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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

“LET’S GET TOGETHER AND CHEW THE FAT”: WOMEN, SIZE, AND COMMUNITY IN  
MODERN AMERICA

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HISTORY

BY

AMELIA EARHART SERAFINE

CHICAGO, IL

AUGUST, 2017

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Every acknowledgement will tell you that a doctoral dissertation cannot be accomplished alone. Well, I tried. Below is an abbreviated list of everyone who intervened in that solitary and lonely effort and turned a trembling wisp of an idea into a plump and ample work.

I'd like to thank the tireless staff of Loyola University's inter-library loan, especially librarian Jennifer Stegen for hunting down obscure pamphlets, cookbooks, and cassette tapes. The archivists at the American Medical Association, University of Indiana, UCLA, and the University of Connecticut for their assistance, conversation, and for offering me lunch money when my wallet was lost. I must thank TOPS for opening their organizational records to me and allowing me to attend their yearly convention, OA for sharing digitized documents with me, and *Weight Watchers Magazine* for letting me comb through their stock of back-copies. A special thank you goes out to the numerous scholars of the American Culture Association's Fat Studies Area, especially Rachel Fox, for sharing their work, hearing my ideas, and finding midnight beignets with me in New Orleans in 2015. The most necessary intervention into my work came from the voices of the women who made up these communities, and to them I offer a most heartfelt thanks for sharing their lives and experiences with me in our conversations.

I could not have completed this work without the patience, support, and friendship of my chair, Dr. Michelle Nickerson. Your faith in me was especially valuable when my own wore thin, and your advice on how to locate and amplify women's voices was vital. To my committee, Dr. Timothy Gilfoyle, for sticking with me through two different dissertation subjects, Dr.

Robert Bucholz, whose oaken door was rarely closed to me, and to Dr. Elliott Gorn for letting me darken your doorway for more years than I'd like to recount.

When I began as a doctoral student, I anticipated the piles of books I would read, the papers I would grind out, and the coffee I would drink. I had no idea that I would stand at my classmate's weddings, play games at their baby showers, or march in the streets by their side. To this found family: my dissertation belongs to you. It is for Erin, who laughed at me the first time we met (I deserved it). For Dan, who told me "it just has to be a thing." For Devin, who lit the path for me. For Hope, who hugged me on Loyola Avenue. For Katie, who gave me Tuesdays. For Rachel, who makes a good dance mix. For Chelsea, who took me to Hamilton. For Matt, and Amy, and Nicole, and Pete, and Will, and Chris, and Laura and...well, this could go on for a while. Thank you all, for arguing with me in class, for writing at my side, and for buying me drinks at Bruno's.

Finally, this dissertation could not have happened without my friends and family stubbornly asking if I was done yet. Thank you Aunt Rose, for chatting with me about Weight Watchers, Meghan for her sustaining enthusiasm for this project, and Jenny for her astounding love. I owe a special thanks to my mother, who not only drove me to Connecticut so I could conduct my research, but without whom this work would never have occurred to me. She showed me what these groups meant to the women in them. And last, to my son. Max, who turned into a wonderful young man while I had my face stuck in a book. He is my dissertation orphan, and the best thing I've ever made.

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## INTRODUCTION

Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt! -*Vogue*, 1913

In many cultures and historical periods women have been proud to be large- being fat was a sign of fertility, of prosperity, of the ability to survive...fat activists suggest that making women afraid to be fat is a form of social control. Fear of fat keeps women preoccupied, robs us of our pride and energy, keeps us from *taking up space*. - *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, 1984

Though historians of fat disagree on the extent to which “fat” has been acceptable in the past, there is no doubt that we live in a time in which fat bodies are the subject of extraordinary surveillance and critique.<sup>1</sup> This work is the story of fat women. But every story about fat women is also a story about all women. All women in the twentieth century negotiated an evolution of expertise and authority over women’s bodies and participated in a struggle for personal autonomy within a culture that compelled female slenderness, medicalized women's bodies, and commodified "wellness." From the early twentieth century, advice columnists, salon managers, and doctors attempted to establish authority over women’s unruly bodies. A close study of the formation and early years of groups like Take Off Pounds Sensibly, Overeaters Anonymous and

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bucholz, for instance, examines representations of Queen Anne in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century as “extremely fat” and “slow-witted,” creating an image of Anne as “out of control greedy, and transgressive.” For more, See “The Stomach of a Queen or Size Matters: Gender, Body Image and the Historical reputation of Queen Anne” in *Queens and Power in Early Modern England*, ed. C. Levin and R. Bucholz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press,) pp. 242-272, “Every Inch Not a King?": The Bodies of the (First Two) Hanoverians” in *Dynastic Politics, Monarchical Representation and the Union between Britain and Hanover* (German Historical Institute, 2015).

Weight Watchers from 1948 to the 1980s shows that diets and ideas about body size were not simply dictated to women by popular or medical authorities. Moreover, the Fat Liberation movement of the 1970s and '80s offered an alternative to compulsory slenderness. As a part of the wider trend of women's movements, these groups grappled with the many problems faced by women, not just the issue of their waistlines. The formation and maintenance of groups around size illustrates the way in which women's conversations about their bodies always expanded to include almost every aspect of their lives. These groups created a space for women to discuss their marriages or their divorces, career aspirations, emotional problems and needs, and relationships with children and friends. Dieters imagined that the size of their body was the source of their difficulties, but in the process of reducing or attempting to reduce, many women discovered larger structural forces that impacted their lives. They joined groups to lose weight, but in discussions about diet tactics, they realized their common problems: their husbands scoffed at their diets, they did not have the time or space to create separate meals, or their families objected to the time they spent at meetings. Some, like the women who walked out of Weight Watchers to establish Fat Underground (F.U.) in the early 1970s, came to reject diet culture entirely as they increasingly identified with more radical elements of the women's movement. Others, like members of O.A. rejected the MetLife weight tables and redefined the meaning of "normal weight" and established that "each person shall be the sole judge of what is their normal weight."<sup>2</sup> By the 1980s, O.A.'s ethos of recovery was the language by which some

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<sup>2</sup> 1962 Article 8.17 of the OA Guidelines: "Those elected at the regular annual meeting in 1964 must then be at their normal weight. Those re-elected at the annual meeting in 1965 must have maintained their normal weight for six months prior thereto." However, OA also decided that "each person shall be the sole judge of what is their normal weight."

feminists spoke and wrote about their struggles with “overeating” and “compulsive eating” and understood these problems as a “consequence of [their] oppression.”<sup>3</sup> Letters to Weight Watchers founder Jean Nidetch were full of frank discussions of sexuality, struggles with the “double shift,” and marital dissatisfaction alongside their discussions of body image and food.

In these groups, women created a space for fat women. In these spaces, women undertook body work through interpersonal relationships, as they attempted to understand and to articulate what it meant to be fat in their time. The meaning of fat is historical. A fat woman in 1948 was in danger of being a bad citizen, an ineffective mother, and a lousy wife. A fat woman in 1968 heard messages that she would not succeed in college, in a career, or in love and sex. Weight Watchers, in the 1970s and ‘80s, built an empire on those fears, and sold a weight-loss program to emerging career woman, folding weight-control into the evolving image of a shoulder-padded corporate woman. Women negotiated oppression through these subcultural networks which outwardly appeared to submit to hegemonic cultural norms about women’s bodies, but internally created alternate methods of resistance. Unlike groups devoted to losing weight, the women of the fat liberation movement used their existing networks of radical feminism to explicitly reject compulsory slenderness, but they too navigated interpersonal relationships to do so, and to establish their own positive identities as fat women in the 1970s and ‘80s.

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<sup>3</sup> T.D., “Overeating,” *Off Our Backs*. Vol 9, No 4 (April 1979), 28, Deborah Swanson, “Compulsive Eating,” *Off Our Backs*, Vol 13, No 4 (April 1983), 22. Other women of OA who did not identify as feminist also used the group to negotiate their oppression, as the member who wrote “I’m in the process of turning a negative marriage into a positive divorce.” *Lifeline*.

In uncovering the history of communities of size in the twentieth century, I resist the simple paradigm of feminist/non-feminist. I do so because my subjects did, as well. Women got together to “chew the fat” and in doing so created personal autonomy through interpersonal agency, negotiated the cultural messages of fatness unique to their times, and talked back with each other’s help to refute and redefine what it meant to be a fat women in America. They found a shared experience of fatness, and in doing so discovered also the shared experiences of sexist oppression. These groups invite us to reconsider what “feminism” meant for women in their own times, and how women created alternative shared identities to understand and remake themselves.

Women in communities of size attempted to wrest control of their bodies away from experts, to define their own bodily parameters, and to understand the forces in their lives that demanded a physical perfection that was always just out of reach. They worked with other women to support each other and to discuss issues particular to women and to women’s oppression. These groups were not “feminist,” *per se* yet I argue that they were part of the “women’s movement.” Between 1948 and the 1980s, communities of size and the women involved answered the dieting culture and industry by making body size a woman’s issue that women could solve. The commercial success of Weight Watchers ultimately marginalized that attempt, folding a variety of groups into the mainstream diet industry by commercializing their organizational structure and making it profitable.

The history of communities of size offer a chance for historians to expand the understanding of the broader post-war women’s movement to include alternate strategies utilized

by women to comprehend their shared oppression. Historian of the body Joan Jacob Brumberg argues that for women and girls in the twentieth century, the body was an “all-consuming project” in which “the shape and appearance of their bodies [was] a primary expression of their individual identity.”<sup>4</sup> While Brumberg uses the diaries of girls to access private understandings of the body, for girls and women in the twentieth century body-work was not always a lonely pursuit. For many women in America, individual identity as a dieter or as a fat woman was created through membership in a community of women, one with defining literature, cultural practices, and meeting places and spaces. The literature and practices of these groups were informed by the self-help movement, evangelical Christianity, and women’s liberation. Their praxis adopted elements of psychiatry and psychology, and their meeting places and spaces were contingent on the social geography of the suburbs. My work serves to illustrate the ways in which women negotiated the discourses of dieting, recovery, and second-wave feminism not as discrete alternatives, but as cultural products that they could re-purpose to their own needs and desires.

Women used the physical and mental space of groups they created to re-negotiate the popular and medical discourses of health and slenderness and establish new parameters by which to measure “success.” For the women involved, these groups re-defined what it meant to be fat and lose weight. At times they re-enforced the diet rhetoric of women’s magazines, doctors and insurance companies. But within the negotiations of these autonomous groups, women articulated new and even counter-cultural understandings of the relationships between food, size,

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<sup>4</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997) xxi.

and self. Women negotiated interior conceptions of body amidst exterior cultural pressures in the mid-twentieth century. Concerns about women's place in marriages and the job market, explorations of sex and sexuality amidst the sexual revolution, and the role of women as consumers all informed the understanding of what body size meant for women. Ultimately this re-negotiation of hegemonic pressures on the ground between women in groups created by women spurred communities of size into a national cultural phenomenon. For thousands of women who did not consider themselves feminists, women who would not have sought a self-help group for "women who love to much" or countless other new "addictions," a diet group was their introduction to concepts of recovery, talk therapy, consciousness raising, and the potentially unifying shared experiences and oppression of women.

The act of dieting to lose weight reflects an external intervention into a woman's life, and from a feminist point of view, that intervention is patriarchal and oppressive in nature. Contemporary feminist critics like Naomi Wolf and Susan Faludi view dieting as a tool to control women, and historians of dieting have largely followed suit. Faludi describes dieting as part of the "social campaign against wayward women" and in *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used against Women* (1991), Wolf declares that "a culture fixated on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty, but an obsession about female obedience. Dieting is the most potent political sedative in women's history."<sup>5</sup> No doubt the promulgation of an ideal- and for most unattainable- female figure impacted women's lives and their decisions to diet. They

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<sup>5</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are used Against Women* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 187 and Susan Faludi *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Random House, 1991), 214.



were daily inundated with images and advice, from magazines, cookbooks, advice columns and their doctors that all seemed to impart the same message: lose weight. Yet by focusing on these top-down messages and images, historical scholarship fails to fully address the discursive nature of the diet dialog. Women were active agents in diet culture, not just consumers or patients. Within the diet group movement, women examined and negotiated mainstream diet advice, and replied with their own ideas.

Following the theories of post-modernism, historians beginning in the 1980s sought to understand the ways in which gender, largely neglected by Foucault, led to unique instruments of control over the lives of women. Building on theories of bio-power, feminist historians argued that the *female* body specifically was a site of medical, social and political discourse.<sup>6</sup> These historians largely focused on the role of medicine and the attempts to define and control female production and sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Women's beauty culture, body image, and size have been less studied.<sup>8</sup> Much of the work on women, body image, and size comes from sociologists, and therefore elides the historically specific formation of these cultural constructions. These scholars focus on the use of dieting and surveillance of women's size as an extension of Foucauldian

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<sup>6</sup> See Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body*. (Routledge, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> See John S. and Robin M. Haller, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America, Complaints and Disorders* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1974), Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1985). Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), Mary Elizabeth Fissell *Vernacular Bodies: the Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> See Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in turn-of-the-century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986) and *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), Richard L. Sartore, *Body Shaping: Trends, Fashions, and Rebellions* (Commack, New York: Kroshka Books, 1998), Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), Maxine Leeds Craig *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

theory, and argue that “dieting lies at the intersection of material embodiment and cultural discourses and practices.”<sup>9</sup> The body is evidence of women’s negotiation of cultural discourses, and women’s practices of dieting are worked daily upon their material bodies. As prevalent as body-work has been in the lives of twentieth-century women, historians have left that phenomena largely understudied. Left to the realm of sociology, as well as popular non-fiction, serious histories of diets and dieting culture are few on the ground.

The sociological narrative of diets presumes that dieting communities represent a reaction to second-wave feminism, even as they attempt to complicate the dichotomy of feminist/dieter. My research interrupts this narrative by suggesting that communities of size arose alongside and in conversation with multiple twentieth-century feminisms. Feminist critics’ persistent evaluation of dieting groups based on their supposed feminist or anti-feminist principles obscures the multiple understandings of women’s issues displayed in diet groups. Sandra Lee Bartky offers three categories of discipline that produce docile female bodies, including “those that aim to produce a certain size and configuration.” Dieting is an especially powerful tool within this category, which produces a “modality of embodiment that is particularly feminine.”<sup>10</sup> Kandi Stinson also builds on the work of Foucault to argue that dieting is an internalized form of hegemonic surveillance. Furthermore, she suggests that the “confession” aspect of dieting communities is linked to that surveillance and that “body monitoring [...] is most effective when

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<sup>9</sup> Kandi M. Stinson, *Women and Dieting Culture: Inside a Commercial Weight-Loss Group* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power.” *The Politics of Women’s Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*. Ed. R. Weitz. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 27.

linked to confession.”<sup>11</sup> In this estimation, group “confessions” are a form of control that brings the confessor back in line with social norms, in this case by expressing dissatisfaction with the dieter’s “abnormal” body shape or size. Ultimately, Stinson finds that within communities like Weight Watchers, “feminist language is co-opted” to allow a “highly selective, watered down version of liberal feminism to promote itself.”<sup>12</sup> She goes on to compare that kernel of feminism within WW to OA, a group which she argues works to “suppress or resist feminist metaphor.”<sup>13</sup> Judith Rolls, another participant observer in both WW and OA, counters Stinson by framing OA as an alternative to the “dominant weight loss paradigm” which “functions to place and maintain women in subordinate positions and to profit financially as it does so.”<sup>14</sup>

Hillel Schwartz’s *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* is one of the few historical monographs on dieting. A post-modern exploration of the culture of reduction, Schwartz’s work demonstrates that dieting methods are historically specific, and relate to prevailing “fantasies” about bodies and body size. His descriptions of diets and dieters are ultimately unsatisfying on several points: an overuse of published proscriptive literature, especially medical discourse, which obscures the interaction between the reducer and the cultural pressure to reduce. Furthermore, an investigation of hegemonic body ideals flattens the category of “dieter” without regards to gender, race, or class. These shortcomings are especially evident in

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<sup>11</sup> Stinson, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Stinson, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Rolls, 84.

Schwartz's treatment of dieting communities, which is confined to less than three pages of post-modern psychobabble, ruminating that "TOPS stuck audaciously to the present and OA moved one day at a time into the future, Weight Watchers was curiously attached to the past."<sup>15</sup> His meticulous investigation of other dieting methods is conspicuously absent here, where only the barest surface of these groups is scratched, leading to this oddly flat characterization which assumes that the approaches, world-views and relationships of these groups with wider dieting messages is fixed, static, and wholly discrete from each other.

Schwartz ultimately fails to appreciate the complexities of the negotiations between dieters and diet, and the degrees to which communities and individuals re-imagined hegemonic dieting pressures to suit their own needs and experiences. This complexity is likewise overlooked by Peter Stearns' *Fat History, Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture* (1997). Stearns, more than Hillel, is concerned with the gendering of modern notions of fat. He argues that dieting culture rises at moments when women gain public power: the 1920s and 1960s specifically.<sup>16</sup> Building on Foucault, Stearns argues that in the twentieth century, patriarchal forces turned to the "use of dieting to monitor women" and that "weight morality bore disproportionately on women precisely because of their growing independence, or seeming independence, from other standards."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Schwartz, 208.

<sup>16</sup> See Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern World* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), and Matelski.

<sup>17</sup> Stearns, 72.

Stearns uses women's magazine, medical advice, and advice columns as evidence, all of which stressed that fat women were "lazy and undisciplined."<sup>18</sup> Stearns' focus is on dieting and "fat" literature, not action or community. Like Schwartz, the audience for this literature is flattened to unwitting receptors that presumably internalized these messages whole hog. Stearns "psychocultural" methodology offers unsatisfying allusions to the motivations and actions of women who dieted, as he muses that they "could have found perverse comfort in subscribing to rigorous standards in order to repay their new latitudes in other lifestyle areas."<sup>19</sup> Stearns discounts the ways in which women incorporated those new behaviors or "lifestyle areas" into dieting itself, and how those new behaviors made communal dieting possible, rather than the reverse. While Stearns argues that women were only permitted new public behaviors because they were simultaneously restricted by dieting, my work suggests that new modes of group dieting relied on an extension of those new behaviors, such as a focus on the sexual self, consumption, freedom from home, and civic and professional engagement.

Issues of body size often seem to focus on white women, as this work largely does. This is not because women of color do not experience sizesim, in fact they experience a sizeism that intersects with racism in classism in unique and important ways. Yet it is most often white women in the twentieth century who led the movement to organize communities around body size. Perhaps because within a racial hierarchy that positions white women as the aesthetic of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>19</sup> Stearns, 87.

beauty white women have the most to lose by being fat within that structure since they have the most to gain by being thin.

Though much work on the biological roots of women's oppression, justifiably, interrogates women's reproductive rights and experiences, I offer a common embodied experience shared by all women. Fat and the fear of fat affect women of every color and creed, and at every stage of life. Neither youth nor crone escape the pressure to be small, to take up less space, to avoid jiggling or spilling over. Below you will find stories of girls as young as six parading weight-loss across a stage, a teenager standing against the wall at a wedding party to hide her shameful posterior, young women trying to lose weight to win boyfriends, career women worried their size will interfere with promotions, and women trying to lose weight well into their eighties.

This work locates these women through the communities they developed. I define “communities of size” as organizations or networks of women built around fatness. Most women within these groups self-identify as “fat,” an identity which is fundamentally relational. I use the term throughout this work to acknowledge that identity, but also as a neutral descriptive term. “Overweight” and “obese” are medical terms, and used accordingly when appropriate.

I focus on women to explicate how fat is gendered. Fat is used extensively as a tool of surveillance and discipline of female bodies. Fat is a barrier to traditional female roles, especially for middle and upper-class women. Abigail Saguy argues that “the pursuit of (female) thinness is an integral part of elite and middle-class (but not working class) habitus.”<sup>20</sup> For women

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<sup>20</sup> Abigail Saguy, *What's Wrong with Fat?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13.

particularly, Kathleen LeBesco notes, fat as neither simply an aesthetic state nor a medical condition but a *political* situation.”<sup>21</sup> LeBesco positions “weight as a subversive cultural practice” and “interpersonal agency” created via “small talk,” psychic connections to others, and interpersonal communication.<sup>22</sup> LeBesco finds this a useful schema for analyzing the language that fat people use to talk about themselves. Like Elizabeth Grosz, she believes that creating a fat subject can disrupt the domination of the ideal body by moving the fat body out of the realm of natural science and medicine and into “the realm of social and cultural criticism.”<sup>23</sup>

This work on fat identity, like my own, builds on the work of Judith Butler to investigate the body is a discursive production. This dissertation argues that while fat female bodies are regulatory constructs requiring extensive discipline and surveillance, women utilize interpersonal agency to negotiate that discourse. They talk back. I find this discursive production of fat bodies via these groups’: publications, meetings, letters, and images. I narrowed my focus by locating groups with the following characteristics: founded by women with a primarily or exclusively female membership, utilized extensive printed materials, and a having a national presence. I explored the textures and intricacies of these groups using oral histories and analysis of printed texts.

Chapter One follows the development a twentieth century ideal of slenderness, as the Gibson Girl morphed into a sporting flapper. Within that cultural milieu, I untangle the myriad

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<sup>21</sup> Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Boston: University of Massachusetts, 2004), 1.

<sup>22</sup> LeBesco, 2.

<sup>23</sup> See Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). LeBesco, 6.

“experts” all eager to lead women to slenderness, and how women spoke back to them, and granted them authority. Particularly powerful was the relationship of women to the American Medical Association, and their role in granting that agency the mantle of expertise over a sea of diet “frauds” and “quacks.” Rejecting the top-down historical model of physician and patient, I instead examine correspondence between women and the AMA to argue that women were instrumental in establishing medical authority over fat female bodies by the mid-twentieth-century.

Chapter Two follows chronologically, and offers my first case-study of a community of size. TOPS continued a warm relationship between women and the AMA, and created a diet group around the principle “ask your doctor first.” The women of TOPS negotiated the patron-client relationship with the AMA and the medical establishment, and established themselves as partners rather than patients. Within their groups, the members of TOPS also created a modern narrative of dieting, including the “before and after” image, and the theme of a “new me” who is slender and vivacious. TOPS members participated in a metaphorical and literal pageantry of fatness and weight loss which, paradoxically, created a space for fat women to display their still-fat bodies.

Chapter Three extends the chronology of this work into the 1980s, noting communities’ of size turn from the medical to the spiritual. Overeaters Anonymous and Overeaters Victorious ultimately created a schema of weight-loss through submission to God. These groups emerged alongside Charismatic Christianity in the 1970s and ‘80s and folded that religious movement into ideas of self-help. I seek to understand how submission fit into women’s conception of self



through oral histories and literary analysis. This spiritual weight-control movement utilized extensive printed materials to create an imagined emotional community for members, and this print culture allowed for a laterally expanding network of groups without strong central organization. Through this localism and spiritualism, women reclaimed a personal authority over their body size.

Chapter Four examines Weight Watchers, which developed alongside these groups and monetized their models in the 1960s. Founder Jean Nidetch created a brand based on a blend of her personal “success story” and the language of science. Though Weight Watchers utilized a weekly meeting like the above groups, Jean Nidetch re-imagined them as “classes” with a clear leader. Through this meeting format and publication of a monthly glossy magazine, Weight Watchers removed members’ authority over their bodies and offered instead a mystified and rigid diet overseen by a strict “lecturer.”

All of these groups formed communities of size in which the ultimate goal was weight-loss or maintenance. Other women, though, built a community to engage in activism. Chapter Five locates the women who stopped dieting or trying to lose weight. Fat Liberation emerged in the early 1970s out of the second-wave feminism, the women’s health movement, and lesbian liberation. I trace this loose network of fat activists through letters, newspapers, and oral histories to understand how these women found each other and articulated a radical rejection of compulsory slenderness.

Together, these chapters tell a messy, complicated, and deeply personal story of women and body size in the twentieth century. In the decades I describe, women constantly negotiate

with each other, with cultural precepts, and with the medical establishment to gain authority over their own bodies. They do so largely through an interpersonal agency: creating ideas of body and self through extensive conversation, in both print and in person. This work seeks to locate that interpersonal agency and highlight the voices of the women involved.

A note on what this work does not do: I do not aim to delineate which diets or programs "work." I am not interested in arguing the biological causes of fat. I have framed these case studies as "communities of size" to resist attaching labels, like diet clubs, that the groups within reject, but also to utilize a common and neutral term which does not categorize these groups as "good" and "bad." Some women herein used these communities to gain interpersonal agency, to form strong networks and lasting friendships, to gain a sense of peace and well-being. Other women used them to perpetuate harmful ideas about the body, promote dangerous eating habits, to criticize other women and their bodies, and to reinforce their shared patriarchal oppression. Rather than submit a judgement on which women and which communities got it "right," I instead work to explicate how these women created potentially liberating "techniques of the self," as Foucault would say, to create themselves as works of art.<sup>24</sup>

I began this dissertation fat, and gained thirty pounds in the course of writing the chapters you are about to read. I embodied this work in a visceral, deep way that mediated how I approached my subject and how my subject approached me. My work lived with me and in me every moment of the day. Fat scholarship, for me, is an active and muscular verb. It is difficult,

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<sup>24</sup> Foucault argues that though "all ways of being of dangerous" through these "techniques of the self" to "decide which are the least dangerous." Quoted in Paul Rabinow, *The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 125.

therefore, to articulate to others why this history matters. But let me attempt: Fat history matters because it is an embodied condition which is used today, as it has been used in the past, to justify harming women in uniquely gendered ways. Women are harmed when the size and shape of their bodies are taken as indicators of morality, temperament, and ability.<sup>25</sup> They are harmed by dangerous and self-defeating crash diets. They are harmed by medicalization which treats size instead of unrelated symptoms, and encourages drastic surgical interventions under the guise of wellness.

