “identities are not frozen forms into which new content can be poured. Nor are they individual creations. All identities are collective identities. And social movements are among the key forces transforming/creating new cultural identities” (Reed 308). Allison’s identity is necessarily shaped by history and by her participation (and frequent marginalization) in queer, lesbian and feminist social movements. Consequently, the words she uses to describe herself change as the histories, needs, and conflicts of those movements change.

Branlandingham, however, does not appear to take up the thread Allison lays down concerning the historically determined, collective production of identities. Her invocation of “the lesbian ‘70s” implies a belief that the common thread of femme history, the only meaningful sense in which femme identity can be historicized, are the means by which varying queer and lesbian communities have repressed and marginalized femmes. That Branlandingham continues to ask Allison how she identifies and maintains her own visibility as an individual suggests that while she understands the importance of recording the history of femme marginalization, she has no corresponding sense that femme identities may also be produced collectively, according to changing historical needs and constraints.

Present-day queer fat femme discourse tends to historicize marginalization, while presenting identity production as a dehistoricized and self-determined process. As we have seen, the lack of attention to the collective, historically determined nature of identity production in
queer fat femme circles leads to the creation of a separatist identity politics that rests on the abjection of presumably less transgressive others, does not lend itself to the formation of political alliances, and fails to imagine political responses to homophobia, fatphobia, and misogyny that require a more collective, confrontational, and protracted effort than mere self-acceptance. In this sense, queer fat femmes’ current failure to transmit movement history via their chosen activist media represents not only a failure of memory, but also of imagination and power. Because present-day queer fat women activists do not understand their identities as “strategically necessary creations that change as movements change” (Reed 308), they are unable to recognize self-acceptance as an important phase in a larger movement that ultimately demands reaching beyond the individual for collective solutions. By aiming to fix their identities and their visibility, queer fat femmes in particular threaten to fix the movement, causing it to stagnate and sabotaging its ability to confront mainstream cultural institutions.
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