Furthermore, what I term “communities of size” matter because they offer a schema for resistance. Women “got together” in the twentieth century and created vital and urgent personal and community abilities with which to negotiate the compulsory slenderness faced by all women. Allow me to make a suggestion: while fat women particularly will benefit from a history of these communities, a history in which we can see ourselves and discover new (old) tactics, non-fat people, too, can find themselves within these pages. Formation of identity through community is certainly not unique to fat women, though they do offer us a unique perspective on the limitations of identity.

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<sup>25</sup> Consider the 2013 tweet sent by Dr. Geoffrey Miller, “Dear obese PhD applicants: If you don’t have the willpower to stop eating carbs, you won’t have the willpower to do a dissertation. #truth.” Quoted by Nick DeSantis in “Professor Apologizes for Tweeting That Fat Students Won’t Finish Dissertations,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* online blog, June 3, 2013.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “WE WHO ARE ABOUT TO DIET”: THE CREATION OF THE DIET EXPERT, 1890-1950

Google “how to lose weight.” Go on, I’ll wait for you, and I’ll tell you the results that I found. Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, NutriBullet, Men’s Fitness, Women’s Health, Web MD, Cosmo, Fox News asks “Can Twerking Help Lose Weight?” NBC News tells me “How to Use Instagram to Lose Weight (Really!)”. Among these options, Google prioritizes simple “science-based” advice by displaying ten tips such as eating protein, eating slowly, and avoiding sugary drinks. Why, then, all these other options? Why is this expertise contested, and how are questioning citizens of the web channeled into consumer options?

This chapter documents the early twentieth-century birth of diet and reduction expertise, particularly as it relates to authority over female body shape and size. As pressure to reduce increased in the 1920s, a variety of reducing “experts” imagined women as passive objects to be put in their care and worked upon. A variety of actors fought to establish themselves as experts: the editors of fashion magazines, female newspaper advice columnists, the proprietors of reducing salons, and the established medical community via the American Medical Association (AMA). Women did not simply absorb these messages passively, however. The AMA came out of this era as a firm authority over women’s bodies, but they did so only through active negotiation and cooperation with women. The women who worked with the AMA and their “fraud and quackery” department, too, found a measure of personal authority through this interpersonal agency.

In the early twentieth century, women's size became a matter for public critique and private criticisms, as women and their doctors learned to constantly measure their bodily parameters. This increased surveillance required new surveyors, experts who could demonstrate their ability to shrink women's bodies. In the 1920s, a plethora of "experts" rallied to reduce women, creating a para-medical profession of advice columnists, get-thin-quick hucksters, and reducing salon directors, all of whom battled with the American Medical Association, various Health Departments, and the Food and Drug Administration to declare themselves the authority on diet and reduction for women. Women were an active part of this contestation, however, via readership, consumerism, and informed communication with columnists and AMA investigators. It was primarily women who evaluated the performance of expertise enacted by these individuals and organizations, and it was in their power to find that performance wanting.<sup>1</sup>

The contestation over expertise created a consistent narrative of dieting for women in these years. From the 1910s to the 1940s dieting was imagined as: largely an individual endeavor, kept secret from husbands and families, or at least of minimal inconvenience to them, and of course led by experts. This dieting narrative was crafted explicitly to create a dependent relationship between dieter and expert, and thus reduce not just waistlines but resistance to dieting.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of expertise as something one does rather than something one has and the performative aspects of the label expert see E. Summerson Carr, "Enactments of Expertise," *Annual Review of Anthropology* (May, 2010): 17-32.

### **“To Ladies! Are you Corpulent?”<sup>2</sup>**

Though weight and size reduction became a uniquely female endeavor in the twentieth century, it was not always gendered so. Fat was a problem in the nineteenth century. The problem, then, however, was on par with a variety of diseases that sapped the vitality of the American populace— especially men. Though advertisers in the 1880s asked women “Are You Corpulent?”, both overweight and underweight were seen as equally dangerous conditions. Both were particular problems of the “civilized” body. White men, specifically, had to prove their gender and racial superiority by displaying control over their bodies.<sup>3</sup>

New demands of industrial capitalism, bureaucracy, and office life seemed to sap the verve out of white middle-class men, a problem exhibited simultaneously through unmanly slenderness *and* corpulence. Furthermore, the abundance and wealth created for that class led to a new problem— overconsumption. Even as they negotiated the perils of their sexuality, men had to learn to control their lust for cakes, as well. To that end, health gurus like Sylvester Graham offered a system of self-control through diet that could expand to self-control in all areas of life, including mastery over the temptation of self-abuse. The chief goal of this diet advice and wholesome diet products was increasing the male body, not reducing it. They focused on the health of men, though gradually the parameters of that health shifted to include male corpulence. Experts offered new solutions, including William Banting, a British undertaker who successfully

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<sup>2</sup> “To Ladies! Are You Corpulent?” Advertisement, *Life* (June 30, 1887): 373.

<sup>3</sup> See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 19915) and Katherina Vester, “Regime Change: Gender, Class, and the Invention of Dieting in Post-Bellum America,” *Journal of Social History* (Vol. 44 No. 1, Fall 2010): 39-70.

reduced by fifty pounds and whose 1863 *A Letter on Corpulence* promised fat men renewed vitality and masculinity in the age of neurasthenia.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, John Harvey Kellogg was especially interested in how diet affected male vitality. Kellogg was a protégé of Ellen White, a whole foods vegan proselytizer who, like Graham, preached her diet as a cure for masturbation. After studying for a medical degree, Kellogg became the head of White's institute in Battle Creek, Michigan in 1874. His nutritional guidelines also focused on achieving sexual purity, even within marriage.<sup>5</sup> For these popular health experts, dieting and reduction in the mid-nineteenth century was a predominantly male problem, though middle-class women were eager to show that they too were capable of managing body and appetite as well as home and family.<sup>6</sup>

Historian of dieting Katharina Vester argues that the first voices to encourage women to reduce were not doctors or fashion editors, but activists in the women's rights movement. Women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton praised women in 1867 for exercising and strengthening their bodies.<sup>7</sup> Anna Kingsford, in her 1886 advice manual *Health, Beauty, and the Toilet* similarly recommended her readers to lead an active, and slim, life.<sup>8</sup> Dress reformers, too, argued that a lean active figure was healthier for women than a restricting corset. Vester suggests that the male associations of dieting with "self-control and citizenship" and the idea of women's

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<sup>4</sup> See Bederman and Daniel E. Bender, *American Abyss: Savagery and Civilization in the Age of Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> For more on Kellogg, see Susan Yager, *The Hundred Year Diet: America's Voracious Appetite for Losing Weight* (New York: Rodale, 2010) 8-10.

<sup>6</sup> Vester, 39-70.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

control over their own bodies appealed to women's rights activists in the decades before the flapper made increasingly slender bodies fashionable.

Through the 1890s, though, femininity was still associated with a soft, lush body. Rounded shoulders, ample bosoms, and full cheeks were the marks of loveliness and health—personified by stars like Lillian Russell, who was said to be two hundred pounds at the height of her fame and beauty. These robust contours were embraced by ladies magazines and conservative authors who criticized dress reformers for trying to “imitate masculine characteristics”<sup>9</sup> Nerves, weakness, and circulation were the keys to health, and a pleasing plumpness was a sign of success. While women were exhorted to “give heed to these things” and not allow the “charming plumpness of the contour” to grow into “double chins,” this could largely be done with “simple home remedies.”<sup>10</sup> Yet the reduction efforts of men crossed gender boundaries, and the focus on plumpness did not stop women from trying to reduce. Throughout the 1890s tonics, contraptions, and miracle elixirs were advertised in women's magazines, and women consistently wrote in to ask for reducing advice.

Mainstream fashion in the 1890s and early 1900s also began to demand a slimmer body. Though the Gibson Girl was epitomized by a certain softness, she was also natural, uncorsetted, and active. Athleticism for both men and women and the desire for a “natural” silhouette only increased after 1900, blending with ideas about racial superiority and the demands of empire building. These trends toward an active and slim female body, and a woman who could “sport”

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>10</sup> “That ‘Pound of Flesh’” *Vogue* (April 15, 1913), 114.



alongside men reached its apex in the flapper of the 1920s, and with it came a diet craze especially embraced by affluent white women.

Cultural forces in the early twentieth century changed fat into a particularly female problem, one related to the role of women as primary consumers and an increasing female presence in public life.<sup>11</sup> In the first decades of the twentieth century, Victorian concerns over general portliness shifted to a disgust with fat female bodies, and women's relationship with food and the size and shape of their bodies took on a moral weight. As women's rights increased, so did new body images, in the form of the Gibson Girl and the flapper. Focus on beauty culture went hand in hand with emerging heterosociability and dating culture, as well as admonishments to "look smart" among a developing female workforce. Historian Peter Stearns argues that looking young, fashionable and thin was the price women paid for increased public civic and economic engagement. Building on Foucault, Stearns argues that in the twentieth century, patriarchal forces turned to the "use of dieting to monitor women" and that "weight morality bore disproportionately on women precisely because of their growing independence, or seeming independence, from other standards."<sup>12</sup>

It was not simply the message to reduce, however, that worked to limit female bodily autonomy. There was also the matter of the messenger. Women were active in choosing "experts" in this period, and did not simply accept wholesale the proscriptions of *Vogue* or their doctor's advice. Women faced an ever-increasing barrage of messages about the size of their

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<sup>11</sup> See Peter Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Stearns, 72.

bodies, and supposed experts who held the key to slenderness. The desire to shrink women grew at a time when new modes of capitalism demanded a “professionalized” workforce, and the role of the “expert” played an increasingly central role in the lives of average people. This contributed to a narrative of reduction in which female dieters had to be worked upon by experts using cutting-edge “scientific” theories and technologies. Important reducing experts of this

December, 1928 247

**“Reach for a Lucky when you crave something sweet**  
*That's the easiest way I know to keep from getting fat* *Elmer J. Juggler*

**RIGHT** a Lucky Strike when you are tempted to eat between meals—they satisfy the craving for sweets and rich pastries. That's why thousands now reducing smoke them constantly.

A year ago 20,679 physicians put themselves on record in confirmation of the fact that Toasting makes Lucky Strike less irritating to the throat than any other cigarette. That's because Toasting removes impurities. Toasting also improves the flavor of the finest tobacco. That's why the delicious toasted flavor of Luckies makes them a delightful alternative for things that make you fat. Avoid harmful methods to reduce. This way is merely common sense.

Men who keep fit have long employed it. They don't believe in tiresome, expensive ways. They do believe that Luckies do not hurt the wind or impair the physical condition—facts upheld by prominent athletes, who are in a position to know the truth.

When you are offered a sweet . . . when it comes time for pies and pastries . . . pass them by and take a Lucky. Then you'll never miss sweets.

**LUCKY STRIKE**  
 “IT'S TOASTED”  
**CIGARETTES**

Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet

**“It's toasted”** No Throat Irritation—No Cough.

© 1928 The American Tobacco Co. Manufactured

Figure 1. 1928 Lucky Strike Advertisement

period were women’s periodicals, female advice columnists, and the American Medical Association.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the embryonic diet industry of the late nineteenth century boomed- both creating and meeting an increasing demand for products meant to melt the pounds away. These products educated buyers as to the nature of their problem, and assured them that their lives would be vastly improved with a slimmer waistline. While Sears catalogs sold “Dr. Rose’s Obesity Powders” marketed toward “fat folk” in the 1890s alongside various concoctions for “weak women,” it was not until the

1920s that advertising of diet pills was clearly gendered female. With messages like “Reach for a Lucky Instead of a Sweet” alongside images of the young, fun, Gibson Girl, whose body shape

was visible beneath her clothes, women were encouraged to lose weight by any means necessary, including smoking, fat banishing soaps, and tape worms.<sup>13</sup>

The first decades of the twentieth century saw an intensification and feminization of the reducing craze. The “new woman” of the 1920s was more active, less corseted, and slimmer than her grandmothers, and this focus on youth and slenderness was reflected in magazines and advice columns aimed at women, as well as in a plethora of new diet aids and reducing contraptions. Fashion magazines described dieting as the all-consuming duty of stout women who, magazines warned, would face ridicule, poor fashion, and a lack of love if they failed to reduce. Though women’s periodicals in the first decades of the twentieth century informed readers of the efficacy of rubber reducing garments- for the waist of course, but also for the ankles, wrists, and chin “to melt the fat right out of the tissues” with “heavy perspiration,” they also stressed that “slimness must be bought principally at the high price of abstinence.”<sup>14</sup> Women were required to subsist mainly on lemon water and dry toast in times of reducing, but this was an effort largely undertaken alone and at home. As the pressure to reduce increased in the 1920s, the proscription of women’s periodicals likewise intensified and came to include a wide variety of “experts” who could work reductions on women. Under the aegis of expertise, dieting could also be a cosmopolitan leisure activity for wealthy women, as suggested by a lengthy *Vogue* article on the subject.

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<sup>13</sup> “Light a Lucky and You’ll Never Miss Sweets that Make You Fat,” 1928 Ad Copy.

<sup>14</sup> “The Diet’s the Thing,” *Vogue*.

### **“We Who Are About to Diet”: Women’s Periodicals as Diet Experts**

In 1921 *Vogue* declared: “Too Many Pounds Spoil the Silhouette: the whole duty of woman as seen by to-day’s couturiere is to devote herself exclusively to the shrinking of her shadow.”<sup>15</sup> With a keen sense of irony, *Vogue* told the story of Japonica, a woman who is horrified to discover that an old lover found her “a good deal heavier” after a long separation. Though she also notices changes in her old flame and finds him “a great deal balder at thirty than at twenty” she nonetheless turns her dissatisfaction inward, admonishing herself “Fool! Reduce!” What follows is a jaunt through the reducing efforts of New York Society women, career dieters who “go to Battle Creek and spend four months every year, just getting slim...Oh, I don’t know all they do to her. Electric baths, and exercises, and getting up at six, and oh, such a diet!” For these ladies-who-don’t-lunch, reducing the flesh was a full-time occupation, a cyclical endeavor in which they spent “four months every year getting slim for the other eight.”<sup>16</sup>

*Vogue* described these women as borderline ridiculous, but the message was sincere: it is your duty to reduce, and to do it well. The focus on fashion, beauty, and youth was married to a reliance on expertise, as the humorous tone breaks to warn that “no extensive reducing should be done except under scientific supervision.” This scientific supervision could be found in a New York Reducing Salon- where for between \$250 and \$1,000 a woman would receive lessons consisting of “scientific exercises, medicine ball, electric light cabinet baths, shower, and massage.” While overseen by a somber-faced doctor, women were under the direct care of salon managers- strict women who recorded the minutia of weight fluctuation. The director and the

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<sup>15</sup> “Too Many Pounds Spoils the Silhouette,” *Vogue*, January 1, 1921.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

doctor's roles as depicted in *Vogue* are largely one of menace. The story describes a mother and daughter at the Salon, "the mother was fat. The daughter was young- but alas! Already." The "expert" doctor cautioned the mother that you must "bring her in for some work." For women, the doctor had "a different system" than for men. "Women are catty" he explains, so to uncover their "lies" about what they eat he "asks their friends."

This article highlights themes in the narrative of dieting and reducing after 1920 that were consistent across media aimed at women. In narratives of reduction, women diet to please men, they keep their reducing efforts secret from their husbands, and they diet in competition with one another, not in cooperation. Importantly, as women increasingly dieted in the 1920s they did so under the direct supervision of experts. There was also significant tension between the scientific experts women were supposed to seek and the goals of fashion, as the article noted that "ideal weight as the physician sees it, however, does not correspond with ideal weight as Paris considers it should be. The fashion is to be slim. Slim to the vanishing point." Another "woman expert" helped reduce women specifically to the tastes of fashion, if "skirts are to be short this season, I must have slim legs." *Vogue* was also keen to tell readers that "fashions for the spring and summer have an engaging air of youthfulness that is very charming if one happens to be slim, but which is apt to be a bit absurd if one's figure is too matronly."<sup>17</sup> Thus women dieters faced two powerful experts- the medical establishment and fashion magazines, both telling her to reduce. The goal of reduction then, was to "meet her dressmaker and her physician alike with a good conscience."<sup>18</sup> For *Vogue*, however, the ultimate authority was fashion, and the ultimate

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<sup>17</sup> "Smart Aids to Slenderness," *Vogue*, May 1, 1921.

<sup>18</sup> "Too Many Pounds Spoil the Silhouette," *Vogue*, January 1, 1921.

goal was slenderness at all costs, not health or happiness. Under the veneer of health, *Vogue* revealed the truth that a dieter “should rather be slim and savage as a wolf.”

*Vogue* frequently adopted this ironic, morbid tone about the trials of dieting even as their fashion spreads dictated a Parisian waistline. A 1936 article entitled “We Who Are About to Diet” acknowledged the absurd lengths women will go to shrink themselves, and the prevalence of diet schemes presented to them, mocking the fictitious “Thumb Method of Reducing, in which the patient reduces by sucking nothing for seven days except her thumb.”<sup>19</sup> This illustrates a central paradox within the emerging diet narrative: reduction is the duty of all women, but it is also ridiculous and worthy of contempt. The message was clear- reduce at all times, but silently and secretly.

*Vogue* was joined by a chorus of women’s magazine advising reduction and the admonishment to seek experts. In 1921 *Ladies Home Journal* informed readers that the science of the Great War was now being applied to women’s waistlines. Lest women languish in corpulence alone, they were told that “some of the men who helped with their high command science to win the war are now devoting themselves to the science of preserving women’s beauty.” Women’s bodies, then, were the purview of science, and required the same effort as the creation of war machines, as the article noted that “one who invented a device for sighting submarines is now reducing the flesh. Another, Doctor Frumusen, is trying to take it off so

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<sup>19</sup> “We Who Are About to Diet,” *Vogue*, March 1, 1936, 71, 120.

effectively that it will not come back; the Queen of Rumania is one of his most distinguished pupils.”<sup>20</sup>

Women were also encouraged to use their increased public engagement and political participation to shed pounds, advising that “the leisurely sauntering, in restricting clothes and high heels, indulged by many women who live in cities, that sort of walking is not worth doing. But a brisk walk, with correct posture, loose, light, porous clothes, comfortable shoes and your



Figure 2. Exercises Recommended by Ladies Home Journal in 1921

toes pointed straight ahead- and an objective to be reaches- that is worthwhile.”<sup>21</sup> This energetic spirit, the magazine encouraged, should also guide civic engagement, as “one of the best uses to which women can possibly put their new political power is to throw their influence into the scale for

a wider knowledge and application of the principles of good health”<sup>22</sup> This knowledge, of course, would come from one of the many experts that graced the pages of *Ladies Home Journal*.

<sup>20</sup> “Exit the Vamp, Enter a New Type of Beauty,” *Ladies Home Journal*, November, 1921, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “What Regular Exercise Do You Take,” *Ladies Home Journal*, January, 1921, 94.

In March of 1922, *Ladies Home Journal* told the story of Mrs. Grace Horchler, a stout Chicago woman who lost 50 pounds dancing to a Mr. Wallace's "Reducing Records." Nestled next to a short story "Confessions of a



"One afternoon I told the secret of my transformation to some friends who had dropped in. Within three weeks one of them removed twenty pounds the same way, and another has made an enthusiastic start," says Mrs. Horchler, who is seen standing in the above photograph

Figure 3. Grace Horchler Showcasing her Dancing Method

Useless Wife," Mrs. Horchler extolled readers to lose pounds and gain energy, youth, and vitality.<sup>23</sup> Decades before Richard Simmons encouraged dieters to sweat to the oldies, Mr. Wallace promised the readers of *Ladies Home Journal* that they could "get thin to music!" Following his records, he assured, would make sure one's "system uses all your food for blood, bone and sinew."<sup>24</sup> This reducing scheme had all the hallmarks of the emerging diet industry-

<sup>23</sup> "Playing off Pounds: The Amazing Story of a Woman who Got Thin to Music," *Ladies Home Journal*, March, 1922, 93.

<sup>24</sup> Advertisement "Get Thin- to Music!" *Ladies Home Journal*, April, 1922, 57.



claims of ease and fun, improbable success stories, and perhaps most importantly- the before and after image.

These top-down messages set clear parameters for female dieters, but viewing them in isolation obscures the active role of women in the struggle over expertise. Looking at two other sources of reducing expertise: female advice columnists and the fraud investigation department of the American Medical Association reveal women as active agents in gathering and disseminating ideas about reducing the body. Individual women wrote letters to advisors such as Antoinette Donnelly and Lydia Lane, and they acted as volunteer informants for the AMA even as they sought assurance regarding the efficacy of various diets found in advertisements and published materials.

Decades of advice columns on dieting show a delicate negotiation of expertise: the advisor set herself up as a dieting expert even as she deferred to established medical professionals. These professionals were used as support, however, for her own knowledge and ability to reduce other women. They also continued the narrative seen in *Vogue*: reducing to please husbands, reduction as a solitary and private affair, and surveillance of bodily size as a solemn duty of women.

**“The National Feminine Cry is not Votes for Women- but Fatless Figures for Women”:  
Female Advice Columnists as Diet Experts**

Antoinette Donnelly was one of the most prolific writers of diet advice in the early twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Writing for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* and the *New York Daily News*, she

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<sup>25</sup> The above quote is Donnelly's. From Antoinette Donnelly, *How to Reduce: New Waistlines for Old* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1921).

distributed diet advice primarily to women who wrote her thousands of letters asking for help and who depended on her advice as a diet authority. Though Donnelly often deferred to medical experts, particularly Dr. Copeland of the New York Health Department, she also focused on women's common sense as the guiding apparatus of reduction, and cautioned women not to let dieting disrupt their roles as mothers and wives. Donnelly promised that reducing would not be cause for divorce if "done in a sane way."<sup>26</sup> Sane reducing, she assured readers, made them better housekeepers and happier wives, reporting that "a husband who said that he had to do most of the family washing rejoiced because his wife can now bend over the tubs."<sup>27</sup>

Donnelly's role as authority was largely rooted in the "success" story of Mrs. Eva Lane shared in a series of articles in April of 1916 in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. Donnelly reported that under the supervision of Dr. Lena K. Sadler of the Chicago Institute of Physiological Therapeutics, Mrs. Lane was reduced from 204 pounds to a svelte 168. She shared Lane's prescribed diet with readers, under the headline "Here's a Sylph Schedule, Fatty, and Good Luck"<sup>28</sup>

Lane's story, and the tremendous response it garnered, established Donnelly as a reduction guru, and is one of the earliest examples of the "before and after" diet narrative. Other themes include the uncovering of the "true" thin self, the role of self-denial, and the crucial

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<sup>26</sup> Donnelly, "Reducing Cause for Divorce? Not if Done in Sane Way," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 12, 1929.

<sup>27</sup> "Finds Fat Reducing Makes Happy Homes," *New York Times*, November 3, 1921.

<sup>28</sup> Donnelly, "Here's a Sylph Schedule, Fatty, and Good Luck," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 18, 1917.

motivation of female dieters- pleasing husbands. Mrs. Lane was represented as an every-woman, someone who just liked bonbons a bit too much, but who, under the supervision of Donnelly, became a master of discipline. Her story was a message to readers that “my heavy sisters, reducing can be done.” In a 1917 letter to Donnelly a dieter wrote that she was inspired by Lane’s successful reducing and felt that “what one woman had done another could do.”<sup>29</sup> The cheerful letter was accompanied by an image of a clownish stout woman walking a small dog.



Figure 4. Illustration in Chicago Daily Tribune, 1916

In many ways though, Mrs. Lane was the passive object of reduction. In every headline, it was Donnelly who did the work, who situated herself as the expert with claims such as “I reduced her 36 pounds in 6 Weeks.”<sup>30</sup> This is consistent with the diet narrative of these decades, one in which experts worked their power of reduction upon female dieters. Only under their guidance did women conquer their appetites and strengthen will and muscles alike. Without them, they were in constant danger of backsliding into rotund backsides.

<sup>29</sup> “Weight Reducing Contest: From a Tub to a Perfect 36,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 18, 1917.

<sup>30</sup> Antoinette Donnelly, “How I Reduced Mrs. Eva Lane 26 Pounds in 6 Weeks,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 16, 1916.



Figure 5. October 1916 Donnelly Article

The Eva Lane narrative was not only one of the first “before and after” picture spreads, it also cautioned women that dieting was a life-long pursuit, and for every “success” there was also a danger of regaining weight. In an October of 1916 follow-up article, Donnelly noted that Mrs. Lane managed to maintain her strict diet for two weeks (quite a feat) without direct supervision, and then came “the sad, sad part of my story....human perversity and fickleness of purpose, of which no human is more guilty than the fat woman.”<sup>31</sup> Though Mrs. Lane was initially eager to reduce “because her husband has expressed himself violently on the excess of avoirdupois and because she realizes the general disapproval of heavy femininity” Donnelly found that without a critical and ever-present supervisor Lane “slump[ed] on the job.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, according to Donnelly she “committed offenses against every common-sense rule for keeping weight down. Her self-indulged passion for ice cream during the summer months no doubt contributed a couple

<sup>31</sup> “A Willful Diet and a Lazy Summer Cost Mrs. Lane a Woeful Waistline and 14 Pounds,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 29, 1916.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

of pounds, and her love of chocolates and bonbons was pampered outrageously.” Donnelly stressed that women needed to be ever-vigilant in their body surveillance, chastising a reader “fatty: you better keep a sleepless eye on that appetite of yours or you never will be a sylph.”<sup>33</sup>

Donnelly asked women to try Mrs. Lane’s diet on their own and send in stories of their results. Many did— women who “discovered, to my horror, I was growing stout” eagerly applied Donnelly’s reducing advice.<sup>34</sup> These letters illustrate the serious business of dieting for a certain class of women, as a dieter reported that she “left home for six weeks in order to accommodate [her] purpose” of reducing and although she reported success, she also noted that she “accomplished it to a finish, utterly losing my identity so persistent was I in my effort.”<sup>35</sup> These letters often display such ironic, even morbid humor, simultaneously acknowledging and deriding the sheer effort women put into making themselves smaller. There is a tension in these notes between the duty to diet and the perceived selfishness of the act- women removing themselves from family, leaving on extended dieting holidays, spending long days in reducing salons, sparing no cost or effort in the drive to be slim. This also points to a persistent theme in dieting during this period- for many of these women, reduction was a leisure activity. The cost, time, and effort required in these reduction schemes limit them to women of means. As another 1917 letter-writer describes “on my return the maid failed to recognize me.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Donnelly, “Here’s a Sylph Schedule, Fatty, and Good Luck,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 18, 1917.

<sup>34</sup> “Weight Reducing Contest: Reduced to a Finish,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 11, 1917.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Donnelly's advice in the 1910s was largely a narrative of self will, deprivation, and private reduction with the Mrs. Lane diet as a guide. Seclusion was a consistent theme- whether it was leaving home to retreat to a sanitarium or creating a "secret reducing chamber" to hide reduction efforts from husband and family.<sup>37</sup> After 1920, Donnelly's advice shifted to embrace new experts- reducing salons and their strict "dictators." The first reducing salon opened in Chicago in 1914. Reducing salons were widespread enough by 1931 that a Marie Dressler comedy *Reducing* could delight movie audiences with a send-up of wealthy women whittling their time and money away, if not their waistslines.

Donnelly often doubted her readers' ability to reduce alone, and consistently stressed the importance of experts: either herself, a doctor, or a salon director. She cautioned that "we weaker sisters have to decide whether we can go it alone, or whether it wouldn't profit more in pound loss and inchlessness if we consigned our problem to the hands of a stern salon director" who made dieters feel like "a simple fool" when they deviate from the reduction plan.<sup>38</sup> The "salon dictator" worked upon the passive dieter her powers of reduction, and dieters were dependent on her not only for the initial slimming but for a lifetime of size management. Donnelly described a woman who "goes three times a week the year around to be watched over and exercised." This woman, she reported, would "never do it alone [...] but will do it if someone gets hold of me and

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<sup>37</sup> Donnelly, "Weight Reducing Contest," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 25, 1917.

<sup>38</sup> Donnelly, "Reducing under Supervision Assures You of Slenderness," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 1, 1938.

makes me.”<sup>39</sup> In Donnelly’s narrative, the chronic reducer *is exercised*, she is without agency or will.

The story of the “dictator” director illustrates two competing narratives of reduction presented by Donnelly: that of the diligent dieter and that the passive reducee. The first type of woman, she suggests, is a rare “iron willed” creature who should have never gotten fat in the first place, while the second has the stout woman’s lack of discipline, and such “weaker sisters” must be continually worked upon by doctors, salon directors, or Donnelly herself.<sup>40</sup> This kind of fat woman does not exercise her own body, it must “be exercised” by machines and masseurs. She does not watch what she eats, she must “be watched” by tyrannical doctors and directors. This diet narrative effectively made reduction the prerogative of wealthy women with access to paid experts, as Donnelly noted that “I do not know how or if it can be applied to the woman who cannot afford this special type of service.”<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the answer was to be found in constant preventative surveillance, an idea that made diet and reduction the burden of all women, not just the unfortunate stout ones. By the end of the 1920s it was not enough anymore to reduce a large body, now small bodies had to be constantly weighed (daily was best) and measured against an oncoming tide of obesity. By 1934, Donnelly asserted that “modern girls view reducing as daily duty” and that women’s attempts to make their bodies smaller was “taken for granted as part of hygiene.”<sup>42</sup> For American women in

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Donnelly, “Salon Dictator Forces Clients to Stay Young,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 1, 1933.

<sup>42</sup> Donnelly, “Modern Girls View Reducing as Daily Duty,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 3, 1934.

the 1930s it was “taken for granted that one attends the duties religiously with no talk about it.” Not only was dieting solitary, it was silent as well.

Though Donnelly was the most prolific source of dieting advice in newspapers in the early twentieth-century, she was joined by others, including Lydia Lane, who began giving diet advice in the *Los Angeles Times* in the 1930s. Rather than establish herself as a reducing expert capable of shrinking her readers, Lane demurred to the experts at salons. Lane occasionally offered simple advice of moderate eating and exercise with which she assured her readers that “there should be no mystery about reducing. If you wish to take off weight all you have to do is obey the rules and the result will be as sure as a problem in arithmetic.”<sup>43</sup> Yet this straightforward advice was also complicated by Lane, who consistently reported on new miracle gadgets such as reducing rollers, reducing machines, and infra-red ray cabinets, all of which supposedly made it “a comparatively easy matter to take off inches.”<sup>44</sup> With folksy, racist anecdotes suggesting that women had “the same feeling about reducing that the old colored coachmen had about medicine” and viewed reducing as an onerous chore, Lane worked to assure women that getting smaller was as easy as standing in a rattling rolling machine for an hour a day.<sup>45</sup> Even easier was the reducing rays which only required that a woman lay peacefully while her muscles were “pleasantly exercised by an electrical wave.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Lydia Lane, “Reducing Rules Easy to Follow,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 1938.

<sup>44</sup> Lane, “Infra-Red Rays Aid Localized Reducing,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1937, and “Machine Aid to Reducing,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 14, 1936.

<sup>45</sup> Lane, “Fat Lulled Off by New Machine,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 1940.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*



These contraptions were the bread and butter of pricey reducing salons, which Lane, like Donnelly, exhorted her readers to use. The experts in these reducing schemes were only very vaguely medical professionals, as unnamed doctors gave their stamp of approval to these machines. But the real experts in the world of reducing salons were the female salon managers, those stern creatures who faithfully watched a woman's fat rolled, waved, and ray'd away. Lane acted as a conduit between readers and salon managers, giving them an air of authority and dutifully reporting on the newest miracle machine and at which salon it could exclusively be found. Expertise and exclusivity were the hallmarks of reducing salons, removing body management from the realm of the home and establishing the problem of weight as one that required para-medical intervention.

Advertised extensively in women's magazines like *Vogue* and given Donnelly and Lane's approval, the reducing salon was the geographical nexus of female reducing expertise. Beauty experts like Madame Helena Rubenstein of Chicago and Florence Woodley of New York's Fifth Avenue promised "preparations to remove a double chin," "wonderful bath salts which reduce flesh," and "unequaled methods for reducing weight."<sup>47</sup> The fact that none of these contraptions, devices, and nostrums actually worked did not curb the popularity of such salons or Lane's enthusiasm for them well into the 1930s.

While reducing salons were the enclave of wealthy women, women of all classes negotiated with messages of reduction, and the salon director was only one of many competing experts women could turn to. The American Medical Association worked tirelessly to trump the

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<sup>47</sup> Advertisement, "Madame Helena Rubenstein," *Vogue*, January 1, 1920, 105, "Nazma," *Vogue*, February 1, 1920, 127, "Eleanor Adair," *Vogue*, May 1, 1922, 123.

expertise of laywomen, and to establish the family doctor as the ultimate authority over women's bodies.

### **“Don't Fall for Food Faddists”: The AMA and Authority**

On June 21, 1937 Dr. Morris Fishbein of the American Medical Association graced the cover of TIME magazine, for an article discussing FDR's plans to federalize the medical profession. Fishbein was the editor of the *Journal of American Medicine* and *Hygeia*, but he was more popularly known as an authority on medical quackery. In that role he was intimately involved in the reducing projects of thousands of American women. Women were daily inundated with reducing schemes like those suggested by Lane and the “expert” salon directors. Quacks and snake-oil salesmen offered a mountain of aids to reduce waistlines, trim arms, and give women whatever figure the current fashion required. These aids ranged from the benignly ineffective to deadly.<sup>48</sup>

As part of the ongoing professionalization of medicine, the AMA sought to establish itself as the ultimate expert in this period of contested authority over the size and shape of women's bodies. As the act of dieting became increasingly feminized in the 1920s and the surveillance of female body size increased, the recently professionalized medical establishment was eager to assert their authority in the matter, and categorized obesity and overweight as a glandular disorder with a medical solution.<sup>49</sup> But that authority was contested not only by prolific

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<sup>48</sup> “Reducing Drug is Fatal,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1933, “Reducing Drug's Sale Restrained as Peril to Eyes,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 9, 1938.

<sup>49</sup> Wilson, Frank J., *Glamour, Glucose and Glands* (New York: Vantage Press, 1956).

advice columnists like Donnelly and Lane, but by an emerging diet industry whose profit depended on a rejection of medical advice.

Dr. Fishbein and the AMA were central in the twentieth-century struggle for authority when it came to diet and reduction. Whom could women trust: their doctors, the government, advice columnists, or advertisers? How could they sort out good advice from bad? To combat dangerous medical quackery and assert professional authority, the AMA created the Department of Fraud Investigation in 1906 under the supervision of Dr. Arthur Cramp. The records of this department show a particularly strong relationship between women's medical questions and the investigation of fraud and quackery. This is especially evident in the investigations of diet fraud and "food faddists."<sup>50</sup>



Figure 6. BattleCreek Ad, from the AMA Archive of Fraud and Quackery

"Faddists" included myriad populist health gurus, rogue doctors, and hucksters, all of whom promised miraculous health changes and effortless slenderness on their specific diet plans. The emerging health industry of the early twentieth century was rife with raw food

advocates, unregulated dietary supplements, claims of "toxins," anti-vaccine hysteria, and a

<sup>50</sup> A *Vogue* Advertisement for Battle-Creek "anti-toxic foods," *Vogue*, March 20, 1929, 11.

broad anti-authoritarian bent that fought against FDA regulation and AMA oversight in the name of “medical freedom.” The AMA collected evidence of health gurus’ wildest claims: that “diet cures crime,” or “biscuits cause cancer.”<sup>51</sup>

AMA records show a variety of food faddists aimed at “women only” with visiting lecturers like Irene Case Nemur advising on “scientific health and beauty” as well as “mixing health cocktails.”<sup>52</sup> Many of the gurus in competition with the AMA for authority over women’s bodies were women themselves, both lay experts and professionals. Women’s roles as consumers and home economists lent them an air of authority in matters of food, but the AMA was suspicious of their claims as experts on health as well. Several of these modern diet spiritualists came from the Racine School of Nutrition in Wisconsin, a guru mill that graduated Dr. Irene Case Nemur and Alma Thompson Leaverton. These women went on national lecture circuits with their claims about the “chemical basis of human behavior” and the nutritional secrets that could unlock individual potential, as well as tips for beauty and reduction aimed at women.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> A 1962 letter asked if “biscuits are a deadly poison” as the writer’s husband believed. She wrote that “I don’t know where my husband got that brilliant idea, maybe out of some of his other quack books.” She pleaded with the AMA to intercede in the quackery that caused marital strife, writing that “I already had more than I can handle, Life is a living hell, not allowed to eat anything made with White flour, can’t even flour chicken or steak for cooking.” Letter to AMA, June 1962, box 199, folder 1, Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection, American Medical Association, and “How Diet Cures Crime,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 21, 1926.

<sup>52</sup> *Food and Health Bulletin* 1935, box 200, folder 1, Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

Health periodicals like *Sunshine Reporter*, *Health Topics* and *Healthful Living* all promised weight reduction via the “miracle of vitamin capsules” or diet “souplets” to hide reduction attempts so your family won’t “make fun of you for dieting.”<sup>54</sup> Much of the diet aids and supplements reviewed by the AMA were advertised as stealthy and private reduction helpers- vitamins to be taken quietly, “souplets” which look identical to the broth in everyone’s tureens, boxes of dietician “chocolates” that secretly provided “scientific calorie control” and



Figure 7. Diet Food Advertisement, Courtesy of the AMA

diet desserts that looked (and supposedly tasted) like the real, fatty, deal. Health periodicals offered these products as solutions to the pressing question of their readers, promising that vitamins and supplements were “how housewives can lose weight” without disrupting their role as baker and homemaker for their husbands and children.

The messages of these miracle supplements came to women via advertisements, periodicals, and even their grocery stores, as new supermarkets emerged in the 1940s and 1950s. The producers of fat-fighting chocolates and other diet aids sent professional demonstrators straight to housewives as part of the new consumer experience of suburban grocery stores overflowing with abundance. Grocery stores worked to establish themselves as food experts,

<sup>54</sup> *Sunshine Health* “Fasting, And... Weight Reduction” and advertisement “Does your Family Make Fun of You for Dieting?” box 200, folder 1, Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection.

guiding women through the variety of choices on offer, with various demonstrators on hand to explain new products and their amazing benefits. In this bursting cornucopia of American affluence, women shopped for baby food to fatten their children to the Gerber aesthetic, cream and sugar for their husband's morning coffee and after-dinner dessert, and for themselves: fake food, reducing vitamins, and the fantasy of slenderness.

Housewives had their doubts, however. Which miraculous scientific breakthrough could really reduce their waistlines? Was the answer really in the grocery store or a health supplement advertised in a magazine? To sort good from bad, women sought the advice of the AMA. Dr. Fishbein was a national figure, and his cautions

against food faddists and supplements were broadcast on the radio and re-printed in local papers.<sup>55</sup> The AMA also offered its own health periodical, *Hygeia*, which took pains to refute all of the latest food fads and miracle cures. Edited by Fishbein and touted as a “family health magazine” and the AMA’s “most powerful weapon in combating quackery,” *Hygeia* was aimed



Figure 8. 1936 Cover, courtesy of the AMA

<sup>55</sup> “Dr. Morris Fishbein Again Assails our Medical Quacks,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1927, “Buncombe in the History of American Medicine: Dr. Fishbein on the Various Fads and Medical Quacks,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1925, “Food Faddists Flayed,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1929, “Pint Milk, Daily is Recommended in Reducing Diet,” *The Patriot and Free Press*, Cuba, N.Y., December 13, 1934, “Dr. Fishbein Again,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 1931.

at housewives as a balm to the suspicious medical advice found in other women's periodicals.<sup>56</sup>

*Hygiea* served as AMA's direct outreach to the arbiter of family health: the housewife. With articles like "What Are X-Rays?" "Are Doctors People?" and "The Story of Venereal Disease" the magazine worked to create a partnership between women and family doctors by establishing the expertise of doctors and the role of women in heeding their wisdom for the health of families.

*Hygiea's* earliest editions feature articles decrying the dubious reduction techniques aimed at women. In December 1923, Dr. Cramp wrote in "Fooling the Fat: How 'Slendaform' Reduces the Pocketbook" that "hope springs eternal in the fat woman's breast" and "there is no one so optimistic or with such an abiding trust in the verity of printers' ink as the obese female"<sup>57</sup> Cramp suggested that it was the naiveté and gullibility of fat women that made them targets of diet quackery, yet failed to acknowledge that the AMA consistently learned of these products directly from skeptical women.

Warnings like this did not satisfy readers, though, and the magazine soon published extensive dieting advice including a regularly recurring feature "I Reduce." Beyond the medical information provided, editors also attempted to create appropriate dieting behaviors for women with advice like "it's nobody's business but your own, keep it to yourself. Don't talk about it, don't compare notes, don't look for sympathy or act the martyr."<sup>58</sup> Like much of the advice in

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<sup>56</sup> "Report of the Twenty-Ninth Annual Meeting of the Utah State Medical Association," *California State Journal of Medicine* (Vol 21 No 9, 1923): 395.

<sup>57</sup> Arthur J. Cramp "Fooling the Fat: How "Slendaform" Reduces the Pocketbook," *Hygiea*, December, 1923, 559-560.

<sup>58</sup> L.M. Davidoff, "Now This Matter of Reducing Weight," *Hygiea*, April, 1924, 210.

magazines and newspapers, women were instructed to reduce their size without inconveniencing husbands or children or revealing their efforts to friends. Dieting was between a woman and her doctor and was not an appropriate social or group activity.

This narrative continued in the “I Reduce” series, written by Dr. Lydia Allen DeVilbiss about her own success reducing under the aegis of a specialist. She described her husband’s lack of support, that he “made fun” of her diets and exercises and “objected strenuously to having the meals for the family- meaning himself- curtailed in any way.” His disinterest in her diet attempts was matched only by his disinterest in her larger body, and she told readers that “the romance was dead.” In this dire situation, lack of romance from an inconsiderate husband, DeVilbiss turned to the expert- a specialist who “took the whole responsibility for the reduction.” She wrote that in his care she “was just to forget that I had a brain in my head.” She was instructed to eat a wildly under-nourishing six hundred calories a day and, unsurprisingly, succeeded in losing weight. Though this article clearly placed the unnamed specialist as the agent in reducing, this was contradicted in the magazine’s layout which featured a before and after picture with the caption “Dr. DeVilbiss considered herself a hopeless case, but she solved her own problem.”<sup>59</sup>

“I Reduce” continued to negotiate this tension of agency- cautioning readers that their family doctor should always advise them even as *Hygeia* offered meal plans, photo guides for food portions, exercise tips, and the idea that “obesity is a mind habit” that must be conquered internally. *Hygeia* also published scathing book reviews of the advice offered by gurus, anti-

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<sup>59</sup> Lydia Allen DeVilbiss “I Reduce,” *Hygeia*, August, 1925, 425-427.



vaccinators, and naturopaths, “whatever that is.”<sup>60</sup> The AMA’s public outreach proved successful, and women eagerly sought advice from the organization, with phone calls and letters to *Hygiea*, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, or the Fraud Investigation Department. This relationship was a two-way street, as the AMA relied on women to send them information and materials about the plethora of dubious new fads and products available.

Women both wrote to request information about diet and nutrition and to inform the AMA and Drs. Cramp and Fishbein of potential quackery. In 1929 a chairwoman of the Illinois Federation of Woman’s Clubs wrote directly to Cramp wondering “if you have seen the ‘Chemical Personalities’ on page 143 of the December number of Welfare Magazine. Here is much new and unheard information which I believe you will wish to call to the attention of the persons responsible for its publication.” This letters speaks to an ongoing relationship between clubwomen and the AMA, wherein clubwomen alerted Cramp to potential dubious health claims, received assurances and information from the AMA- including pamphlets on food faddism and quackery, and helped disseminate that information to the women who made up their constituency.

Individual women also wrote to and called the AMA to ask about various obesity cures like “Corpus Lean” or the “Cosi Obesity Cure.” Their letters are full of hope in the products they saw advertised, but also tinged with healthy skepticism, as one women wrote to *Hygiea* in 1923 to ask “if the rubber garments advertised by Dr. Jeanne B. Walker are worthy of trial [...] personally, I am quite sure that nothing short of a proper diet and vigorous exercise will ever

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<sup>60</sup> 1923 review of Dr. Charles Froude’s *Right Food the Right Remedy* which ranted against a “big sugar” government conspiracy, box 199, folder 1, Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection.

attain the ends I desire.” The AMA’s reply assured her that “your skepticism has a very solid foundation.”<sup>61</sup> Women wrote to the AMA to ask about products like “Candyaid” and learned that it was “essentially nothing but candy containing some vitamins,” a massager called “Beautiform” which was deemed “preposterous,” and to ask where to buy diet pills, the answer to which was “don’t.”<sup>62</sup>

Many of these women were housewives, or girls who read in textbooks that the AMA could be sought for information, but letter-writers also served in civic positions like chair of various Homemaker Extension Councils, Farm Women Councils, and Home Demonstration Councils associated with state and local health departments. In this capacity, they sent frequent requests for pamphlets on food faddism to aid in demonstrations and public outreach to “combat misinformation concerning health fads, fallacies, and quacks.”<sup>63</sup> Another Home Demonstration clubwoman wrote to request a list of “books which might be found in a public library, of which you do not approve” to disseminate to local housewives who might otherwise be led astray by books like “Eat, Live, and be Merry.”<sup>64</sup>

As the diet craze swept the 1920s, women wrote to the AMA, the Fraud Investigation Department, the *JAMA* Propaganda Department, and *Hygeia* for assurance that “Narci Reducing Creams,” “Sylph Reducing Gurus” and “Bullet Proof Anti-Fat” cures might slim their waistlines.

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<sup>61</sup> July, 1923 Letter to *Hygeia*, box 598, folder 1, Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection.

<sup>62</sup> August, 1919 Letter from Mrs. Frances B. Pike of Brooklyn to the *JAMA*, November, 1919 Letter From Mrs. H.T. Lillie, July, 1923 Letter to *Hygeia*, box 598, folder 1, Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection.

<sup>63</sup> August 1962 Letter from Mrs. Thompson of the Orangeburg, South Carolina Council of Farm Women, box 199, folder 1, Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

They asked not only for themselves, but on the behalf of friends whom they had “assured that taking their face value they represent is pure quackery.”<sup>65</sup> The unnamed AMA staffers who wrote the bulk of return letters tended to respond with acerbic wit, presumably because they grew weary of finding new ways to say that “we know there is nothing that can be rubbed on the body to reduce weight.”<sup>66</sup> These letters reveal a network of women- clubwomen, housewives, friends and family- who wrote to the AMA to not only gain information for themselves, but to spread that information to their wider groups, or maybe to show their friends ‘I told you so.’ In 1929, Mrs. Joseph J. Meyer of Johnstown PA sent the AMA a circular for an obesity cure that women had brought her “since she is a physician’s wife.” Mrs. Meyer served as a source of knowledge for the women in her community, and a liaison between them and the expertise of the AMA.<sup>67</sup>

Skeptical women sent ads, circulars, and letters they received offering reducing products. Part inquiry, part notification, these letters offered an invaluable resource to the AMA Bureau of Investigation to build on their collection of known diet quackery. The women who wrote these letters were an integral part of a web of information and informants which included doctors, health department officials, and better business bureaus, all bent on exposing diet fraud. One 1938 note describes a women who telephoned the AMA Fraud Investigation Department to verify the claims of a “Theradiet” line of diet foods, including broth, parsley and garlic

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<sup>65</sup> September, 1926 Letter, box 598, folder 1, Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection.

<sup>66</sup> 1925 Reply from the *JAMA* Fraud Investigation Department, box 598, folder 1, Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

guaranteed to slim the waist. She informed the AMA that the product's grocery store demonstrator promised customers that the diet food was endorsed by Dr. Fishbein himself, though the AMA assured the women that this claim was "preposterous."<sup>68</sup> The chain of communication demonstrated in this exchange illustrates the relationship between female dieters, the diet industry, and the AMA. Diet fad marketers were clearly aware of the reputation of Dr. Fishbein as a trusted source, and female consumers were savvy enough to be suspect of such claims, as well as to call or write to the AMA Fraud Investigation Department directly to question them. Not only was the AMA a trusted authority on diets for women, but women were also an important source of information for the AMA. Many of the frauds investigated were done so at the bequest of women who called or mailed in advertisements for diet aids.

Women also sought the AMA's stamp of approval for popular diet books, like those by Adelle Davis. In 1955 a Mrs. Hans Hefti received a reply that assured her "we do have record of Adelle Davis as a food faddist author" whose book was "a hodge-podge of sensible advice on foods, isolated bits of scientific data concerned chiefly with vitamins, and irresponsible

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<sup>68</sup> Letter Dated March 9, 1955, box 199, folder 1, Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection.

statements about successful treatment of conditions with proper vitamin feeding.”<sup>69</sup> The war



Figure 9. “Merchants of Menace” Ad, courtesy of the AMA

against food faddists and supplements was waged against popular gurus both with and without a medical license. The AMA was often in conflict with doctors trying to cash in on dieting, bemoaning the fact that “even well-informed people can be influenced by the personable writing of an unknown physician.”

The organization was critical of doctors’ “formula diets” and dieters that jump from one to the next after disappointment, calling this behavior “the rhythm method of girth control.”<sup>70</sup>

<sup>69</sup> 1955 Letter, box 199, folder 1, Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection.

<sup>70</sup> This quote suggests the link between doctors’ establishing authority over women’s reproductive health with that of issues of size and diet. “Merchants of Menace” Philip White, Director of AMA Department of Foods and Nutrition, 1968. Pg 5.

### The Sierra Reducing Club



Figure 10. Photograph of the Sierra Reducing Club, courtesy of the AMA

The AMA records also contain hints of the group-diet movement to come. A 1935 pamphlet “The Business of Eating” contained a brief description of the Sierra Reducing Club- twenty four women on a very low calorie diet who reported “mass reductions” recorded at weekly public weigh-ins.

The group explained that though “three members failed to have any

cooperation from their husbands in any attempts to reduce” their cooperative efforts proved effective, and that “it is the opinion of all members of the class that the plan of organizing fat-reducing clubs throughout the country is entirely feasible and practical...all that is needed are a few enterprising women in a community to give it a start.”<sup>71</sup>

Of course, the AMA considered such groups dangerous and unsound, not only because they relied on far too-few calories and a mysterious tea to reduce, but because they did so outside of the purview of their family doctors. Clubs like this threatened the relationship of medical authority figure working upon a hapless patient. They also interfered with the pre-war conception of diet as a private enterprise, one not to be shared with friends or family. Though the Fraud

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<sup>71</sup> *Business of Eating*, box 197, folder 1, Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection.

Investigation Department worked to uncover dangerous and unsound medical quackery, it also struggled to retain a scientific and medical authority over all aspects of health, including the size of women's bodies. Like women's periodicals and advice columnists, the AMA was insistent that women only reduce under the direct supervision of experts, that their body project was one in which women were effectively passive objects to be worked upon.

Women like those in the Sierra Reducing Club, however, looked to each other for support and expertise. In the years after World War Two, "enterprising women" came together in ever-greater numbers to diet cooperatively, critique prevailing notions of size and health, and to test the idea that they might be the experts of their own bodies. The communities of size described below negotiated the pre-war belief in experts and expertise and regained a measure of personal autonomy through their body work. Leaders in these communities selectively chose from the advice of magazines, columnists, and doctors to create their own plans of reduction, creating a new category of lay-experts for their fellow fats to turn to.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “WE’LL HELP THE DOCTOR HELP HER”: TOPS, THE AMA, AND WOMEN’S MUTUAL SUPPORT

It’s a Saturday night in July, and I’m in the grand ballroom of the Coronado Springs Disney resort in Orlando, Florida. As the lights dim, the crowd of two-thousand falls silent. Most are women, most are older, and almost all are fat. Around the edges of the room, however, a circle of thinner women stand, holding electronic candles as the lights fall and stirring music plays. This is the “circle of light” the culminating moment of the annual meeting of one of America’s oldest weight-loss clubs, Take Off Pounds Sensibly (TOPS). I’m here to interview long-time members, and see the pageantry of the club- including a “coronation” of the international “Queen” and “King” of tops. In this emotional, dramatic evening, the yearly winners “speak from the heart.” I hear “I have battled with weight problems my whole life...my group taught me how to lose weight.” Every story is unique and identical.

Over the weekend, TOPS members welcome me warmly. I’m fat, too, which seems to assuage suspicion over my relative youth, ubiquitous laptop, and a nametag with my university affiliation rather than a home TOPS club. TOPS in 2016 firmly believes in supporting people “where they are,” meaning that some fat members who find acceptance at their meeting may decide they don’t need to lose, after all. Yet most here at least give lip service to goal of slenderness, and all are eager to hear the “success” stories on display. For more than sixty years, the members of TOPS have gathered in ballrooms like this to crown their kings and queens, to



see the fantasy of transformation, and to celebrate their TOPS community. As I look around I want to know: what made them join? What made them stay?

In the spring of 1951, LIFE magazine introduced the nation to Milwaukee-based dieting group TOPS, a collection of women losing weight together since 1948. Alongside pictures of zaftig women dancing together to “lose ounces twirling around,” the article described a fun, playful atmosphere where women exercised, shared cooking tips, and extolled each other to “feast your eyes and nothing more.”<sup>1</sup>

Esther Manz started T.O.P.S in 1948, after returning to homemaking following the war. Manz’s granddaughter notes that, ironically, this reducing club was “created at the kitchen table.”<sup>2</sup> Mutual support and group therapy were the central tenets of TOPS. Before 1948, diet groups like the Sierra Reducing Club organized around a specific, and often dangerous, fad diet. TOPS didn’t offer members a diet plan, but rather a space to work the diet prescribed by their family doctor. Perhaps because of this flexibility, TOPS, was one of the earliest diet groups to go national, and it rose out of the post-war push for women to return home.<sup>3</sup> Founder Esther Manz lost her war-time production job even as she gained weight in the absence of food rationing. Manz created TOPS as a way for overweight women to share diet tips, offer encouragement and

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<sup>1</sup> “TOPS Take off Pounds: A kind of Fat Ladies Non-Anonymous helps girls to fight for their figures,”

<sup>2</sup> Carol Holtz, 2010 Interview in *TOPS History: Esther Manz’ Story*, Available online at <http://www.tops.org/tops/tops/History2.aspx>. Accessed 4/16/2016.

<sup>3</sup> For more, see Elaine May, *Homeward Bound: Families in the Cold War* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), Lizabeth Cohen, *Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

censure to each other while publicly celebrating success- which the scale strictly measured.

TOPS newsletters show a focus on women's role as consumers and primary preparers of food for their families; fat was the moral realm of women, and it was their duty to banish this blemish from their bodies and their homes.

TOPS offered nutritional education to women, and stressed lower calorie menus and avoidance of "sweets." Groups also encouraged physical activity, and dances and games were a central social element of weekly meetings. At TOPS meetings, the focus was on fun, and weight was seen as a very public social and civic issue. This rejection of privacy was on display in weigh-ins, where there were clear winners and losers at weight loss. Elements of both celebration and shame were displayed in the crowning of weight-loss kings and queens, and the public humiliation of the "piggy song." Though Manz modeled TOPS on elements of group therapy, the organization's philosophy disavowed both anonymity and a psychological or spiritual focus. Instead, the focus was solely on weight, and numbers strictly established success or failure. For the women of TOPS, the act of overeating was the problem, not any underlying motivations or structural problems in their lives. TOPS used the schema of group therapy, the approach of AA, the relationship of women to medicine, and the popularity of pageants to create a group unique to its historical moment.

William Griffith Wilson founded Alcoholics Anonymous in 1934. The recovery group was born out of Jungian psychology and evangelicalism, a blend of medicine and religion that culminated in an ethos of self-survery, confession, and service. AA was a mutual support group, explicitly a-political even in an era of political upheaval, and part of a broader movement of

depression-era self-help ideology. Amidst the trauma and turmoil of the Great Depression, the AA movement focused on individual improvement, not structural changes in American society.<sup>4</sup> It was also explicitly religious, and while membership in early years was overwhelmingly masculine, AA's "infusion of spirituality" came from two women, Anne Smith and Henrietta Sieberling, both associated with the Oxford Group in Akron, who encouraged recovering alcoholics to pursue daily meditation and deep bible readings. Anne Smith remained AA's spiritual matriarch in its early years, offering comfort and religious direction to members on a daily basis. Bill W. created The Twelve Steps in 1938, beginning with the central tenant that AA members are powerless over alcohol. The steps demand submission to God, self-survey, reflection, atonement, and service to others.

Historian Kevin Kaufman describes the mountain of good press Alcoholics Anonymous received in the late 1930s and early 1940s, often focusing on stories of redemption and success, and describing AA as any other middle-class fraternity.<sup>5</sup> A *Saturday Evening Post* article in 1941, for instance, presented AA as a group of middle and upper-class men, grey-clad professionals who had succumbed to drink but redeemed themselves through humility and temperance. The 1941 article established AA as a respectable, masculine enterprise that offered a salve to the moral crisis of a depression-era middle-class. AA was also made respectable by the organization's deferential relationship with the medical establishment and reconceptualization of

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<sup>4</sup> Kevin Kaufman, "Rigorous Honesty: A Cultural History of Alcoholics Anonymous 1935-1960 (PhD Dissertation, Loyola University Chicago, 2011), 116.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 139.

alcoholism as a complex medical disorder, not a character failing. The preface to *Alcoholics Anonymous* had an endorsement from a Dr. William Silworth, who characterized alcoholism as an “allergy”. Dr. Silworth also gave Wilson access to his alcoholic patients to illustrate the efficacy of the program.

These twin pillars of respectability, religion and medicine, were seen in the process of induction into AA. Sociologist Klaus Makela finds that in the early Akron group, which was most closely associated with the Oxford Group, men were first hospitalized and treated for alcoholism, then they knelt and prayed in communion with other AA members.<sup>6</sup> Respectability was further upheld by the location of AA meetings in their early years- Oxford Group meetings and largely in private homes in middle-class neighborhoods. This placidness, in the welcoming family homes of successful men, offered both legitimacy and hope to those in the bottle’s thrall. These homes assured men that they could overcome their illness, become contributing members of society once more, and settle into a comfortable family life.

The women of TOPS took this model of respectable self-help and incorporated it into their understanding of the relationship between their bodies, their doctors, and themselves. Feminist scholars, beginning in the 1960s and ‘70s in the wake of the women’s health movement, have investigated how male doctors medicalized women’s bodies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Historians Virginia Olesen and Ellen Lewin recall that "from the very start of the new feminist movement those who took up health issues advanced the seemingly

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<sup>6</sup> Klaus Makela, *Alcoholics Anonymous as a Mutual Self-Help Movement: A Study in Eight Societies* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Madison Press, 1996), 21.

incredible claim that even ordinary women's knowledge of their bodies was as legitimate as the expertise of the medical profession."<sup>7</sup> TOPS, though, offers evidence that even non-feminist women negotiated this within the schema of 'ask your doctor first.'

Like Olesen and Lewin, Rima D. Apple sees a history of women and health emerging from the women's health movement with Gilmanesque models of oppression which "saw women as victims of the medical profession" and "oppressed by contemporary medical theory."<sup>8</sup> Yet, Rima argues, "women were not, are not, passive recipients of medical advice" instead they were "active participants who at times resist, at times embrace, and at times create the conditions" of the medicalization of women's bodies.<sup>9</sup> But even emerging feminist research imagined the health-care system as a model of "receipt and delivery" rather than "participatory and processual" and "rarely examined women's roles as constructors of knowledge."<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Judith Walzer Leavitt characterizes early work in the field of women and medicine as polemical diatribes that "saw a single villain, the medical profession as a, if not the, major oppressor of women."<sup>11</sup> In this estimation, she argues, "physicians took on the character as all powerful" "socially determined by male power and biologically determined by women's own bodies." Social historians like Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, Ann Douglas Wood, and Mary Roth Walsh used this

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<sup>7</sup> Virginia Olesen and Ellen Lewin, *Women, Health, and Healing: A Theoretical Introduction* 7.

<sup>8</sup> Rima D. Apple, *Women, Health, and Medicine in America: A Historical Handbook* (New York: Garland, 1990), xiv.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-10.

<sup>11</sup> Judith Walzer Leavitt, "A Decade of research in women's studies" (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 4.

oppression model to trace the medicalization of women's bodies in the nineteenth century and the professionalization of medicine which marginalized women's health practices. This model was succeeded by a focus on women's agency in the 1980s and 90s.

Following these scholars, historians like Martha H. Verbugge used a discursive model to uncover the negotiation of women's health. Verbugge finds that during the first half of the twentieth century "apparent threats to national vigor" led to a "heightened belief that health was a civic duty and the emblem of a responsible life."<sup>12</sup> Verbugge finds that in the late nineteenth century, urban communities engaged in new forms of athletics mixed "competition with cooperation" to teach discipline "while releasing physical energy" but also new judgments about "what is desirable, or moral, or functional in human's life."<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, Vergubbe finds that historically, models of health and sickness "have helped diagnose personal shortcomings, analyze social problems, and reinforce moral behavior."<sup>14</sup>

The history of women and medicine is particularly relevant in tracing reproductive health, as colloquial practices of childbirth and birth control were medicalized in the early twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> More recent work, like that of Andrea Tone, focuses on centering women's

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<sup>12</sup> Martha H. Verbugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood: Personal Health and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Boston* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4. For more on health, gender, and national identity, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> See Judith Walzer Leavitt, "The Growth of Medical Authority: Technology and Morals in Turn-of-the-Century Obstetrics," in *Women and Health in America*, Ed. Judith Walzer Leavitt (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 636-659, Linda Gordon, *Women's Body, Women's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New

actions and voices rather than prevailing medical literature. Historians trace the shift in the location of care, from women-centered home care to male-dominated institutions.<sup>16</sup> TOPS seems at first to fit the oppression model, but a closer examination reveals a women-centered approach moving into medical institutions, rather than being replaced by it.

### **A Kind of Fat Ladies Non-Anonymous: AA Meets Reducing Schemes**

Weight-management groups in the mid twentieth century rejected the tyranny of salon managers, and negotiated with the medical establishment for a shared authority over women's bodies. To do so, they reworked the public perception of fat to create a "good fatty" who is constantly undertaking a personal project of slenderness. TOPS found a workable hybrid of self-help and mutual support in the model of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA was both well-known and well-respected by the 1950s, and offered a blend of respectability and sympathy for a group that culture rarely had sympathy for: fat women. Making alcoholics sympathetic and potentially respectable was no easy feat, and the stigma against alcoholism mirrored the stigma against fat in important ways. Both were seen to indicate a lack of self-control, selfishness, and weak will. AA and weight-management groups worked to create public sympathy and suggest that alcohol dependence and fat could both be overcome, to reveal the "true" self underneath- a self that inevitably practiced middle-class behavior and strove for upward mobility.

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York: Grossman, 1976), Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Joan E. Lynaugh, "Institutionalizing Women's Health Care in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century America" in *Women, Health, and Medicine: A Historical Handbook*, Ed. Rima D. Apple, (New York: Garland, 1990). 247-270.

The literature and membership of early AA Big Book had explicit instructions for the wives of alcoholics: to be patient, kind, never angry or nagging. There was a focus on preserving the reputation of her husband, maintaining it for when he would be sober enough to take up that burden for himself again. TOPS noticeably did not publish lists of proscriptive behavior for husbands of fat wives, rather it was the responsibility of members to maintain a slim figure for her husband's benefit. TOPS maintained elements of AA, most importantly the tenets of self-survey, confession, and service to others. They also, like AA, believed that women could be best helped by others who shared their struggles with weight, "in the kinship of common suffering."<sup>17</sup>

Looking for new solutions to the problem of overweight, the ethos of the rising self-help movement resonated with dieters, especially the successes of Alcoholics Anonymous. In the 1940s AA methods were widely publicized, and resonated with a message of manly self-restraint and individual accountability. The 1951 creation of Al-Anon was largely for the wives of alcoholics, though women made up 15 percent of AA's membership in the 1950s.<sup>18</sup> Al-Anon supported traditional family structures and women's domestic roles; the end goal of the group was to create supportive spouses for alcoholic husbands, with a focus on reconciliation and forgiveness.<sup>19</sup> AA proved to be a workable model even for groups like TOPS who didn't explicitly utilize the 12 Step traditions. In 1957 at the TOPS National Convention in Cincinnati, one member noted that "one speaker from Alcoholics Anonymous told how their organization

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<sup>17</sup> Katz, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Anon is a community for friends and family of alcoholics. Kaufmann, 219.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 221.



functions and how they help one another. One thought I liked very much was that they just try to stay strong for today and each day takes care of itself.”<sup>20</sup> The themes of “one day at a time” and sponsorship were widely adopted by TOPS members, who looked to local leadership for guidance and inspiration, and organized nationwide “pen pals” to find women similar to themselves to write to for motivation and support. They also adopted the AA tactic of calling each other in moments of weakness, as one member noted that when she “needs help staying away from food-much like an alcoholic who needs a drink- she calls a member of the club just to talk.”<sup>21</sup> This theme was often repeated in articles and images printed in *TOPS News*.

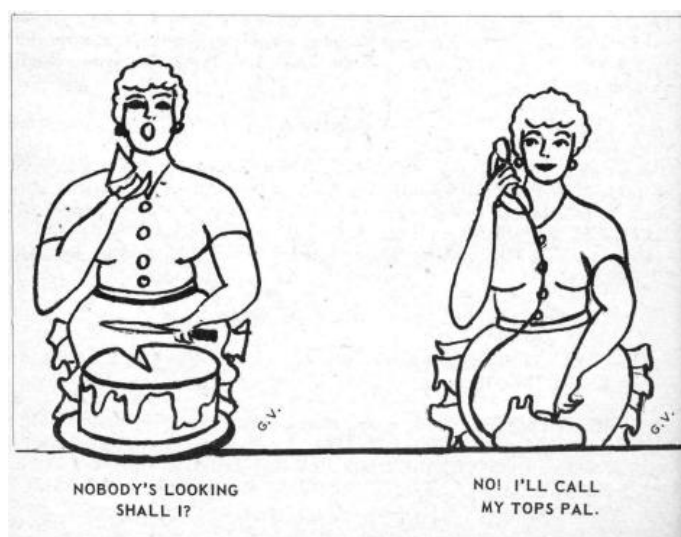


Figure 11. *TOPS News* February, 1959

The anonymous movement provided female dieters with a language to understand their own overeating, with its focus on surrendering to a higher power and creating and utilizing

<sup>20</sup> “Fun at the Convention” Ina Mae Loppnow, *TOPS News* (March, 1957 Vol 10 No 3).

<sup>21</sup> “Look at Mommy: Woman Loses Weight, Wins State TOPS Title” *Los Angeles Times* (June 26, 1960).

extensive networks of support. For the ladies of TOPS, the “higher power” was not discretely chosen- it was always the family doctor

### **“See the Doctor First”: Self-Help and the Doctor’s Orders**

In 1952, Mrs. Margaret Schmidt of Milwaukee was crowned the TOPS “Queen” at the American Medical Association’s headquarters in Chicago, IL. She lost a hundred pounds, she said, by eating 600-800 calories a day, and was unsurprisingly “still hungry.” How and why, in the most prosperous and well-fed nation in the world, was a housewife in Milwaukee starving herself to slenderness? How was this imagined to be the “sensible” way to reduce? Perhaps the answers to the how and why can be found in the where. It’s no coincidence that the early national meetings of TOPS took place in the headquarters of the AMA, or that every TOPS publication ended with the words “under a physician’s supervision.”

Manz recalled that she got the idea for TOPS from her experience with women’s mutual support in childbirth classes. These classes wed together the central pillars that TOPS would use: women’s mutual support groups, the AA paradigm and doctor’s orders. Her experience in child birthing classes mirrored the larger discursive role of TOPS: women maintaining or creating a sphere of expertise for themselves within the broader twentieth-century medicalization of female bodies. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, physicians worked to wrest control of childbirth away from mothers and midwives. Part of the professionalization of their community, doctors invented a language of expertise which excluded laypeople. The AMA was an active agent in establishing this expertise, advising women in *Hygeia* to “see an obstetrician early, he will take

care of the rest.”<sup>22</sup> In the 1930s, doctors, aided by insurance actuaries, re-imagined childbearing as a disease that needed extensive medical intervention to avoid mortality.<sup>23</sup> By 1935, almost 40% of women gave birth in a hospital, by 1950 that number rose to 88% and by 1960 over 96% of Americans were born in a hospital.<sup>24</sup> According to medical historian Neal Devitt, this momentous shift was encouraged by “obstetricians, public health officials, upper-class women and insurance companies”.<sup>25</sup> By the 1950s, doctors were the established authority over childbirth, and like the salon-reducers of the 1920s, pregnant women became the passive object of childbirth, she was sedated and worked upon- it was the doctor who delivered the baby.

Manz’ experience illustrates that the shift from social childbirth to medicalized childbirth did not do away with women’s networks entirely, but it did move them into the sphere of the physician. Women still gathered to discuss pregnancy and prepare for births, they just did so under their doctor’s orders. The medicalization and healthization of women’s bodies was contested and negotiated by women as it occurred. The dialog of medical expertise was complicated by women’s daily activities and their social networks, and doctor’s authority was not always taken for granted. Women’s voices still argued for home-births and a preservation of

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<sup>22</sup> Aldine R. Bird, “Progress of Obstetric Knowledge in America” *Hygeia* 11 (May, 1933): 439.

<sup>23</sup> “Maternal Mortality Lowest Where Hospital Confinement is Most Frequent.” *Statistical Bull, Metro Life Ins Co* 26:6-8, 1945.

<sup>24</sup> See Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Brought to Bed: Childrearing in America 1750-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>25</sup> Neal Devitt, “The Transition from Home to Hospital Birth in the United States, 1930-1960,” in *Childbirth Methods and Folklore*, Ed Philip K. Wilson (New York: Garland, 1996).

female knowledge of the body.<sup>26</sup> These groups maintained the social aspect of pre-medicalized childbirth, allowing women space to offer their own experiences and expertise to each other. But, importantly, they were organized by hospitals and privileged the instructions of doctors over female-created knowledge.

Manz thought that this model could work for reducing, as well, and asked her family physician for his thoughts. Manz's story again illustrates the negotiation of the medicalization of women's bodies, in this case of women's size. With her doctor's approval, she organized the first TOPS club in 1948. Like her birthing classes, TOPS organized women around the central advice and literature of the medical establishment, but TOPS moved this mutual support group back into spaces created and controlled by women. Furthermore, the records of TOPS illustrate that this relationship was often one of equals, as Manz and the board continually asserted their own expertise in guiding medical research on obesity, and used the support of individual doctors to bolster their own credentials. They did so via a close relationship with the AMA in the early years of the organization, a regular physician's column in TOPS News, and the creation of a TOPS obesity research project at Deaconess Hospital in Milwaukee.

Manz organized TOPS around the principle of "see your doctor first." New members came in with their doctor's permission, and with a goal weight set by him, not by the member herself. But it's important to note that in the rare circumstance in which a doctor could not set a member's weight goal, it was the club leadership that would set it for her, functioning as a stand-

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Ashley Montagu, "Babies Should be Born at Home" *Ladies Home Journal* (September, 1955), Sep 1955), 72, 52.

in for the medical establishment. A 1962 leaders' handbook reminded group runners that "a member cannot set her own weight goal. It must be set by her physician, or in cases where a person's religious belief does not allow her to go to a physician, it must be set by the executive officers of a chapter."<sup>27</sup>

The relationship between TOPS and the AMA came directly out of the AMA's success in claiming expertise over fat bodies in the preceding decades. The earliest national TOPS conventions were held at the AMA headquarters in Chicago, and included tours of the facility. Manz' personal doctor penned the forward to the earliest edition of the members' "guide to health and happiness," and TOPS News regularly ran contributions from doctors, and after 1967 a regular column by Dr. Edward Habeck. Doctors and representatives from government health services were a regular feature at club meetings and larger TOPS events, as reported in TOPS News in 1952 when "Dr. Wiese from the Milwaukee City Health Department showed movies and gave a lecture on health."<sup>28</sup> Doctors were also a key element of any good success story in TOPS early years. Doctors, husbands, and children were the three central agents of applause and accolades for slimming members, who reported that after losing weight they "w[on] the praise and admiration of my husband" and "my doctor says it's like a miracle."<sup>29</sup>

The AMA supported TOPS through a partnership that provided legitimacy and exposure. In a 1973 article with Vi Dewey of the Milwaukee Journal, Manz recalled that "Through

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<sup>27</sup> 1962 Leader's Training Manual, TOPS Archive, pg 17.

<sup>28</sup> TOPS News June 1952.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

arrangement made by the AMA, tops had nation-wide exposure on the Dave Garraway show- the 'Today' shows. Our first big loser (she had lost 80 pounds) and Dr. McDonald and myself went down to the AMA and Chicago to do the program. It was sent all over."<sup>30</sup> In the early 1950s, the AMA was a regular tour stop for TOPS members visiting Chicago.<sup>31</sup> The relationship between the two organizations was close enough that women nationwide who were interested in the reducing club sent "a deluge of mail" to the AMA, which TOPS members were kept busy answering.<sup>32</sup> The AMA also gave an air of professionalism and legitimacy to early national conventions. The first conventions were held at the AMA headquarters in Chicago, and convention committee members gushed that "the help [with the conference] the AMA gave puts their personnel in the same class with our very top tops"<sup>33</sup>

This relationship was fully reciprocal- TOPS earned legitimacy through its relationship with the AMA and government health agencies, but TOPS also worked to spread the health messages of those groups. TOPS consistently upheld the role of doctor as expert, and also functioned as an agent of the AMA's effort against food faddism and diet tonics. Acting as an AMA surrogate, a sharp-tongued 1952 *TOPS News* article asked members "are you going to read labels from now on, and no longer be gullible characters for every fancy advertisement that is printed? Better yet, check with your doctor on any advertised diet aid before you spend your

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<sup>30</sup> Esther Manz, Interview with Vi Dewey, 1/29/73, Transcript at TOPS Archive.

<sup>31</sup> "TOPS Members Tour the American Medical Association's Headquarters" *TOPS News* Sept, 1952.

<sup>32</sup> *TOPS News* December, 1952.

<sup>33</sup>*TOPS News* February, 1955.

money for trouble."<sup>34</sup> In the club's first years, leadership routinely lent credence to the expertise of doctor's over nutritional conundrums, scolding women not to "ask your fellow members to give you copies of their or ask their advice on how much salt or water to take. Your doctor is the only one who can advise you safely on these and many other questions."<sup>35</sup>

In the 1960s, as the organization built a new headquarters amidst ever-expanding membership, Manz and the board's relationship with the medical establishment changed from client to patron when they reached out to Milwaukee's Deaconess Hospital to explore a possible obesity research program underwritten by TOPS Members. Between 1966 and 1968, TOPS Club awarded \$500,000 to Deaconess Hospital, and in 1968 the hospital admitted its first three patients to the Deaconess-TOPS Obesity Treatment and Research Program. Dr. Kenneth S. Jamron, executive director, reported that all incoming patients would be TOPS members.<sup>36</sup> The program consisted of evaluation, education, and a three-week hospital stay that may have functioned as an almost spa-like vacation for the working-class women who made up TOPS membership. The program also included an extensive survey via questionnaire, dispersed and collected by individual club leaders and filled out by members.

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<sup>34</sup> *TOPS News* August, 1952.

<sup>35</sup> *TOPS News* November 1952.

<sup>36</sup> Deaconess Press Release, May 1, 1968, TOPS Archive.

Internal club records illustrate the negotiation of expertise and authority that surrounded the creation of the Deaconess research program. Minutes of the Research Program Committee meetings from 1967-1969 reflect involvement in the creation and distribution of medical questionnaires, as well as an insistence that TOPS was a full partner in the venture. The committee sent instructions to Deaconess that “TOPS Club will decide upon: 1. the restrictions to be placed on the cost of occupational therapy. 2. The wording and form of the letterhead for the physician’s questionnaire. 3. The printing that will be done at Tops club or by an outside concern. 4. The best time to mail the questionnaires.”<sup>37</sup> The committee decided that questionnaires sent to club leaders for dissemination would have a TOPS letterhead, not the



Figure 12. Esther Manz Tours New Construction for the Deaconess Research Program, Courtesy of *TOPS News*

hospital’s. An explanation of the questionnaires was attached, and was also published in *TOPS News* in December, 1968. TOPS worked as the agent of the program, mediating the relationship between members and hospital, and taking on the role of expert after securing “approval from the AMA”.<sup>38</sup> Deaconess relied on TOPS exclusively for both the survey work and the publicity of the program. A 1968 Deaconess press release packet sent to chapter leaders noted that “the attached packet of materials is to be delivered by hand to the editor of the

<sup>37</sup> TOPS Archive, Medical Research Folder.

<sup>38</sup> Handwritten note- approval of AMA (with a big question mark), TOPS Archive Deaconess Folder.



most influential newspaper in your immediate vicinity.”<sup>39</sup> 186,000 surveys were sent to club leaders, and by 1970 over 100,000 had been returned. Local leaders “guided the chapter members through the maze of questions and answers,” and TOPS members also applied to become a Deaconess patient directly through their area supervisors.<sup>40</sup>

The Research Program Committee also left their stamp on the name of the program, and changed “national obesity survey: sponsored by TOPS research program” to “national obesity survey: conducted by TOPS-Deaconess research program.”<sup>41</sup> TOPS prominence and expertise in the program continued through the survey process and into the hospital stay. Entrance into the Deaconess program included a welcome note from Esther Manz signed “your tops mom,” and the weight-loss focused in-patient stay included a daily “rotating trophy” for the woman with the greatest loss.<sup>42</sup>

TOPS articles of incorporation asserts the club’s role as scientific partners and experts, organized for education and scientific purposes which “include the following; to control and correct weight imbalance and to study its underlying causes; to improve knowledge of the causes of and means for the corrections of individual overweight; and to promote knowledge of and means for the formation of social environments conducive to the control of harmful weight fluctuations in individuals.”<sup>43</sup> The Club cultivated expertise in its leadership programs, including

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<sup>39</sup> Deaconess Press Release Packet, TOPS Archive.

<sup>40</sup> “TOPS Obesity Research Patients ‘Home In’ on Milwaukee” TOPS News March 1970, 5.

<sup>41</sup> TOPS Archive, Medical Research Folder.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> 1968 Deaconess Press Release, TOPS Archive.

workshop for TOPS leaders with speakers from Deaconess, from the FDA on the subject “food and faddism,” and from the county extension service.<sup>44</sup>

Throughout the 1960s, TOPS firmly established itself as a locus of reducing expertise, able to navigate the medical establishment and the government, disseminating top-down messages to its members, but also influencing the creation of those messages. Their role as experts in the field culminated in an invitation to Nixon’s White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health in December, 1969. TOPS founders and board members participated in the three day conference at the Sheraton-Park Hotel in D.C. alongside three thousand delegates, which included community groups and women’s groups. The conference was part of Nixon’s attempt to create a national nutrition policy, and focused on malnourishment and food insecurity, especially for children, the elderly, and pregnant women. TOPS stood out as a voice for the peculiar problem of affluent excess amidst concerns of poverty and malnourishment. But their role as a working-class woman-led organization with an interest in family food habits meshed with a conference that quickly radicalized. Participants noted that “militant groups and coalitions of the poverty- and minority- conferees fed a sense of urgency into the conference” and shifted focus to economic inequality and demanded an adequate minimum wage.<sup>45</sup>

Manz was invited to speak before a sectional meeting at the White House conference in the panel dealing with obesity in an affluent society and she reported that Chairman Dr. Ancel

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<sup>44</sup> 1962 Leaders Manual, TOPS Archive.

<sup>45</sup> Mary E. Hawkins, “White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health Illuminates Inequities and Stresses Urgency, *The Science Teacher* Vol 37 No 3 (March, 1970) 20-22.

Keys stated “we are in the embarrassing position of finding an excellent organization that knows more about doctors than they know about it.”<sup>46</sup> TOPS leaders participation in the conference panel on “Adults in Affluent Society” is clear in their recommendations in the final report. The panel noted that “the apparent effectiveness of self-help groups in the treatment of chronic disorders, in particular Alcoholics Anonymous for alcoholism and TOPS for obesity, suggests that this approach to the treatment of obesity merits careful study.”<sup>47</sup> Panel members views on food faddism, starvation diets, and “reducing equipment” aligned with TOPS and the AMA, but the panel also argued that securing adequate nutrition was central to obesity prevention, and so recommended “that an adequate income be guaranteed to enable all Americans to purchase adequate foods.”<sup>48</sup>

Through their role as mediators between the medical establishment, the government, and reducing members, the women of TOPS leadership actively asserted their expertise over club members’ weight-loss, even as they admonished them to “see your doctor first.” The weekly meetings maintained the authority of club leaders, and created a system of mutual support that began with the doctor’s orders, but ended with women crowning each other queens.

### **“Get a Grip on Yourself, Girls”: TOPS as Mutual Support**

TOPS blend of medical authority and self-help created a mutual support group for women that made reducing the ostensible yet almost secondary goal of a broad community of

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<sup>46</sup> “History Year by Year,” TOPS Archive.

<sup>47</sup> “Report of Panel II-3,” *White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health Final Report*, 54.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

support. The activities of local TOPS groups went beyond personal weight goals to create a level of civic engagement and community building. Adopting an ideology of healthism, the neoliberal idea that health was a civic and social responsibility, the holistic approach of TOPS meant the club was part of every aspect of home, family, and work life for members.<sup>49</sup> TOPS News, as well as interviews with longtime members show consistent themes of: money as a motivator, negotiations with family about food and leisure time, crafting, beauty culture, incorporation of civic engagement, and an extensive and growing support network through the 1950s and '60s. The monthly TOPS newsletter had steady features of "success stories," individual accolades for club members across the country, organizational and financial news, poems, songs, ideas for club prizes and, by 1957 "before and after" pictures. It also functioned as a nationwide phone-tree, sharing news of babies born, sick children, workplace promotions, and death announcements. Many of these announcements included calls or thanks for gifts and letters. Crucially, the monthly newsletter offered a space to display individual achievement, though it was always tempered with gratitude to fellow members and Esther Manz as their founder. TOPS News shows the extent of community involvement for members, and a changing focus over the 1950s that highlighted pageantry.

*TOPS News* shows that the groups were built on pre-existing networks of women, who used money and special recognition as weight loss motivation. The groups display a consistent playfulness, with songs, poems, dances, skits, and picnics all featured as group activities. News

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<sup>49</sup> Healthism is a term coined by Robert Crawford to describe a political preoccupation with personal health as the solution to public health issues. See "Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life," *International Journal of Health Services* vol 10 no 3 (1980): 365-388.

articles also show an inclusion of family and husbands in their weight-loss schemes, and a general understanding of members as wives and mothers. All of this occurred under the maternal eye of Esther Manz, whose motherly “Founders Message” told readers that “sensible dieting under the doctor's supervision plus group therapy is the number 1 solution” and ended every message with her trademark quip- “see you lighter, Esther Manz.” To grow the group along organic and pre-existing networks, she also suggested that members leave a copy of tops news at their doctor’s office, their beautician, or that they “give it to a friend.”<sup>50</sup>

In the 1950s, every issue of TOPS announced new babies, or “lollitops” born to members, as well as their plans to lose the “baby weight.” Issues also include news, both good and bad, of individual members. “Marian Koehler and Eleanor Penske’s children had the measles. We hope they get well soon because we know what a few weeks absence can do for mother's reducing program. We all need the moral support only TOPS can give.”<sup>51</sup> TOPS News shared grief as well. In [date] members were “grievously shocked to learn” that a popular and well-known leader La Rue Holtz from Milwaukee “died following the birth of a healthy baby daughter.” TOPS headquarters helped to organize a memorial night for her.

Most of the work of TOPS clubs, however, focused on how these larger life issues affected weight, and how to combat fat. TOPS News includes reports of health department education, and chided members to avoid taking “any of the pills or remedies on the market. They are either poison or plain foolish.” TOPS brand of support came with a healthy dose of tough-

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<sup>50</sup> *TOPS News*, May, 1952.

<sup>51</sup> *TOPS News*, July 1952.

love, telling members that "too many of us eat like lumberjacks, fight with the neighbors and family, use safety pills to pin up our duds. Mend your ways." The newsletter also shows that, even as these elements of mutual support endured, members attention shifted to focus on pageantry. An increase in pageantry was allowed for by photographs but also seems to have been a popular element of the group, and the organization responded to the desire of members with fashion shows, charm and beauty pageants, swimsuit competitions, and of course the crowning of royalty



Figure 11. TOPS Members show off their convention costumes. Courtesy of *TOPS News*.

TOPS was an organization by and for working-class women. Many members worked a double shift, which turned into a triple shift when they took on roles in club leadership. Groups

worked around job schedules, and discussed tactics for maintaining healthy diets when working odd hours, or working around food. Their goals and rewards also reflected working class concerns- namely, money. TOPS gave members advice on how to find free meeting spaces, and how to organize free and low-cost activities.

Throughout the 1950s, TOPS News reported new clubs at places like the GE X-Ray Corp.<sup>52</sup> In 1954 Mrs. Betty Finwall, of Chicago organized a tops club where she works. Finwall's group worked the third shift and come in early one night a week and have their meeting before they started work.<sup>53</sup> A 1954 *Chicago Tribune* article "TOPS Nips Cookie Nibble Habit of Cracker Packer" described the "dimpled" Mrs. Hensen, a member of the Marquette Park club and an overnight cookie packer at the Nabisco factory. The local group had no president, and was instead led by the member who had lost the most, at that time Mrs. Hensen. Hensen founded a TOPS club at the Nabisco factory with the help of the on-site first aid nurse. She measured her success in the approval of her family, and the article concluded with an anecdote about her young son declaring "why, mommy, now I can hug you again."<sup>54</sup>

Employment was also a crucial element of motivation for some women, who understood the bias against fat women on a job market that associated slenderness with energy, productivity, and neatness. Having experienced a more open job market during WWII, women also

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<sup>52</sup> *TOPS News*, August, 1952.

<sup>53</sup> *TOPS News*, May, 1954.

<sup>54</sup> "TOPS Nips Cookie Nibble Habit of Cracker Packer" *Chicago Daily Tribune* (June 20, 1954).

understood that they had to be ready (and slender!) if the market changed again. *TOPS News* warned of difficulty of obese people obtaining jobs in September of 1950, writing that “the present Korean situation will probably mean that many people will need to take jobs. In most places they are reluctant to hire anyone who is considerably overweight...if you plan to work, look to your weight now”<sup>55</sup>

TOPS was an organization whose philosophy and meeting style made it accessible to working class women. As Mrs. Hensen’s story shows, the clubs arranged themselves around work schedules, acknowledged the particular problems of the “double-shift” for working women, and often focused on family-centered results. A far cry from the wealthy women languorously rolling their fat away in State Street reducing salons, the women of TOPS negotiated their size wearing distinctly blue collars. They found meeting spaces in park houses, community rooms, and other civic spaces. TOPS meeting spaces reflect a blend of working-class civic culture and home life. These meeting spaces helped to ensure the groups remain inexpensive for members, but they also nurtured a homogeneity based on geography and spatial practices. In a 1973 interview, Manz recalled that in the 1950s “there wasn’t a recreation center in Milwaukee that didn’t have a tops chapter.”<sup>56</sup>

In 1964, the first “predominantly negro” Chicago TOPS club was formed in Woodlawn, with the name “Smart Slimmers.” Founded by Mrs. Myrtle Mckenzie, the group met regularly in

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<sup>55</sup> *TOPS News*, September, 1950.

<sup>56</sup> Manz, Interview with Vi Dewey, transcript. TOPS Archive.



the Washington Park fieldhouse.<sup>57</sup> TOPS as a whole struggled to balance a desire for inclusive

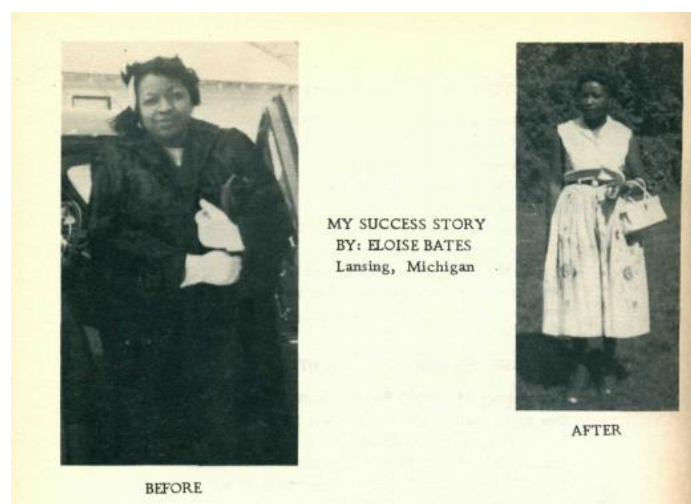


Figure 12. Before and After from *TOPS News*, 1965. Courtesy of TOPS

membership rolls and the realities of racism and neighborhood segregation. Man was clear that the club could not “allow any kind of discrimination in our chapters.”<sup>58</sup> The 1962 Leaders Guide Book further acknowledged that “racial discrimination may arise among members, but leaders should set a good example by rising above such a

situation.” However, the guide book also suggested that “for the best and happiest results, different races have preferred to have their own meetings, but their leaders attend leaders’ meeting and leaders and members attend local, state, and national events” together.<sup>59</sup> TOPS strove for racial unity on the state and national level, but segregation locally. However, the group remained largely white.

*TOPS News* featured the magazine’s first black “before and after” in the January, 1956 issue. Women like Eloise Bates joined an African-American TOPS club in Lansing Michigan. This segregation of groups persisted well into the 1980s. During an interview with Suzanne

<sup>57</sup> “Didn’t Want to Lose Weight; She Organizes TOPS” *Chicago Tribune* (January 23, 1966).

<sup>58</sup> 1961 Leaders Guide Book, 16, TOPS Archive.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Reed, a TOPS member and area coordinator since 1973, Reed recalled that her LA group had only one African American woman in her years there. She told me that, even into the 1990s African American members were “almost rare.” When I asked her why she thought TOPS remained and remains largely segregated she offered a view that notes the intersectional oppression of size and color: “If you’re an African American woman, and you already have the stigma of being overweight. You’d have to be a really strong person to come into a room [...] you have to be brave to walk into a room full of white women...and you’re already fat, but fat *and* black!”<sup>60</sup> The highly localized and organic community nature of most TOPS groups meant that women joined groups started by near neighbors, friends, coworkers, and relatives. In 1960s Chicago, black groups began to form that supported black women exclusively, and black and white group leaders met and mingled at regional and national conventions. *TOPS News* also featured black before and afters prominently. Yet TOPS remained overwhelmingly white through the 1960s, even as Weight Watchers and OA gained traction among women of color and Jewish women.

The homogeneity may be attributed to the methods of group formation, the use of de-facto segregated spaces like churches and park houses for meetings, and the fact that reduction and obsession with slenderness was a mostly white preoccupation in most war America.<sup>61</sup> As the diet industry grew exponentially in the 1970s and 1980s, profit-driven groups like Weight

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<sup>60</sup> Suzanne Reed, Interview with Author, July, 2016. Reed noted that though her relationship with this member was close and long-lasting, when Reed left the group other members fell out with her when the “Rodney King thing happened.”

<sup>61</sup> For more, see Liz Matelski.

Watchers worked to inundate women of color with strict ideas about slenderness, but by that time TOPS membership was waning considerably.

### **Reducing Big Shoulders: TOPS Grows in the Midwest**

Chicago clubs came to dominate TOPS in the mid to late 1950s. At the second annual TOPS meeting in 1954, Mrs. Lillian M. Pedtke was crowned “queen of TOPS” for losing ninety-seven pounds over nine months.<sup>62</sup> Pedtke was part of the “Low-Cal-Gals” club in Riverpark, one of the eight TOPS clubs in Chicago in 1953. Pedtke told reporters that she was particularly concerned that her weight made it difficult to “kneel to pray in Queen of Angels Church.” She added “I owe my success to my prayers, my doctor, and to TOPS”<sup>63</sup> Her before and after pictures included a new element which would endure in diet narratives- she was pictured holding her former-fat dress up to her newly-thin body.

In March of 1954 the *Chicago Daily Tribune* ran a lengthy article on TOPS and the group-diet phenomenon. The author focused on Mrs. Harry Hurley, a Chicago grandmother who was “an inspiration” to her twenty new TOPS recruits. She kept their meetings on “an even keel” and recruits found that in “moments of temptation” they “must keep her in mind.” Her group met at Independence Park Fieldhouse in Irving Park, the twenty-third group in Chicago by March of 1954. Explaining TOPS, Hurley suggested that “its main idea is disarmingly simple [...] basically it is friendliness- the friendliness of women with a problem who can get together

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<sup>62</sup> “Woman Diets Off 97 Pounds to Win Prize” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (January 23, 1954).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

regularly to bolster each other's morale."<sup>64</sup> She went on to add, though, that the order of a TOPS meeting was "an important ritual." First, she noted, the groups meet once each week, "often enough so that a member can't 'forget' their diet. The scale is there, to give its accurate answer to each member, which is recorded by the secretary." But from there, the meetings could vary as the club members wished, and Hurley informed readers that "the format is fixed only in that it is NOT fixed, though the exchange of problems and tips in a round table manner has seemed the program most likely to stay." She said that, through this free-flowing meeting style and open sharing, members "hear the stories from each other and are amazed at their similarity." Mrs. Hurley was a registered beautician, already an expert for the women under her charge, and able to advise them on hair and skin care as well as dieting. TOPS clubs do not enforce a set diet, but instruct their members to see a physician and follow their advice.

The *Tribune* also used the now-familiar metaphor of dieting as war against fat bodies, when they wrote "Visit Stevenson Fieldhouse; Oak Park, any Wednesday afternoon between 1 and 3 and you'll see women on the war-path."<sup>65</sup> The paper continued in this tone, noting that "their weapons are calorie charts, tape measures, and moral support; their enemy, FAT." "These women- mothers most of them- represent the Midwest's newest phenomenon." Mrs. Eileen Fitzpatrick, TOPS president, was an ebullient Oak Park matron who regarded her fellow members with fond, if firm, "maternalism." Fitzpatrick said that "we urge every member to

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<sup>64</sup> "Telling Truth Trims Pounds, Members Find: TOPS Recruits Talk out Their Troubles" *Chicago Daily Tribune* (March 21, 1954).

<sup>65</sup> "STOP Takes UP Calorie Chart and Wages War: And Pounds Fall 'Way Before It" *Chicago Daily Tribune* (April 25, 1954).

consult her doctor first. Then we'll help the doctor help her." Beyond that initial medical consultation, other members and group leaders were seen as the authority over maintain diets, and they offered support outside of the meetings, as Fitzpatrick noted that "members sometimes send cards to one another urging abstinence from fatty foods. Periods of great temptation occasionally are warded off thru a telephone call to a fellow member." Continuing the theme of battle, Fitzpatrick described weigh-in as "a time of crisis," which brought "chastisement or reward." And of course, that chastisement came in the form of monetary punishment, costing wayward members a nickel and a more whimsical sign of failure, "a cardboard pig to be worn throughout the meeting."<sup>66</sup>

TOPS club "TOPSy Curvys" fined their members the poundage price of lard for every pound gained, deposited in a red piggy-bank.<sup>67</sup> The weekly meeting served as "group therapy." They met in the village hall once a month and otherwise in members' homes. Weighing in was "terror time." These Skokie women believed that "weight makes a person hypersensitive, diffident, and a seeker of quiet corners in which to hide their heaviness." Stressing that weight-loss was the key to these personality defects, an accompanying photograph showed a picture of a member showing off her new slim evening gown to an adoring husband and children while she stands on a scale. An expansive *Tribune* spread in December of 1959 likewise showed pictures of women marveling at their former-fat dresses, "champions in training" showing off plaques and cups from state, national, and international TOPS weight-loss championships, and manning

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Genevieve Flavin, "Fat Folks Find Loser Can Win in Skokie Club" *Chicago Daily Tribune* (September 12, 1954).

the weekly weigh-in armed with a clipboard and a stern demeanor.<sup>68</sup> The Austin-neighborhood TOPS group was sixty-five members strong in 1959, with a five-dollar fine for failing to lose every week. This steep charge may have helped the Austin group win the group championship title, claiming an average forty pound loss per member in 1958. The club used consistent peer pressure, before and after pictures, and showing off old fat dresses. Mrs. William J. Walsh, club president, described her best winners as “show pieces” to encourage new members. One such show piece, Mrs. Chester Kensik, described her former-fat self as an “unhappy suburban housewife” who avoided people because she “knew I couldn’t dress to look nice- not at my size [...] I’d stay home and eat more to assuage my loneliness.” But she “heard a cheery pep talk” and joined the group.

TOPS quickly expanded beyond the Midwest, and the *Los Angeles Times* announced new groups in 1956 including “a new women’s organization” in Burbank.<sup>69</sup> The *Times* they reported that these women “solve the problem of weight control through group therapy, they discuss their extra pounds frankly and without fear of misunderstanding, and work together to develop successful reduction programs.” The Burbank chapter was open to women aged 20-40 with at least thirty pounds to lose. The move west also signaled a move to a greater focus on group therapy and self-help, with fewer mentions of a physician’s approval or diet plan. In September of 1959, the *Times* reported on the spread of TOPS across southern California. It quoted group

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<sup>68</sup> Jane Kertz, “Women Pool Will Power in Weight Fight: TOPS Club Leads War on Pounds” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (December 6, 1959).

<sup>69</sup> “New Burbank Group Will Slim Figures” *Los Angeles Times* (July 29, 1956).

leaders, who told readers that “it’s like ‘group therapy,’ it has no strings attached to it and the supply is free and unlimited through the TOPS clubs, which are making life a whole new vista for many women whose weight woes had meant mental anguish and philosophical despair.”<sup>70</sup> More than 300 women belonged to seven chapters in Orange County, with club names like: “Wimmin Slimmin, DeLiters, DietAntes, Hopeful Hannahs, Classy Chassis, and Slimmerettes.”<sup>71</sup>

The rise of California clubs also coincided with an increased focus on pageantry: titles, ribbons, and crowns. The emerging TOPS pageant cycle, at the local, state, national, and international levels, demanded weight loss that was fast and dramatic. In 1960, an Inglewood TOPS member named Mrs. Mildred Van Der Sluis lost 141 pounds in seven months to win the California state title and third place nationally. Such fantastical stories of transformation were widely publicized, and TOPS queens became local quasi-celebrities. By 1963, SoCal women were regularly winning the national title, ousting the Midwestern queens of the 1950s. Placing this queen firmly within her domestic palace, the *LA Times* began their story of Van Der Sluis’ success with an anecdote of motherhood- reporting that her eleven-year old son was delighted that “Mommy! My hands can touch” when he hugged her.<sup>72</sup> Van Der Sluis insisted that TOPS program deserved all the credit- saying that “I’ve gone to doctor after doctor but was never

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<sup>70</sup>Jack McCurdy, “They Help Each Other: TOPS Club Waging War on Women’s Weighty Problems” *Los Angeles Times* (September 20, 1959).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> “Look at Mommy: Woman Loses Weight, Wins State TOPS Title” *Los Angeles Times* (June 26, 1960).

successful in staying on a diet [...] I can't do it myself." In California, the shift from a doctor-dieter relationship to the self-help method was most explicitly expressed. Van Der Sluis reported that "when she needs help staying away from food-much like an alcoholic who needs a drink- she calls a member of the club just to talk."<sup>73</sup>

In 1963, the Glendale, Cal queen Mrs. Rollo Ferreby gave all the credit to peer pressure, saying "TOPS made me resist. My pride wouldn't let me break rules in the club at each weekly weigh-in I HAD to weigh less because I couldn't stand the embarrassment of being penalized."<sup>74</sup> There was no mention of a physician or a doctor's visit, just the other women at her club. A 1966 notice about the formation of a club in Northridge, California forgoes any mention of a doctor's advice and declared that "TOPS bases its weight losing method on group therapy."<sup>75</sup>

### **"Pretty Dapper": Men and TOPS**

TOPS was originally open only to women, and remains predominantly female. Manz explained this gender dynamic in a 1973 interview, saying "I always say the ration in my family- one boy and four girls- is like the ration in tops."<sup>76</sup> At that time she reported that "not even a fifth of our members are men." These men formed their own groups, and Manz discouraged mixed groups, partly to avoid sexual temptation. She believed that "sometimes when women lose

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> "Credit Goes to Dieting: Woman Wins Crown for Losing Pounds" *Los Angeles Times* (February 3, 1963).

<sup>75</sup> "Chapter to Deal with Overweight" *Los Angeles Times* (March 6, 1966).

<sup>76</sup> Manz, 1973 Interview with Vi Dewey for the Milwaukee Journal, Transcript, 17. TOPS Archive, Esther Manz Folder.



weight or men lose weight they really think they are pretty dapper and really desirable...it's just something that happens..." To avoid such hormonal fracas, men and women stuck to their own groups, and agreed that "we don't like to have any marriages break up."<sup>77</sup>

In 1957, TOPS expanded husbands' inclusion into their wives groups by inviting them to the TOPS convention for the first time.<sup>78</sup> A South Shore group reported four male members in 1962, though they also noted that "the men first came to meetings to observe."<sup>79</sup> Men, it seems, were wary of joining a "woman's" group, one devoted to topics of cooking, make-up, and dress as well as weight-loss, an all-encompassing concern with self-care, self-help, and beauty culture. Even in articles devoted to men's TOPS groups were couched in language of femininity. In 1963 ten South Side men broke off from the female-dominated South Shore TOPS group to form their own club. The group kept the traditions of prizes, fines, and shame, as well as the "womanly forte" of talk therapy.<sup>80</sup>

In California, too, men lagged behind their fat sisters and wives in organizing. The first men's group organized in Cheviot Hills in 1963, the twenty-first men's chapter nationally.<sup>81</sup> Men's groups were far more transitory than women's groups. They tended to form and disband quickly, and were significantly more goal-oriented. Men left the group when they lost weight, or

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> "Source Book of TOPS History" at TOPS headquarters.

<sup>79</sup> Mary Huff "Lean, Light Lady Lauds Loss" *Chicago Daily Tribune* (June 24, 1962).

<sup>80</sup> "Female Forte Aids in Fat Fight: Men Try 'Talking' Weight Off" *Chicago Daily Tribune* (January 6, 1963).

<sup>81</sup> "Men Organize to Take Off Weight" *Los Angeles Times* (December 5, 1963).

left the group if they failed to lose weight. They also left groups when they interfered with other men's organizations, most notably bowling leagues. These groups suggest that men already had social groups and support networks that filled the needs that weight-management groups did for women. They also suggest that for most of these men, the size and shape of their bodies was not a crucial element of self-identity or an ongoing personal project. Men did not feel the same pressure to perform weight loss attempts the way that women did. They did not need to be seen to be dieting in order to fulfill the roles and obligations of their gender. They were also less likely to desire the pageantry and performance of TOPS.

### **Crowning the Headless Fatty: Performance and Pageantry of Fatness and Reduction**

TOPS helped to create performative elements of fatness and reducing that endured. Discourse between members, TOPS headquarters, and a curious general public created a pageantry of fatness and reduction in the 1950s and 1960s. This pageantry took three major forms: the "before and after" narrative, performative shame in the form of "piggy" themes, and the crowing of dieting "royalty" at the yearly national convention. This pageantry served to normalize dieting, but it also allowed for fat women to claim public space as a "good fatty" that is, one who is on a diet.

TOPS Leadership manuals stressed the importance of taking a "before" picture as soon and as unflattering as possible, since one of the most important aspects of success was the "before and after" pictures. These pictures are staples of diet culture today, but they only emerged in the 1950s as a central component to group dieting. Before and after pictures were motivation and publicity to still-fat members and non-members alike. They encouraged a fantasy

of hidden slenderness and suggested that the current fat self was actually a remnant of a woman's future past. Members were encouraged to choose their least flattering before and most flattering after picture, stressing the dramatic nature of the changes wrought, what Elena Levy-Navarro refers to as an "apocalyptic transformation".<sup>82</sup> A fat woman, then is always a before, and the before is always a self to be rejected. Not satisfied with a simple picture as they were, dressed for socializing, TOPS members staged fat photo shoots that stressed what they saw as the negative aspects of fat, and after pictures that evoked the fantasy of "a new me". Before pictures included unkempt hair, ill-fitting clothing, and dour faces, while after pictures were artfully posed, with fresh salon hair, fashionable attire, and a winning smile. The staged nature of these images was an intentional narrative of transformation, not just of size but of self. After pictures glowed with fashion, beauty, and energy. The drama and pageantry of these pictures combined with their relative rarity, made successful dieters minor local celebrities.



Figure 15. TOPS News Cover March 1960

<sup>82</sup> Elena Levy-Navarro "I'm the New Me: Compelled Confession in Diet Discourse," *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol 45 No 2 (April, 2012), 340.

The “before and after” picture was the most potent, but performative elements of fat temporality also included “the fat dress,” and the theme of being “barely recognized.” In newspapers and publicity no woman was mentioned without a list of numbers next to her name: her “before” weight, usually described as “tipping the scales,” her current weight, her dream weight, her former and current dress size, waist, hip, and bust measurements, age, and the length of time dieting. Presentations of TOPS to the general public contained hints of side-show intrigue of the nineteenth century and the modern *My 600 lb. Life*. With quasi-medical descriptors of bodies, and a focus on delineating the parameters of fat female bodies, the *LA Times* in 1961 even showcased the now-ubiquitous images of “headless fatties” those nameless, faceless specters of wide hips and round buttocks that accompany medical moralizing in journalism. In 1961, in an image presented below the headline “Hips that Pass in the Fight: 200 Feminine Tons Melt to 100,” a group of fat women, shot from behind to focus on their ample backsides, approach a snack bar at the Annual meeting of Southern California TOPS chapters. The text, however, was careful to note that the women mostly ordered black coffee and tomato juice. The women are described as pretty and jovial, and they told reporters that “we have good times together and also learn a lot about nutrition, pretty clothes, how to fix hair and about make-up.”<sup>83</sup>

The pageantry of fatness was in constant negotiation with elements of shame and legitimacy. Public shame operated as both a motivation and an avenue to legitimacy as a “good fatty” i.e.

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<sup>83</sup> Cordell Hicks, “Hips that Pass in the Fight: 200 Feminine Tons Melt to 100” *Los Angeles Times* (June 4, 1961).

one attempting to reduce. Shame was presented, and perhaps sometimes experienced, as a playful element in the first decade of TOPS clubs. The most notorious motif of shame was the “piggy.” The piggy motif took the form of “pig punishments” for gaining or failing to lose which included sitting in a “pigpen,” and wearing a pig pin, bib, or hat. By 1956, various iterations of the “pig punishment” were widespread in clubs and approved of by leadership. By 1969, however, it was formally disavowed by TOPS headquarters, though its use in clubs persisted at least into the 70s. The “piggy” motif was a central theme in individual clubs and *TOPS News* mentions even giving a secondary meaning to the piggy bank used for monetary club prizes. The most infamous use of the pig, of course, was the “Piggy Song”:

We are plump little pigs who ate too much fat, fat, fat  
 We are stout little pigs who can't resist food, food, food  
 Pounds can be lost if you're really sincere  
 Pledge to TOPS for year  
 Will power helps us to be TOPS  
 TOPS, TOPS, TOPS

The pig motif was also found in TOPS handicrafts, which were full of “piggy” bibs, hats, pins, and even the fully decorated “pigpen table” for members who had failed to lose on any given week. One group even had members say “oink oink” on command when the scale betrayed them.



Figure 16. “Pigpen Table” TOPS News September, 1961

The performance of shame can be seen as a reclamation of sorts, since this shame was not meant to be seen by the general public but by fellow fatties. This is particularly true of the songs and poems published in TOPS News, ditties like “The Fat Girl Blues” written by members Marilyn Dillie and Marilyn Deal. The duo wrote that their “blubber laden bones” meant that they “can’t buy no clothes only those/ that would scare off Romeos/ and that’s part of the Fat Girl Blues.”<sup>84</sup> Members also spoke of the experience of being shamed in public as part of their motivation for reducing, and linked “success” with a cessation of shame. Alberta Moye shared her “success story” with the readers of TOPS News in December, 1955, and noted that her success began with a public shaming. She wrote that while out in public with her young son, a

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<sup>84</sup> Marilyn Dille and Marilyn Deal, “The Fat Girl Blues” *TOPS News*, January, 1955.

drunk man loudly called her a “big elephant.”<sup>85</sup> Though she recalled this story eighteen months after the fact, it was still the most prominent feature of her reducing tale.

The centrality of shame waned with a new generation of members in the 1960s. Internal organizational records show a vigorous debate between original members and these newcomers over the place of shame, embodied by the piggy motif. By 1970, the pig symbol was *officially* abandoned, though there was no consensus on this and many groups continued using both shame and the piggy for years after. Some members found the shame both painful and useful, and “the thought of wearing that piggy bib (or sitting in the pig pen or singing the pig song or whatever) scares me half to death. I really make sure that I don’t eat too much.” Others members, though, argued that “we don’t use the pig symbol at all. We need encouragement, not punishment” and that “the mortification of a pig episode is just too much for some of us. We’d rather stay away from our meeting than to put up with that pig.”<sup>86</sup> The decision to eradicate these methods, though, may have had less to do with the voices of membership and more with a pragmatic concern over optics. TOPS leadership pointed out that the severest critics of the piggy were “(a) our ‘sophisticated’ competitors, (b) unsympathetic, controversially bent reporters, (c) some sincerely interested educators in the health, medical, and psychology fields.”<sup>87</sup> Ultimately the board announced that “it was the unanimous opinion that we recommend abandonment of the pig symbol” imploring members “no more piggy stuff at IRD, please! No piggy stuff in publicity!!”

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<sup>85</sup> “Success Story by Alberta Moye” *TOPS News*, December, 1955.

<sup>86</sup> *TOPS News*, June 1969.

<sup>87</sup> Board of Directors, TOPS Archive.

Increasingly, the pig was incompatible with a new younger generation of members, an increasing focus on emotional and psychological health, the criticism of competitors (especially Weight Watchers after 1963), and the celebratory nature of more popular prizes and awards.

The counter-balance to the shame exercised in meetings and newsletters was the evangelical celebration of the group at the yearly National Convention. In the first decade of TOPS, the convention evolved from a “big party” to “International Recognition Days”: a glimmering centerpiece, widely anticipated by members, with significant planning and financial outlay on the part of local and national club leadership. The convention was the culmination of a spring season of pageantry, and groups practiced, prepared, and of course reduced, all year in anticipation of it. TOPS leadership responded to members’ enthusiasm for this particular form of motivation and reward, and the post-1956 inclusion

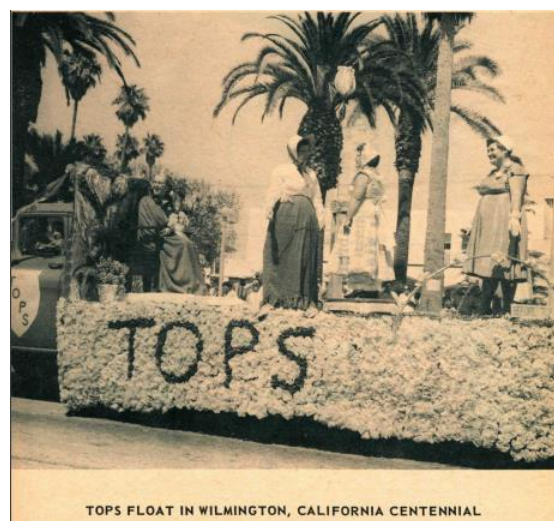


Figure 17. Local Float featured in *TOPS News*, 1958.

of photographs in *TOPS News* complemented and accelerated a shifting focus within the group as pageantry took central stage. TOPS pageants began at the local level with local “recognition days,” elaborate local parade floats, beauty and charm classes and contests, and continued through State Recognition Days, the final stop before the pageant circuit ended at IRD. While before and after pictures and TOPS royalty were a pageant of success, TOPS members also



paraded their fatness- literally on the streets of their town and on the stage of the national convention.

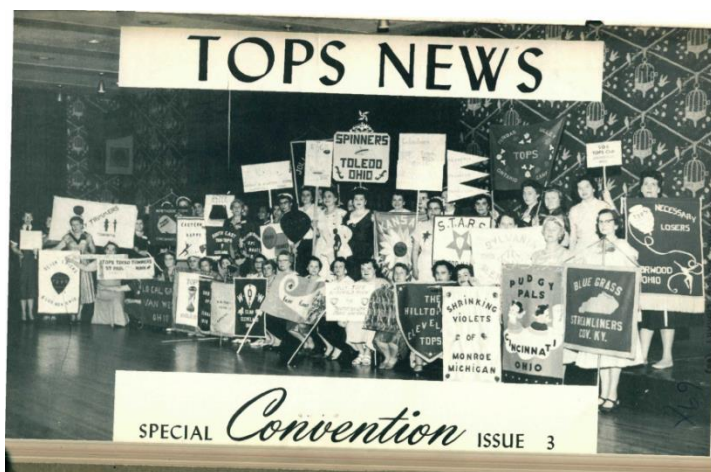


Figure 18. TOPS News Cover, March, 1957.

The March, 1957 issue of *TOPS News* displayed all the splendor and enthusiasm of the 1956 Convention in Cincinnati. Convention attendance was both an exhilarating celebration of self and a major expense for members, many of whom organized “vacation clubs” amongst themselves to save. As Ina Mae Loppnow recalled: “I and probably many others had spent about all we had travelling to the convention.”<sup>88</sup> KOPS “had a style show and the attractive styles they modeled were modestly priced the way most of us TOPS like.” Loppnow described the thrill of the crowds, the business of meetings for board members, the luncheons and processions, and her “pride and joy in being part of the organization ‘TOPS’ that had a part in helping these wonderful happy people to attain such success.”<sup>89</sup>

<sup>88</sup> “Fun at the Convention” *TOPS News* March, 1957.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

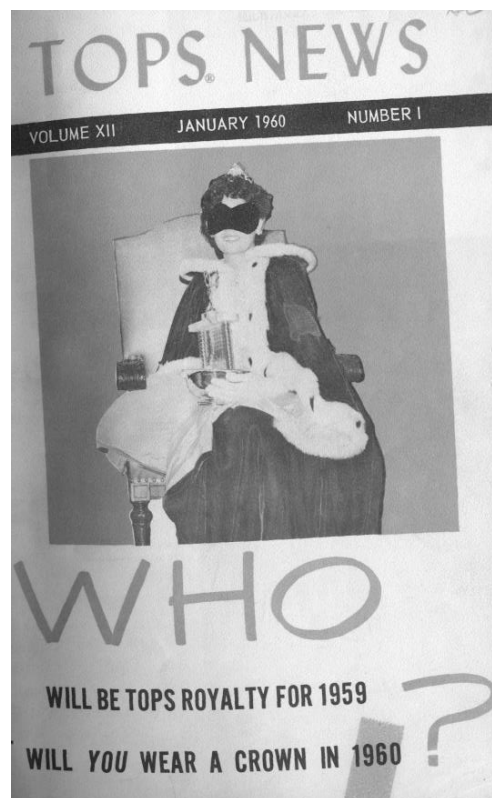


Figure 39. Getting members excited for the 1960 convention.

Saturday evening, the coronation paraded state winners and ultimately crowned an international king and queen. TOPS crowned Lillian Pedtke the first national queen in 1953, and the coronations increased in popularity and pomp in the next decade. In 1965 TOPS introduced “State Recognition Days” to honor local winners and crown state losers, new pageants which reflected the desires of members. In that year, *TOPS NEWS* showed 3 royalty/pageant pictures, by 1958 the magazine printed over thirty pictures of pageants and royalty for the year, and by 1964 readers enjoyed over one hundred pictures of pageants, winners, and royalty. Multiple categories

developed based on age and original weight. 1956 had a teenager category including a 13-year-old and 17-year-old girl.<sup>90</sup> By 1959, girls as young as eleven were crowned “Miss Tiny Top” by the Illinois division of TOPS for losing six pounds.<sup>91</sup> By the end of the 1950s, the coronation included not only crowns, but scepters and ermine cloaks, as well. Participants wore extravagant gowns and bouffants, and walked across the stage to swelling music and standing ovations.

<sup>90</sup> “Champ Weight Loser Sheds 140 Pounds in 15 Months” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (April 28, 1956).

<sup>91</sup> “Take Off Pounds Sensibly” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (September 25, 1959).

The international coronation was only the culminating event in a long pageant season, which began at the local level, and continued to State Recognition Days. States like Illinois and Chicago had elaborate SRDs in the late 1950s and 1960s. The September, 1958 Illinois TOPS SRD convention at the Sherman Hotel featured talks by a doctor and a beauty queen.<sup>92</sup> The state chapters crowned a queen and a princess- a member of Teen T.O.P.S, and a hundred other women graduated to KOPS to maintain a “weight deemed ideal by their doctors.”<sup>93</sup>



Figure 20. State Queen and “Princesses” 1955

TOPS introduced a graduation ceremony in the 1950s, as well, for new “KOPS,” women who had reached their “goal weight” and were “keeping pounds of sensibly.” For working class women, many of whom had never gone to college, this offered a chance to celebrate a personal success with style, in full regalia. The graduation ceremony offered an acknowledgement that

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<sup>92</sup> Louise Hutchinson “Arch Enemies of Old Devil Fat to Gather” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (September 1, 1958).

<sup>93</sup> *Ibis*.

these women were leaders in the TOPS community, they were robed in success and entered a rarified club of those who reached their goal weight. Even more importantly, they were acknowledged every year they maintained “KOPS” status, offering assurance to the thousands of members in attendance at IRD and those consuming the images in TOPS News that cruel weight-loss failure statistics didn’t have to apply to them. But members didn’t have to lose weight or win a crown to participate in the pageantry. Clubs organized skits, songs, and pantomimes to fill out the weekend’s entertainment.

These acts offered a space for still-fat women to take center stage, show off, and be recognized. Though under a veneer of legitimacy provided by their very membership in a reducing club, this pageantry nonetheless created a rare moment of celebrating fat bodies without mockery or censure.<sup>94</sup> TOPS Conventions offer an unexpected glimpse onto a stage not dominated by either the male gaze or normalized slenderness.



Figure 214. Members graduate to TOPS in 1963

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<sup>94</sup> Julia Grace Jester notes the rarity in which fat female bodies are exhibited without mockery or hypersexualization in entertainment. “Placing Fat Women on Center Stage,” *The Fat Studies Reader*, Ed Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, New York: New York University Press, 2009.



Figure 22. Milwaukee Club performing at the 1956 convention, TOPS News.

By 1966, TOPS' was no longer on top. A *Chicago Tribune* reader wrote to the newspaper in 1966 seeking the address of Weight Watchers, "I am not referring to TOPS I think this organization is headquartered in New York."<sup>95</sup> For many emerging pink and white collar workers, the social aspect of reducing clubs was eclipsed by an interest in scientific efficiency, or at least the appearance thereof. Women influenced the by a blend of consciousness-raising elements of second-wave feminism, psychotherapy, and evangelicalism on the other hand, were looking for a more inward-focused personal project. Women turned from the traditional communal atmosphere of TOPS to the corporate efficiency of Weight Watchers and the self-help of Overeaters Anonymous.

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<sup>95</sup> "Weight Watcher Forsakes TOPS for Rival Group." *Chicago Tribune* (September 11, 1966).

CHAPTER THREE  
“MORE OF JESUS, LESS OF ME”: SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY IN OVEREATERS  
ANONYMOUS AND VICTORIOUS, 1960-1980s

In an interview with my mother Mary S., who joined Overeaters Anonymous in the early 1980s, I ask her how she first learned about the group. “Oh, Pastor Johnston and Connie sat me down and told me I should go.” I asked why her spiritual leaders gave her that advice. She laughed and told me it was “because my life was out of control. I was buying Breyers, which we could *not* afford, and I would buy two cartons and eat one on the way home...it was so insane.” Did she go to a meeting, then, when they told her to? “Well,” she recalled, “I resisted at first. But...I always listened to David and Connie in the end.”<sup>1</sup>

Connie was our pastor’s wife, of course. And I remember the Breyers ice cream, and how it was such a treat when my mother brought a carton home. This is the first I’m hearing about that second carton, though. I’m not surprised that the Johnstons had a hand in getting my mother help; they were always there for us growing up, and my mother accepted their word as delivered straight from God. Also, I remember her OA meetings, or I think I do. “They were in the church basement, right?” I prod. “No, not at Fairmont, in that other church, the one where you went to preschool, do you remember?” I do, now. I remember how exciting it was to get to play in the toy-filled room without other kids there, a quiet sunlit dreamland where I didn’t have to share while my mother sat in a circle a few doors away, sharing all she could bear to.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary S. (former OA member), interview with author, December 27, 2016.

Overeaters Anonymous has always meant church basements to me, and it's true that meetings of OA, like AA, NA, and others, often take place in holy spaces. Meetings happen in hospitals too, though, and park houses, and conference rooms, and prisons. But the association of church-spaces and OA isn't just a coincidence, or a result of dim childhood memory. OA, and a less-known group called Overeaters Victorious, were born in a time of increasing evangelicalism among American Protestants, and they developed alongside the emergence of a Charismatic Christianity that focused on spiritual forces in everyday life. Though OA was originally quite secular, and infused with other influences like the broader self-help movement and psychiatry, these groups came to exhibit a unique spiritual character reflective of modern American religious culture. Like members of TOPS, women in OA and OV found inter-personal agency via group work. Unlike TOPS, though OA and OV went beyond the mechanics of weight-loss and spiritualized their body work. Mary, for instance, found that in "the room" she "came to understand that God "really loved" her, and that it was through submission to God's authority and love that she could find serenity. She was not alone. For many OA members, and as a central tenant of OV, submission and obedience were key, and the ultimate authority in weight loss and the management of food addiction was God. Through inner-personal and interpersonal communication, these women established personal agency based on submission. This spiritual paradigm privileged God, and, crucially, an individual member's understanding of and relationship with him, over established "experts" of women's body and weight: doctors, government agencies, and even the emerging diet industry. An examination of these groups, therefore, offers a paradox of autonomy for women within a model of submission.

This chapter explores two groups concerned with weight-loss and food addiction, created by women primarily for women. It traces the multiple influences in the founding and early years of Overeaters Anonymous, and argues that ultimately an ethos of sincere spirituality emerged, with submission to God as the central tenant. Overeaters Victorious, on the other hand, adopted the model of OA but formed as an explicitly Christian group, and adopted a Charismatic Christianity that OA only flirted with.

In 1980, Overeaters Anonymous published a two hundred and fourteen page book filled with personal stories of losing weight and finding peace. It also included three non-members who were nonetheless “longtime OA supporters”: Dr. William Rader, a psychiatrist; Dr. Peter G. Lindner, a bariatric doctor; and Rev. Rollo M. Boas, an Episcopal minister. This book illustrates the nature of the group- an aprofessional organization that prioritized personal experience but maintained a loose affiliation with professionals as peers. The inclusion of these three disparate approached in the books also shows a careful negotiation of a central argument within OA- was weight a mind problem, a body problem, or a spiritual problem?

The history of OA is nestled within the broader self-help movement, a popular interest in both psychology and spiritualism, the rise of evangelicalism, second-wave feminism’s consciousness raising, and emerging ideas about the power of body positivity. These multiple and often competing cultural influences suffused the creation and re-creation of OA as women sought to establish healthy relationships with food, their bodies, and their selves. OA and OV bear many similarities to TOPS: the focus on group support and weekly accountability most noticeably. But these groups were also a reaction against the strain of shame and embarrassment, the concept of before and after, and eventually the physician-established “goal weight.” Shifting



to a template of “abstinence” or abnegation removed the physician from the equation and ironically, given the mantra of submission to a higher power, re-established the dieter as the arbiter of her own “success.”

Looking at OA as a network of local groups, not simply an a-political message of self-help, adds texture to our understanding of the broader self-help movement in America. OA illustrates that while historians have seen self-help as a mark of an increasingly isolated suburban lifestyle and consumer-focused solutions to problems, some iterations of self-help philosophy actually mark a continuation of older forms of mutual aid, like that seen in TOPS. The distinction of the ethos of self-help, then, may not be in individual pursuit but in a de-politicization of personal and community problems. Identifying interpersonal negotiations through oral histories of experiences in these groups, as well as the communications circuit found in print literature explicates the manner in which “self-help” is more accurately anti-professional community organizing.<sup>2</sup>

Primarily using published materials, cultural histories of the recovery movement have investigated the nature of self-help, asking as a central question- “is it political?” This question is especially crucial to understanding women’s involvement in the recovery movement, which has been heavily criticized by second-wave feminists as a de-politicization of the common oppressions faced by women. Social critics like Wendy Kaminer have been openly contemptuous of self-help, arguing that “the self-help tradition has always been covertly authoritarian and conformist, relying as it does on a mystique of expertise, encouraging people to

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<sup>2</sup> Using Robert Darnton’s model of print culture as a “communications circuit.” See Robert Darnton, “What is the History of Books?” *Daedalus* Vol 111 No 3 (Summer, 1982), 65-83, and *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

look outside themselves for standardized instructions on how to be," and that self-help "is anathema to independent thought."<sup>3</sup> Alfred H. Katz's *Self-Help in America: A Social Movement Perspective* agrees that twelve-step type recovery was personal and a-political, yet he argues that it is unified as a broad social trend offering real solutions to complex problems.<sup>4</sup>

Elaine Rapping contemplates this issue in *The culture of Recovery: Making Sense of the Self-Help Movement in Women's Lives*. Rapping investigates the relationship between second-wave feminism and Alcoholics Anonymous, which she argues created the twentieth-century "recovery movement." She is critical of the recovery movement for ignoring social structures and being a-political, and imagines the concept of a "higher power" as a hegemonic tool used to maintain the oppression of women.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, she finds that feminism brought "consciousness raising" into the 12 step program, but 12 step conservatism de-politicized social problems and re-imagined them as personal. This focus on AA neglects the centrality of body image and weight to the formation of the recovery movement, and supposes that feminists were de-radicalized as a part of recovery. My research into the group diet movement and OA particularly, illustrates that the reverse was also possible- that non-feminist women encountered new feminist ideas and solutions in their local groups, even as the national bodies remained a-political.

The complexity of the relationship between recovery and second-wave feminism is further explored by Trish Travis' *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery*

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<sup>3</sup> Wendy Kaminer, *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions*. Reading: Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Katz, *Self-Help in America: A Social Movement Perspective* (New York: Twayne, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Rapping, *The Culture of Recovery: Making Sense of the Self-Help Movement in Women's Lives* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 13.

*Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey*. Travis builds on Robert Darnton's model of print as a communications circuit to investigate the literature of AA and what she terms "post-12 step recovery" movement."<sup>6</sup> Travis finds that the print culture of AA facilitated group cohesion, but was also the "the preferred symbol through which members argue with one another about the organization's nature and purpose."<sup>7</sup> These "communications circuits" of the recovery movement were "both a channel through which recovery ideas have been expressed and a material and social force that has helped give these ideas their form."<sup>8</sup> The groups below illustrate Travis's argument, displaying a "language of the heart" with a coherent and consistent narrative structure of diet, failure, surrender, abstinence, and finally peace.

Travis' treatment of the relationship between feminists and recovery is nuanced, and she finds that in the early eighties addiction and recovery emerged as pressing concerns for "a wide range of feminists."<sup>9</sup> Travis explores the feminist possibility inherent in recovery literature like *Each Day a New Beginning* and notes that though the author "worked apart from the self-consciously feminist communities...her volume nevertheless moves deliberately to bring women's voices, experiences and perspectives into a mainstream that had long treated them as marginal."<sup>10</sup> Travis finds that "meditations" like "PAIN IS OUR COMMON DENOMINATOR AS WOMEN" could operate either as a form of consciousness raising, or as a more a-political

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<sup>6</sup> Trysh Travis, *Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Travis, 110.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 187.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 157.

sense of surrender that was central to recovery. Rather than rejecting recovery culture outright, Travis notes that a movement of anti-patriarchal “post-12 step recovery” was critical of process recovery like OA, arguing that “recovery culture had appropriated the concerns of second wave feminism in order to gut its political analysis: “dysfunctional’ replaces ‘patriarchal’; ‘toxic’ replaces ‘oppressive,’”<sup>11</sup>

Travis argues that a discourse developed in the 1960s which "characterized 12-Step groups as strange religious sects [...] whose controlling and anti-rational devotees believed the 12 Steps to be the result of 'divine revelation.'"<sup>12</sup> This perception, Travis notes, comes from the linkage of addiction to "spiritual malaise." Travis finds that early AA was "primarily concerned with spiritual and psychic abstinence, with abandoning worldly notions of happiness and success in favor of 'relinquishing our lives to God," and that true sobriety and abstinence was "the surrendered and spiritual life."<sup>13</sup>

The groups below blended this spiritual nature of AA with an emerging religious movement in the United States. What historian Harvey Cox has called “redneck religion,” mass-mediated Charismatic Christianity emerged in the post war period as a historically unique revival of Pentecostal revivalism.<sup>14</sup> Allan Anderson notes that the Charismatic Movement entered “mainline” protestant churches via the Episcopalian Church in America in 1960 and the Roman

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>12</sup> Travis, 61.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 72-80.

<sup>14</sup> Harvey Cox, *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), Stephen Hunt, Malcom Hamilton and Tony Walter, Eds., *Charismatic Christianity: Sociological Perspectives*, (London: Macmillan, 1997) and Simon Coleman, *The Globalization of Charismatic Christianity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Catholic Church in 1967.<sup>15</sup> Anderson locates the arrival of the modern charismatic movement in California, with the revelation and subsequent ousting of Episcopal minister Dennis Bennet. Bennet received a “spirit baptism” in 1959, and announced his embrace of “spiritual gifts,” including speaking in tongues, to his congregation the following year. In the next decade, Anderson describes an explosion of charismatic leaders, churches, and print culture: including bestsellers like 1964’s *They Speak with Other Tongues*, a book which influenced two theology faculty members at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh to form the first Catholic Charismatic prayer group.<sup>16</sup> The following decade brought the movement into homes via the televangelism of Oral Roberts and Pat Robertson.

These charismatic preachers, and others, brought a gospel of wealth and health to a global audience. Ethnographer Kate Bowler places contemporary gospels of health and healing within the broader prosperity gospel movement, which she characterizes as a “wildly popular Christian message of spiritual, physical, and financial mastery” that is espoused not only in explicit prosperity churches, but infused in the broader American Christian culture.<sup>17</sup> Bowler finds that the Prosperity Gospel is preached by a network of ministers, speakers, book writers, and radio hosts, all with a central message that “god desires to bless you.”<sup>18</sup> Bowler argues that this movement found maturity in the “ripe individualism of post-1960s America” and increased expectations brought by new affluence that was not distributed equally. R. Marie Griffith notes

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<sup>15</sup> Anderson, 144.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, 148-151.

<sup>17</sup> Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Bowler, 6. See also: Andrew Perriman, *Faith, Health and Prosperity*, 2003.

that charismatic Christianity and the gospel of health are gendered within church communities, and that for women, submission to God leads to spiritual gifts. In the popular women's prayer group "Women Aglow," Griffith finds that "spiritual weight loss" within the group focuses on narratives of rebellion and weight gain followed by submission to God and loss.<sup>19</sup> As the groups below show, this narrative to submission is not unique to Women Aglow.

### **Hello, My Name is Rozanne: The Story of Overeaters Anonymous**

Like TOPS, the creation of OA is the story of smart energetic women who also happened to be frustrated housewives. OA began in 1958 when an overweight and compulsive eater named Rozanne S. went to a Gambler's Anonymous meeting in L.A. to support a friend. She later recalled that it was there that she had an epiphany that "I wasn't wicked or sinful; I was sick."<sup>20</sup> Over the next several decades, Rozanne told and retold the founding story of OA in books, interviews, and conference talks. Several narrative elements evolved in that time to focus on differentiating OA from diet clubs such as T.O.P.S. and Weight Watchers. Rozanne also spoke increasingly of the futility of traditional medicine and psychiatry in curing her compulsive overeating, and the increasing role of spirituality in OA.

OA's story is a Sunbelt story. In the "magic lands" of Southern California, a diverse web of women's groups organized around suburban kitchen tables. McGirr argues that in this world of "cowboy capitalists", created a "built world that affirmed the values of privacy, individualism, and property rights and weakened a sense of cohesive community, providing an opening for

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<sup>19</sup> Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 141-143.

<sup>20</sup> Rozanne S., *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams: A History of Overeaters Anonymous as Seen by a Cofounder* (Rio Rancho, NM: Overeaters Anonymous, 1996), 6.

organizations, churches, and missionary zealots that could provide one.”<sup>21</sup> For many fat women, OA created a community space in the often-isolating suburbs. The way the Sunbelt was built matters- Mike Davis and Lizabeth Cohen both note the privatization of public space in the forms of shopping malls, convention centers, and amusement parks. Groups like OA complicate this view of the privatization of Sunbelt socializing. Early meetings did take place in private homes and husbands’ offices, and they also continued to use hybrid private/civic spaces like the conference rooms of banks and insurance companies, but they also used churches and temples and schools.

Rozanne’s personal narrative stressed her personality as an overachiever, her desire to lose weight to find love and dissatisfaction as a suburban housewife in 1950s Southern California. By 1980, “Rozanne’s Story” was also a repudiation of mainstream diet practices, commercial and medical. Her story served to set her apart as a forward-thinking woman from a history of like-minded woman. She wrote that her “grandmother was very daring. She worked with Margaret sanger in the early days of planned parenthood”.<sup>22</sup> This is more than in interesting tidbit, it established Rozanne’s uneasy relationship with twentieth-century popular feminism and her own personal fulfillment. Pulled between an anxious, overachiever’s nature and the desire to conform to mid-century feminine ideals, Rozanne’s weight issues and self-actualization collided. She spoke of academic perfection that landed her a place at the University of Chicago, but when she turned that mania to dieting and slimmed down she “dated so much” that she “flunked her

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<sup>21</sup> Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 30.

<sup>22</sup> “Rozanne’s Story”, *Overeaters Anonymous* (Rio Rancho NM: Overeaters Anonymous, 1980), 8.

classes.”<sup>23</sup> Mortified by her failure, Rozanne spent a year at a woman’s “business school” that taught administrative skills. She ultimately did earn her B.A., and found work as a fashion copywriter. Rozanne’s narrative spoke of the role of weight in the performance of heterosexual femininity, specifically in her search for love and marriage, and she recalled that she moved to LA, and once again lost weight fueled by the motivation “to find a man”.<sup>24</sup> She quickly achieved this goal, but found that after marriage “all it took was that little ring on my finger for me to take back the food.”

Unsure what to do, and with no support system of similarly-fat women, she turned to her doctor for help. Rozanne had already had extensive experiences with psychiatry. Her memoirs blend psychoanalysis and the physicality of overeating with a sense of spiritual crisis, recalling that she “couldn’t stop eating and most of the time I wished I were dead. My self-worth was completely gone, my soul was empty, I had no place to go and I didn’t believe in god. What was left for me?” She was forthright about her experiences with psychiatry “I had tried suicide in my late teens, and I’d had several years of conventional therapy. It had not helped my eating problem.”<sup>25</sup>

Rozanne thought she found her solution when she went to that meeting of Gambler’s Anonymous in 1958. The elements of acceptance, confession, and camaraderie at the meeting resonated with her, and she thought she could re-invent what she saw for fat women.<sup>26</sup> She

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> *Overeaters Anonymous*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Rozanne, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams: A History of Overeaters Anonymous as Seen by a Cofounder*, 6.



recalled that she “wanted to talk to other overeaters, so I looked in the phone book for TOPS, the only well-known weight-loss organization available at that time. TOPS wasn't listed, so I tried to find Fatties Anonymous. Somewhere I'd heard about that too.” But ultimately she figured that she could do it better herself, and set out to cajole fat women into her scheme, telling her overweight neighbor “listen, I have this terrific idea to get thin.”<sup>27</sup> To further her weight-loss goal, she once again went to her doctor and was subscribed Dexedrine. Years later she despaired of this choice, but asked readers to “remember, this was the beginning of the 1960s. Along with many others, I was naive regarding drugs, and I viewed my doctor as The Authority. Overstimulated as a result of the medicine, I stopped excessive eating, and for six months I had the cleanest house in Los Angeles!” She was high as a kite.

Thus energized, Rozanne poured her personal and professional frustrations into organizing her new group, which she recalled became “an integral part of my life from its beginning. I was obsessed with my vision, living and breathing it as I cared for my family.”<sup>28</sup> In those early days, Rozanne indeed saw the group as her own “vision” and resisted AA’s traditional 12 steps scoffing at the idea of admitting powerlessness and acceptance submission to a “higher power,” after all “what would an intelligent, sophisticated person like me do instead of turning my will and my life over to God? The answer seemed obvious: medical supervision for my dieting.”<sup>29</sup> Rooted in a trust of medical doctors as the ultimate dieting experts, Rozanne’s re-wrote the 12 steps with submission to a doctor’s care. Rozanne embraced the group method of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Rozanne, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 17.

AA but balked at the concept of submission. She removed step three (turn yourself over to god) and replaced it with “a step advocating consultation with 'a physician of your own choosing'". The early meetings then still embraced the doctor’s orders, but added psychiatry, as Rozanne recalled "we sat around and talked about our feelings in a very psychological manner".<sup>30</sup>

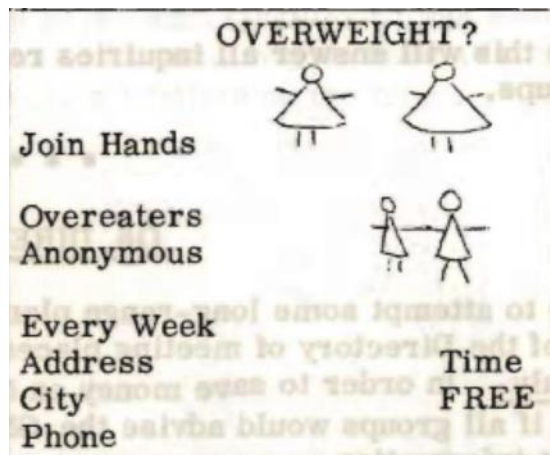


Figure 23. Early OA Advertisement, Courtesy of Overeaters Anonymous

Even though she refuted the tenant of a higher power, so basic to the Anonymous tradition, Rozanne fully embraced the group dynamic. She also adopted the mores of compassion and understanding that AA had helped to develop for Alcoholics, and applied it to fat women, noting that “People feel sorry for alcoholics and want to help them, but no one seems to have any sorrow for the overeater, other than being disgusted with our size. So we have to have compassion for ourselves. We have to get together for ourselves.”<sup>31</sup>

The early structure of OA was a social club with shared goals; it was casual, gossipy, and unstructured. It had no offers, took no donations, and had no established meeting place. Rozanne dreamed of larger goals, but the group was “solely a fellowship of women during our first two and a half years.”<sup>32</sup> That changed in 1960, when Rozanne and fellow member Barbara advertised their group and their weight loss on the Paul Coates show, a local interview program in LA.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Rozanne, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 29.

Coates crafted a narrative for them that he thought would sell to his audience, as Rozanne later recalled, “Coates introduced Barbara and me, without using our names, as hopeful actresses who had ‘watched their careers be destroyed because of an inability to stop from consuming great quantities of food.’” After the show aired, Rozanne and company worked to create literature, including the first OA booklet which informed readers that “the prime concern of OA is not with diets, calories, and weight, but with that lie behind our overeating, even the everyday occasions that tend to make us seek excess food.”<sup>33</sup>

Rozanne was no stranger to diet groups like T.O.P.S., which she painted as ineffective bullies. Other personal testimonials from the 1980 collection *Overeaters Anonymous* reinforced this element of Rozanne’s narrative, including disastrous attempts to try weight loss via mainstream methods. One story told of a chubby teenage girl, whose mother took her to a “popular diet club four different times, the first time when I was only ten years old. I did fairly well on their diet, but I always stopped going after the fifteenth week. I couldn’t face that award ceremony which came the sixteenth week, when you had to walk up in front of a large group and receive a pin.”<sup>34</sup> Years later, Rozanne recalled that she went to many diet clubs, but “I don’t remember feeling as if they really cared about me.”<sup>35</sup>

Rozanne’s story reflects the cultural, intellectual, and environmental contexts in which OA grew, and which influenced the trajectory of the group. The history of OA is nestled within the broader self-help movement, a popular interest in both psychology and spiritualism, the rise

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>35</sup> Rozanne S., Speech at the 1997 WSC Founders Panel, MP3 Recording, 27:00.

of evangelicalism, and second-wave feminism's consciousness raising, and body positivity. These cultural influences suffused the creation and re-creation of OA as women sought to establish healthy relationships with food, their bodies, and their selves. OA bears many similarities to TOPS: the focus on group support and weekly accountability most noticeably. But it is also a reaction against the strain of shame and embarrassment, the concept of before and after, and eventually the physician-established "goal weight". Shifting to a template of "abstinence" removed the physician from the equation and ironically, given the mantra of submission to a higher power, re-established the dieter as the arbiter of her own "success".

OA firmly drew distinctions between outside professionals and inner-community leadership. OA's central organizing body, the World Service Office, carefully insisted that groups may bring in speakers, including medical professionals, but that there were "no 'experts' on the subject of the OA program. Each person shares only his or her individual experience" and their guidelines discouraged the use of last names and titles, again de-valuing professional experience and privileging the personal.<sup>36</sup> Even speakers who were OA members were dissuaded from using their inter-group titles like "member of the Board of Trustees," reminding members that service was to be given "without expectation" and their authority came not from status in the service structure but from the "personal experience, strength and hope they have to share as [a] recovering compulsive overeater."<sup>37</sup> OA's groups were aprofessional but the central organization was not always anti-professional. They worked with medical professionals to get their literature into doctors' offices and clinics to fill in for services which patients could not receive or could

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<sup>36</sup> *WSO Notebook* Vol 7, No 6, November/December 1980, 1.

<sup>37</sup> *WSO Notebook* Vol 7 No 1 January/February, 1980, 1.

not pay for. The WSO sent out calls to members via the Professional Community Committee in 1977, for help drafting a new “professional packet” for wide disbursement.<sup>38</sup> The Professional Community Committee referred to OA as a “community health resource” for compulsive overeaters who may seek help and not find it in traditional medicine.<sup>39</sup> Trustees also attended the Second International Congress on Obesity in DC in October of 1977, in order to make contacts in the medical community but also to evaluate other weight management programs. They found that research showed a 3% success rate in “weight loss clubs” and that “the price per pound of loss weight in Weight Watchers [was] \$11.92 per person.”<sup>40</sup> Contemporary news reports show that groups like OA stepped into a gap of care identified by both patients and physicians. Dr. Ernst Drenick, chief of general medicine at Wadsworth VA Hospital in LA believed that “it’s hard to combat compulsion eating based on a psychological problem” and that science offered no “revolutionary cures” for weight loss.<sup>41</sup> The *LA Times* reported that weight loss “body shops” like OA, TOPS, and even “Connie Levy’s Re-Form School for the Overweight” were “in effect, removing the burden of authority and responsibility from the physician, who traditionally operated as the sole authority in matters of weight control despite the fact that often the doctor lacked [...] the time to hold the patients hand over a long haul.”<sup>42</sup> Further partnerships between OA and HR professionals are suggested by the creation of new pamphlets in 1985 meant to

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<sup>38</sup> *WSO Notebook* Vol 4 No 8 August, September, October 1977, 2.

<sup>39</sup> *WSO Notebook* Vol 4 No 8 August, September, October 1977, 2.

<sup>40</sup> *WSO Notebook* Vol 4 No 9 November/December 1977, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Dosti, Rose. “Help is at Hand for Overeaters” *Los Angeles Times* September 14, 1978, 28.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

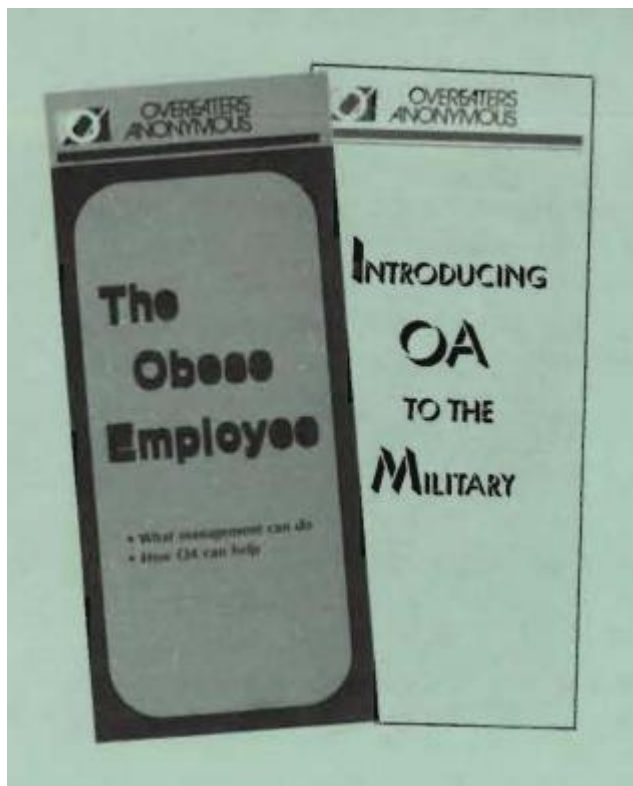


Figure 14. 1985 OA Pamphlets, Courtesy of Overeaters Anonymous

provide information about OA to businesses and the armed forces: “The Obese Employee” and “Introducing OA to the Military.”<sup>43</sup>

OA exhibited this sense of partnership with, but separation from, the world of traditional experts at the 1985 World Service Convention Silver Jubilee in Anaheim’s Disneyland Hotel “emotion-charged” ballroom as two thousand members presented Rozanne S with twenty-five long stemmed roses and an engraved silver tray. Her husband Marvin, “whose steadfast support enabled her to persevere” was given a silver

letter opener. President Ronald Reagan sent a telegram declaring that OA’s “advocacy of sound eating practices” improved peoples’ “ability to function and contribute to their full potential.”<sup>44</sup>

OA also shared a working partnership with another traditional “expert” in dieting: the agony aunt. Dear Abby won the 1980 OA Appreciation Award for having “regularly carried the OA message for more than fifteen years.”<sup>45</sup> Her award was part of an anniversary fete at the LA Hilton which also featured a twenty-four hour marathon, a disco dance, and talk by Rozanne. OA

<sup>43</sup> *WSO Notebook* Vol 12 No 6 November/December, 1985, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Ronald Reagan, Telegram to OA, quoted in *WSO Notebook* Vol 12 No 6, November/December 1985, 1.

<sup>45</sup> *WSO Notebook* Vol 7 No 1 January/February 1980, 1.

was mentioned often in the “Dear Abby” feature, and she offered the group as a solution to a myriad of problems for women. For instance, in 1973 a woman fretted that her prison pen-pal boyfriend was about to discover that she was fat. Thankfully, the terms of his parole kept her safe temporarily but as soon as he was free to travel the truth would be revealed. Abby didn’t address the woman’s fear of losing such an obvious catch, but told her “if Overeaters Anonymous can’t help you nobody can. Good luck and God bless”<sup>46</sup>

Like T.O.P.S., OA’s early literature began with a forward by a doctor. But OA’s doctor was a practicing psychoanalysis, and his essay spoke of the futility of his profession’s efforts to cure compulsive overeaters. Dr. Rubin noted that though he attempted to treat the overweight for decades, “eventually it became apparent to me that overeating is an obsessive, compulsive addiction of a highly complex nature.”<sup>47</sup> He announced that food was “even more addictive than [...] alcohol” and that though “we do know that one’s emotional life has a great deal to do with overeating [...] we also know, unfortunately, how limited all treatment modalities have been to date in affecting sustained relief, let alone cures.”<sup>48</sup>

Dr. Rubin also spoke of the problem of overweight not as a moral failure or a lack of willpower, but as a mode of oppression. He mourned the fact that fat people “have been patronized, prejudiced against and exploited for economic gain. Charlatans and chicanery abound. Millions of dollars are made off of the suffering of fat people, and this condition is

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<sup>46</sup> *El Paso Herald Post* Tuesday July 15, 1975. Abby’s column also ran “A Tribute to Overeaters Anonymous” and “Questions and Answers on Overeating” which featured the teachings of OA in 1978.

<sup>47</sup> Theodore Isaac Newton, “Forward”, *Overeaters Anonymous*, OA: Torrance, CA, 1980, vii.

<sup>48</sup> Judith Stein, fat liberationist, spoke of the dangerous demonizing of food in OA. Interview with author, April, 2017.

probably the most prevalent health problem which exists in the American population."<sup>49</sup>

Supporting the OA model, Rubin stressed the necessity of mutual support in healing emotional wounds through the creating of a firmer “sense of self and self-esteem through its extraordinary implementation of camaraderie and caring for one's fellows and one's self.”<sup>50</sup>

This interpersonal agency was achieved through the relationship of sponsor and sponsee, and created a fluid schema of authority. In the early years of OA, authority within the group was gained by losing and lost by gaining. During the 1963 annual conference, nominations to the board of trustees highlighted nominees’ weight-loss as a measure of success and expertise. Thelma S. was seen as “well qualified by virtue of having lost 110 pounds since coming in and [...] has consistently, lost, never gained, and is the first one in OA to celebrate her second year of abstinence and sobriety.”<sup>51</sup> Thelma was elected to the board on these merits. Articles, poems and songs in OA’s newsletter *Lifeline* reinforced the connection between abstinence and weight loss, with motivational snippets like “on three moderate meals a day, I’ve lost inches the OA way/Carbohydrates I avoid, not for me said, Sigmund Freud.”<sup>52</sup>

Early *Lifeline* issues, meeting guidelines, and conferences minutes are also notable for what they lack- calorie counts and doctor’s orders. *Lifeline* had no talk of calorie counts, just “abstinence” which meant different things for different members. The 9<sup>th</sup> National Conference on May 24, 1970 introduced a new trustee with her story- she created her own abstinence diet

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<sup>49</sup> Rubin, viii.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, ix

<sup>51</sup> 1963 Conference Minutes, courtesy of Overeaters Anonymous.

<sup>52</sup> *The O.A. Lifeline* Vol. 1 No. 1 October, 1965, 13.



through OA and told her doctor about it— he had no advice, and was “just happy” her bloodwork was normal.<sup>53</sup> This strain of personal authority over the meaning of “abstinence” and strain of anti-professionalism eventually allowed for a new paradigm of “success” as well as room for both local interpretation and cults of personality. Authority over one’s body was achieved through persuasive interpersonal communications, including the messages found in *Lifeline*. However, weight loss was the only measure of “success” in the early years of OA. Before their membership expanded to include those with a variety of eating disorders including anorexia and bulimia, the only proof of self-directed “abstinence” was a trimmer waistline. The 1963 Conference established weight loss and the maintenance of that loss as mandatory for trustees. Article 8.17 of the OA Guidelines stated “Those elected at the regular annual meeting in 1964 must then be at their normal weight. Those re-elected at the annual meeting in 1965 must have maintained their normal weight for six months prior thereto.” However, in defiance of the Met Life Insurance charts OA also decided that “each person shall be the sole judge of what is their normal weight.”<sup>54</sup>

The story of early OA isn’t just Rozanne’s. The group she started in Southern California spread quickly, and the creation of personal projects through interpersonal agency was bound to create conflict and disagreement. What was the heart and soul of this group, and who got to decide? The uneasy blend of spirituality and psychiatry came to a head at OA’s first delegate conference in August of 1962. The intricacies of the debate illustrate the autonomy of local groups and a strong strain of the desire for local and personal individualism within group

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<sup>53</sup> 1970 OA Annual Conference Meeting Minutes.

<sup>54</sup> 1965 OA Annual Conference Meeting Transcript.

cohesion. Much more than T.O.P.S. or Weight Watchers, OA maintained autonomous and diverse localism, which allowed for alternative and even dissenting voices.

To ensure solidarity the conference first unanimously adopted an overarching concept of what it meant to be OA, declaring that: “any group of two or more people who accepts the twelve steps and twelve traditions as their basic foundations can call themselves an OA group [...] Each OA group is free to interpret these Steps and Traditions in any manner it sees fit, so long as ‘it does not affect other groups or OA as a whole.’”<sup>55</sup> Yet the 1962 conference revealed conflict between the autonomy of the groups and Rozanne’s vision of OA “unity.” Delegates passionately debated over the inclusion of men, the spiritual vs. psychiatric debate, and the authority of groups to print and disseminate their own materials.

The delegates reached a point of vigorous discussion and disagreement when it came time to vote on the particulars of adopting AA’s pamphlet “If God Spoke to AA He Might Have Said...” as a piece of official OA literature. A delegate named Irene argued that “the program is mostly spiritual” and the literature should reflect that. Lorraine from the west LA group spoke against adopting this overtly religious tract, arguing that “there are three aspects to OA- spiritual, psychological, physical.” A proposal was quickly made to change “priests and ministers” to “spiritual leaders” which was met with some support, but other members added their voices, arguing that a simple change to the pamphlet wasn’t enough. Sunny, a delegate opposed to printing only overtly spiritual tracts, argued that “there are many aspects of working program. If prayer is printed, then other ‘tool=type’ literature should be available, too.” Ethel supported this

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<sup>55</sup> August 11, 1962 Conference Delegates Business Meeting Minutes, courtesy of Overeaters Anonymous, Rio Rancho, New Mexico.

flexibility and diversification, noting that though her group agreed that OA had “three factors” they nonetheless “chose to put the word spiritual ahead of the physical and psychological because spiritual is such a word that it encompasses so much that we felt that this had to be the cornerstone.” But on the other hand, she declared, “we, perhaps more than some of the other groups, believe that the psychological, or the emotional if you wish to call it that is also very vital.” She went on to note that though her group nodded to spirituality, it had embraced psychoanalysis outside of the group. Members of her group “aside from OA and nothing to do with OA formed a therapy group.” These women met with a psychiatrist at UCLA and tried to “get from psychiatry whatever is applicable without going into analysis or deep therapy.” Irene balked at psychiatry, and announced that “the program is mostly spiritual, in fact, it is the only side. If a group is interested in the psychological (moral inventory) what’s wrong with a group printing it themselves? If it’s the real message, it’ll go over, nothing can stop it.”<sup>56</sup>

Lorraine wanted the group to stay secular, and her argument exposed a possible rift in the group- those that had an active religious life outside of OA and those for whom OA filled that role. She focused on neither that psychiatric or the spiritual but the physical, noting that “OA is not a religion, and that has been said...that’s very important. TOPS is a group where people have lost their weight. Some people lost their weight in OA before there was a spiritual concept. The[y] used the physical, psychological, power of the group, before they discussed it as such. There are many ways...mechanical ways, spiritual ways, terrific ways...of a group acting together to instill this wonderful feeling of success, and everybody who says so in the program

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<sup>56</sup> Delegates Meeting.

understands the spiritual aspect their own way.” “When I do my praying as such, I do it in my Temple.”

A.G., a Texas oilman who had formed a rival group “gluttons anonymous,” had flown in to the conference on his private plane and tried to take over the group, even suggesting that OA be renamed GA. A.G. took a pragmatic approach and argued for localism amongst the groups, arguing that “any group that says they are working the twelve steps and 12 traditions [...] is an OA group, [...] and if they want to practice yoga while they do it, it suits me fine.” Amidst the debate over which aspect of OA should be given prominence- the spiritual, physical, or physiological, no consensus was reached except “for goodness sake, let’s not separate!” Ethel argued that the entire concept of prayer limited the concept of God, and specifically objected to the inclusion of “priests and ministers” in OA literature as well as referring to God as “he.”<sup>57</sup> Lorraine seemed to attribute the “spiritual” power to the women of the group, and suggested that TOPS could and did achieve the same result for many women. Was this enough to serve as the “basis for unity” for these groups? Would god and carbs tear them apart?

The debate dragged on, and an uneasy compromise to revisit the topic lasted only minutes, falling apart when the new board of trustees was appointed with no non-spiritual delegates. Ethel objected to the point of threatening to take her local group and leave, declaring that “I feel we have no real representation on the Board of Trustees”. A compromise was once again brokered, adding two new trustee positions for Ethel and Sunny. Rozanne later gave credit to

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<sup>57</sup> 1962 Conference Minutes, 4.

A.G. for saving the day, attributing his cool head to the fact that “he was a man.”<sup>58</sup> Rozanne may have believed that the chaos was the result of women untrained in the business of committee work or too slow to make a firm decision, but this rigorous debate at the very first delegate meeting is illustrative of the potential for localism and interpretation built into the OA paradigm.

This buffet style approach can also be seen in early issues of the group’s newsletter *Lifeline*, where abstinence advice was often couched within explicitly religious fervor. Beginning from its inception in 1965, the monthly publication featured frequent personal stories of growing closer to, or gaining faith in, God via OA. Edie C. reveled in “watching my body whittle down to its normal weight. This is another favorite gift. If this is the body god intended for me all along, I am assured He has other good things in store for me.”<sup>59</sup> She gave all the credit to God, and believed that “no human power could have relieved this compulsion...I have proved this to be true for myself over and over and over again before coming to the program. There were parents trying to help, diet doctors from age 10, friends, pills, fat farms, magic formula diets, therapy...tried them all right up to 275 lbs.”<sup>60</sup> These early forays into spirituality blossomed in the growing evangelicalism of American Christian culture, and also adopted earlier twentieth century ideas about faith, healing, and the interaction of the physical and spiritual world.

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<sup>58</sup> OA Establish a board of directors and named AG chair. As to why AG, a stranger, became chair, Rozanne later recalled “My own feeling was that he was a man with the business expertise and experiences the rest of us lacked.” *Story of Us*, 113.

<sup>59</sup> *Lifeline* November 1970, 11.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

### “Fat People Don’t Go to Heaven”: Weight and the Gospel of Health

In 1957 Charlie Shedd, a formerly-fat Presbyterian minister, declared that fat was a physical manifestation of sin.<sup>61</sup> This condemnation of the corpulent marked a new blend of religion and reduction that saw fat as a physical witness to a hidden spiritual failing.<sup>62</sup> Though theologians have often condemned Shedd’s interpretation of scripture, a spiritual approach to weight loss fits into the growing evangelicalism and specifically Charismatic Christianity in the post war period.<sup>63</sup> These spirit-focused religious practices offered an understanding of healing and health that incorporated some aspects of medical knowledge but offered God as the final arbiter of wellness. In OA this manifested as an increased spirituality and faith in God as a higher power, while in OV weight management became a sincere battleground of spiritual warfare.

The Prosperity Gospel and positive thought theologies are descendants of the New Thought movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and new thinkers like Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, Mary Baker Eddy and the Pentecostal Revivalism of the 1920s, and charismatic faith healers like Aimee Semple McPherson. Like these earlier gospel of health iterations, the gospel of slenderness in the post-war period allowed for female revelation and leadership. Healing was central to the Pentecostal revival of the 1940s, as well, with best-selling texts like *Christ the Healer*. Author Fred S. Bosworth also had a Chicago-based radio program *national radio revival ministry crusaders*. The most prominent faith healer of the 1940s was William Branham. In this

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<sup>61</sup> Charlie Shedd *Pray Your Weight Away* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1957).

<sup>62</sup> Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>63</sup> See Griffith, *Born Again Bodies* and “The Promised Land of Weight Loss” *The Christian Century* (May 7, 1997), 584-454.

post-Pentecostal faith healing revival confession was the key to healing. *The Voice of Healing* 1947-1957 Branhamite publication of the growing faith healing movement. *Herald of Healing* By the 1950s new thought and elements of faith healing had infused mainstream Protestantism as “positive thinking” and the belief in mind over matter.<sup>64</sup> This infusion can be seen in the Charismatic Christianity that developed in the 1970s and ‘80s, with an emphasis on the Holy Ghost, belief in everyday miracles from god and spiritual blessings. Charismatic Christianity also



Figure 25. Pat Robertson shows his diet shake to The 700 Club's Audience, 2005

saw the world as a vast battleground for the forces of God and Satan, an invisible but total war that affected believers lives every day. In this understanding, physical manifestations had “spiritual realities” in faith healing- spirit of jealousy, spirit of laziness, etc.<sup>65</sup>

Post war maladies no longer

included polio, but shifted to cancer, old

age, and obesity. Charismatic Christians reimagined fasting as a way to achieve blessings as health rid the body of both physical and spiritual toxins, and joined a growing diet industry; Pat Robertson even peddled a diet shake.<sup>66</sup> Spiritual leaders found diets and diet groups found God;

<sup>64</sup> Bowler, 31.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>66</sup> This by far not the most unusual product sold by a televangelist. Jim Bakker sells buckets of “survival food,” perhaps to leave behind for un-raptured loved ones. Churches also became fertile grounds for various pyramid schemes and multi-level marketing companies peddling diet pills like Starlight International and Herbalife, which offered an ideal blend of the gospel of health and wealth, promising weight loss, longevity, and a successful business.

Chicago-based Thin Within incorporated biblical principles in the mid-1980s, after the founder became a born again Christian, and promised dieters a way to find their “God-given weight.”<sup>67</sup> Religious scholar R. Laurence Moore sees these ventures as part of the twentieth century commodification of religion, and how religious leaders have successfully negotiated their way into modern commercial cultures.<sup>68</sup> This doesn’t account, though, for the women who adopted spiritual beliefs and tailored them to their own needs in various diet, weight management, and food addiction recovery groups.

For these groups, Overeaters Victorious in particular, their understanding of spirituality was explicitly gendered. In the spiritual battle of charismatic Christianity, strength for women was to be found via submission, and this concept of submission as a spiritual gift for women manifested in beliefs about the female body and size.<sup>69</sup> After the 1962 Conference, OA increasingly embraced spirituality as the path to serenity. Meetings, publications, and subsequent conferences made frequent allusions to God, though OA noted that each member should be “inspired by God as each individual understands him.”<sup>70</sup> This turn complemented the search for a serenity that didn’t grapple with structural forces outside of home and self. Even the acknowledgment that weight loss may not bring peace and happiness did not suggest that the problem might lie outside the self but rather that more self-help was needed and that “for the emotional peace we need an inner change, a beauty of the soul and mind [...] we are what we

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<sup>67</sup> Elana Conis, “Feed the Soul, Trim the Fat” *Los Angeles Times* July 10, 2006.

<sup>68</sup> R. Laurence Moore, see *Selling God* and *Touchdown Jesus*.

<sup>69</sup> Griffith, *God’s Daughters*

<sup>70</sup> *Lifeline* Vol. 1 No. 2 March-April, 1966. 7.



think ourselves to be.” Dissatisfaction, anger and resentment could be soothed with “love of beauty, love of books, love of all peoples, love of a clean house.” Members reported that submission to the mantra of “one day at a time” let them be a “better person, O.A. member, wife, and mother.”<sup>71</sup> Further advice extolled members “don’t analyze...utilize.”<sup>72</sup>

OA’s focus on spirituality largely was member-driven. The WSO noted that an overwhelming enthusiasm for the 1979 convention as “one of the best conventions ever!” was due to “the emphasis on spiritual recovery.”<sup>73</sup> The Professional Community Committee also solicited input from members of the clergy in drafting OA literature for the religious community.<sup>74</sup>

Judy S. from Phoenix Arizona reported experiencing a “spiritual awakening” at the 1975 OA Convention, where she “saw many thin beautify bodies” and “got this enormous feeling in my heart [...] I came home saying I had gotten LOVE at the convention.” “Miracles began to happen. A willingness to eat Plan A and call my food in again was one.” “I had a new feeling of self-worth.” “My relationship with my Higher Power (Who I chose to call God) was strong and complete.” “What had been missing in my program for a year and a half was God.”<sup>75</sup> For these members, OA’s yearly conference not only offered a chance to commune with friends and work the steps, but a spiritual revival as intense as any had in a tent in the desert.

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<sup>71</sup> *The Lifeline* November, 1970, 5.

<sup>72</sup> *Lifeline* Vol. 1 No. 2 March-April, 1966. 7-8.

<sup>73</sup> *WSO Notebook* Vol7 No 6 November/December 1980, 2.

<sup>74</sup> *WSO Notebook* Vol7 No 6 November/December 1980, 2

<sup>75</sup> Judy S. “A Spiritual Awakening,” *Lifeline* September/October 1975, 9.

For some members, achieving spiritual serenity was a full-time endeavor. Phyllis S. described herself as a “grateful compulsive overeater” who called in her daily food plan to a sponsor every morning, attended “as many meetings as possible” weekly, and read OA literature daily.<sup>76</sup> She noted that though at first she “analyzed and intellectualized” her way through a year of OA, she kept gaining until she “surrendered to the fact” that she was “allergic” to

refined carbohydrates.<sup>77</sup> Though agnostic, Jeri found a higher power in her fellow OA members who she saw as “winners” and OA as an organization, before embracing the spirituality so central to the group. She recalled that “at the beginning, my faith was 2% God and 98% the group, but by acting as if I believed, it has done a slow reversal and I’ve a God now that has sustained me through both real and imaginary trials and tribulations.”<sup>78</sup> Another anonymous member shared that “one of the many beautiful things this program has done for me is that it has opened my eyes to see that there really is a Power greater than myself whom I choose to call God and who is kind, loving, and dear to me.” For this member, OA literature led her to traditional



**God** grant me the  
**Serenity** to accept  
 the things I cannot change •  
**Courage** to change  
 the things I can • and  
**Wisdom** to know  
 the difference

Figure 26. Serenity Prayer from Lifeline

<sup>76</sup> *The Lifeline* November, 1970, 5.

<sup>77</sup> *The Lifeline* November, 1970, 7.

<sup>78</sup> *The Lifeline* November, 1970, 5.

religious texts, writing that “he has given me an open mind so that I can read His word in the Bible and know that it is truth for the first time in my life.”<sup>79</sup> Edie C., in losing weight, wondered if “this was the body God intended for me all along.”<sup>80</sup> In the pages of *Lifeline*, members’ essays on spiritual awakening nestled amidst evocations of the Serenity Prayer and biblically-inspired ditties like “Fat Woman’s Psalm.”<sup>81</sup> Marcia R. conceptualized her size as a site of miraculous work, crafting a common narrative in which she tried to lose weight through “diet doctors from age 10, pills, fat farms, magic formula diets, therapy...tried them all right up to 275 lbs. Nothing could do it!!!” Her narrative culminates with finding OA and then God who “could do it.”<sup>82</sup>

Interviews with long-time OA members consistently turned to faith and God. Mary S. recalled that her group met in the basement of a Protestant church, and some in her group did not originally identify God as their higher power but embraced spirituality in general. Mary joked that their higher power might be “a tree or the bushes,” but these women either didn’t last or “came around.”<sup>83</sup> Mary herself found that her OA practice and her practice of faith complemented and encouraged each other, saying that working the program “got me closer” to Jesus and encouraged her to “really seek what he had to say.” Likewise, Edie recalled that the first time she went to an OA meeting she “saw something in those rooms that those people had

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<sup>79</sup> *The Lifeline* November, 1970, 8.

<sup>80</sup> “The Gift of Hope”, Edie C., *The Lifeline* November, 1970, 11.

<sup>81</sup> *Lifeline* Vol. 1 No. 2 March-April, 1966. 14.

<sup>82</sup> *The Lifeline* November, 1970, 14.

<sup>83</sup> Mary S. Interview with author, December 27<sup>th</sup>.

that I wanted. I know today it was a spirituality.”<sup>84</sup> She found that the spirituality she saw went far beyond a desire for God to help these women lose weight, but rather addressing deep-seated hurts. For her, “It wasn’t about losing the weight. I stayed for the program.” The spiritual practices that she found in OA led her to join several other Anonymous programs to deal with family and relationship problems. Edie and Mary both interacted daily with OA literature, and used it to continue to expand their spiritual practice. Edie also noted that she found spiritual leadership within the group, and that her sponsor “taught her my spirituality.” Both women also drew clear lines between their religious and spiritual beliefs. Though they believed it was a Judeo-Christian God, and for Mary it was Jesus as well who granted them grace, the group members maintained that “religion is dogma but spirituality is our serenity.”<sup>85</sup> Mary agreed, she described the nature of the group, even when it was God-centered, as “spiritual, not religious. Religion didn’t enter the building.”<sup>86</sup>

These women and others committed to a full surrender to what they saw as God’s will, and believed the rewards would be the thin bodies they imagined for themselves. One anonymous member told others that through this submission of self she lost fifty pounds and felt “feminine, womanly, ladylike and loving [...] thin mentally and physically.”<sup>87</sup> In this way, weight loss became not only the measure of abstinence, but a measure of spiritual wellbeing and a mark of God’s grace. This grace manifested in a slender, loving wife and mother who felt

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<sup>84</sup> Edie. Interview with Author.

<sup>85</sup> Edie, Interview with Author.

<sup>86</sup> Mary S., Interview with Author.

<sup>87</sup> “I Listen Loudly,” *The Lifeline* November, 1970, 15.

peace and happiness with the world. There was no room for critique beyond the self in this milieu.

OA's members were evangelizers, believing that their message of peace through surrender had implications far beyond waistlines. One member wrote in *Lifeline* that if she “only had one wish, it would be that [OA] could spread the word of the Twelve Steps til it enveloped the world. If the world practiced them what a nice place it would be to live in for everyone.”<sup>88</sup> These members believed that OA offered solutions that could not be found in “organized efforts to relate to God, psychoanalysis, psychotherapy – individual and group, consciousness raising, diet clubs, exercise groups,” because OA offered a “unique three fold scope” of “service, obedience and love” which led members to a “dawning spirituality”<sup>89</sup> OA literature was the key to their evangelizing, and played an important role in both the circuit of community building and interpersonal relationships, as one member noted “it’s easier to approach that obese, sad-looking person when we can offer either [a] flyer or [a] card.”<sup>90</sup>

### **Free to be Thin: Devotion and Diet in Overeaters Victorious**

Women who had experienced TOPS, OA and WW split off to join “Overeaters Victorious”, an explicitly religious group began by Neva Coyle that had 16 chapters in the Midwest by 1978.<sup>91</sup> Their meetings blended motivational tapes, diet accountability, and bible study. They published biblical weight loss pamphlets like “More of Jesus, Less of Me.”

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<sup>88</sup> *The Lifeline* November, 1970, 17.

<sup>89</sup> Anonymous, *Lifeline* September and October 1975, 8.

<sup>90</sup> *WSO Notebook* Vol 4 No 8 August, September, October 1977, 1.

<sup>91</sup> Charles Leroux, “Religion a Staple for These Dieters,” *Chicago Tribune* Aug 29, 1978.

Neva Coyle's sprawling devotional dieting enterprise began with group meetings based on the model of TOPS and OA. Overeaters Victorious relied on bible passages rather than piggy songs and serenity prayers, "put a knife to your throat if you're given to appetite Proverbs 23:2. Coyle



Figure 27. Neva Coyle (Left) leading a meeting of OV

was a former Weight Watchers member who "had been going there just to have a place to weigh in." She had bypass surgery in 1973 but "God had other plans." "I had a growing desire to see if there was a connection between what I believed spiritually and the everyday problem I had with food. In Ecclesiastes 4, it says there's a strength when there's three or four together; the Bible is very big on group dynamics." Coyle recalled that OV was formed at her Episcopal church in St. Paul when she "called some friends, also Christians and also overweight. We read the Bible and started seeing the same things, passages that just jumped out. We don't want to twist the

meaning of everything to losing weight, but when you're eating for emotional reasons and you see what the scriptures say about emotional health, of course you apply it to your problem." In about a year OV grew to 16 groups with trained instructors in the upper Midwest with two

hundred and fifty active members and two hundred and fifty in a correspondence course. The meetings had a set fee of 20\$ for every four-week series. The meeting played a cassette of Coyle, a review of members' diet diaries, and bible study plans tailored for slimming down which showed that "the teachings of the scriptures apply to the chunky housewife." They read "God's Answer to Fat" and "More of Jesus, Less of Me." Coyle patiently instructed the women in her group toward a spiritual weight loss, using her own narrative and telling them that "since [she has] given my appetite to Him, I have a new sense of responsibility for the nutrition of my family." She believed, and told others, that their fat bodies betrayed their true spiritual selves, and she wanted "each of you ladies to end up the person God wants you to be, not just physically but mentally too."<sup>92</sup>

Like any gathering of church ladies, of course, the group evolved to address any number of problems through fellowship and prayer, meeting to talk about "God, husbands, children and food."<sup>93</sup> Coyle reported that in one group session "they had prayed together that Meryl's husband wouldn't overwork so much." They also showed care for women who couldn't join a group, either due to geography or circumstance, noting that "our prayers this week were for Mary. She's not a member [...] I've only talked to her by phone. She must weigh over 520 pounds because she says she has 400 pounds to lose." Coyle told this woman and others that "when you become thin, the real person emerges."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Leroux.

<sup>93</sup> Carol Brzozowski, "Group's Weight-Loss Recipe Involves Heavy Servings of Faith, Religion" Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel August 18, 1986, 5.

<sup>94</sup> Leroux.

Coyle first experienced “body shame” at the age of fourteen, while<sup>95</sup> shopping for a dress with her aunt, who “wanted [her] to wear something that would not emphasize [her] hips.” Coyle suddenly felt like there was something wrong with her body, and she spent the wedding the dress was bought for “backed up against a wall” because she felt like her “hind-end was too big.”<sup>96</sup>

Coyle recalled the struggle with weight that followed:

As a young married, and as a mother of two little girls, I started going to the TOPS group, and I went to Weight Watchers, and I tried a doctor with diet pills, and everything that I could think of that would help me be slender...I don't think that I ever really wanted to be thin, as much as I wanted to be what I thought was average, what felt average to me. And of course that's so, that's such a ... a nebulous number that you just really...and then the only people that you depend on are the people that you think are the experts, who will tell you what you should weigh. Nobody ever taught me about, that there was a size that you could reach that would be a range, and in that range, you would have what I would consider, like, no body consciousness. You just were. You know, you could ride in circus or amusement park rides and fit in an airplane seat and have plenty of seat belt left over and there was a range that was so evasive that I didn't even discover that until...many, many years later, after *Free to be Thin* was written. Way after that. There was always a goal-weight number, instead of an emotional comfort, and peace with your body. It was like, that was gonna be the magic number, and I weighed that one day.<sup>97</sup>

As OV grew into a million dollar empire of books, tapes, and videos, individual groups gained autonomy. Individual groups were connected through common Coyle literature, not through a central organization. Leaders used Coyle's leadership guide, and members utilized Coyle's workbooks, but groups were otherwise free to adopt their own styles and take dues or not as they saw fit. A 1987 group in Florida, which had adopted Coyle's theology to the point of declaring that “it is a sin to be overweight” 13 middle-aged members of Palm Springs Baptist

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<sup>95</sup> Neva Coyle, Interview with Author, February, 2017.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Coyle, Interview with Author.



Church, collected no dues, and mandated at least 1200 calories a day. They embraced their lack of expertise and declared “we are very aware we are amateurs.”<sup>98</sup> Though reliant on Coyle’s published guidance, and though members signed a form stating that “the advice of my doctor will prevail over any teaching or leadership in the group,” OV evolved to be largely anti-professional, not simply a-professional. With God in place of doctor, prayer in place of therapist, and fellow members encouraging a personal understanding of weight loss, these women created an interpersonal agency over their bodies through their discursive practices of faith.

Like the 19<sup>th</sup> century and current gospel of wealth, these gospels of health and slenderness imagine that God’s priorities are in line with capitalism and it’s ideals- including thinness for women. It also, like the gospel of wealth, removes structural problems from the equation to imagine women’s unhappiness about their bodies is not only a personal, but a moral and spiritual failing. True to the ethos of the prosperity gospel, Coyle assured readers of her 1979 *Free to be Thin* that “the Lord [...] wants to help you lose weight” and they should think of a thin body as their “promised land.”<sup>99</sup> She promised that “God wants us to be attractive,” and that “the Holy Spirit gives new motivation to the Christian to be attractive.”<sup>100</sup> These positive

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<sup>98</sup> Brzozowski, 5.

<sup>99</sup> Coyle, *Free to be Thin*, 9-17.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

confessions of attractiveness meant that for the women dieting, failure to lose weight was not God breaking a promise but a lack of faith. This faith began at the outset of dieting- when a dieter prayed and sought God's guidance on that dieter's fantasy: the goal weight. Victorious dieters asked God how much they should weigh, and enlisted the help of friends and prayer groups to confirm the answer they received. This allowed for some group control and conformity, if God's message fell outside the norm, prayerful friends could intercede. God gave these dieters both their goal weight and their daily calorie goal, and dieters may have reported

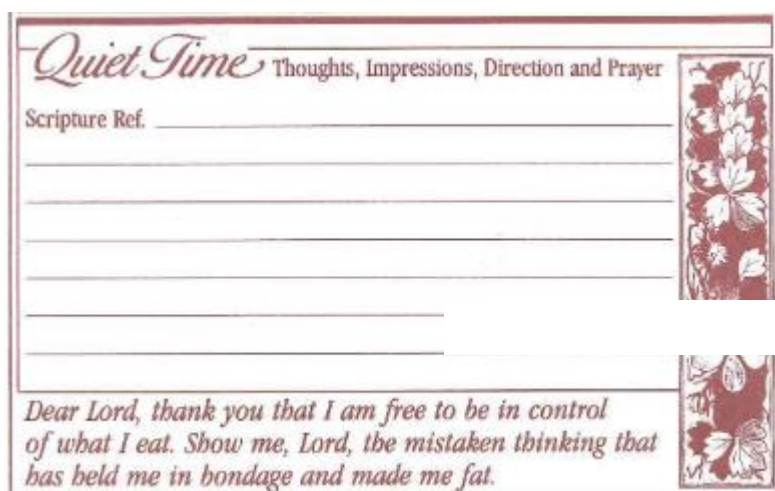


Figure 28. A Daily Devotional Space from Coyle's *Free to be Thin Daily Planner*

a “Jesus snack in the Word” when feeling tempted. Success in this paradigm was the fruition of faith and the receipt of a spiritual blessing, as well as the fulfilment of a covenant. It was announced with a new spin on the before and after, in the pages of *Free to be Thin* one dieter's photo set featured a 168 pound “before” and a 130 pound “God's New Creation.”<sup>101</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Coyle, *Free to Be Thin*.

these statistics to a doctor, but the ultimate authority was their relationship with the Lord. Only full submission to God would lead to the blessing of slenderness, and faithfulness and obedience was shown by food restriction. Coyle suggested that hungry dieters have

In the 1970s, Christian dieting became a multi-million dollar enterprise, with Coyle as the most prominent leader. Her fellowship included Joan Cavanaugh, who participated in OV briefly but went on to write her own *More of Jesus, Less of Me* in 1976.

Cavanaugh was influenced by faith-healer Oral Roberts, who she saw on TV in 1961, “when he said if you want healing for yourself or someone else, to put

your hands on the TV and pray with him. By this time I was crying like a baby, and I did as he said.” Cavanaugh completed her conversion when she went to a church and “waddled down the aisle of a little church and asked to be baptized.”<sup>102</sup> Despite her religious conversion, Cavanaugh continued to gain weight. She came to believe that this was because she had not fully submitted to God’s will, and that successful dieting would only come after she signed a written contract with the Lord, promising to do his will and binding Satan.<sup>103</sup>



Figure 29.

<sup>102</sup>Joan Cavanaugh, *More of Jesus, Less of Me*, Logos International: Plainfield, New Jersey, 1976, 20.

<sup>103</sup> Cavanaugh, 53.

Cavanaugh, like Coyle, imagined the battle of the bulge to be a moral combat fought with the gifts of the spirit. Only through these spiritual gifts, granted by the Holy Spirit, could they defeat Satan the tempter and claim the thin, beautiful body God had waiting for them. These works stand as an application of Charismatic Christianity to Christian women's everyday lives and concerns- the belief that an omnipotent and loving God would intercede and transform a worldly concern over waistlines into a heavenly battle for their souls. This view found parallels with Eve and claimed food struggles as a particularly female spiritual battle.<sup>104</sup> This shaky theology imagined the root of modern western women's quest for slenderness not in patriarchy, but in Genesis, imagining Eve's original sin, and the ongoing sin of fat women, as a desire for food, not knowledge. Adam is too blame, as well, of course, as the original enabler. Cavanaugh fantasizes about an Adam that could have kept the Garden intact, if only he had said to Eve "you big dummy; now isn't that just like a woman? Let her out of your sight and there she is, stuffing her mouth."<sup>105</sup> Alas, Adam had not yet learned to critique Eve's weight, so here we are.

At the end of my interview with Mary S., I asked if she had any last thoughts about her experience that she'd like to share. She thought for a moment, reflecting on the memories our conversation had brought up, and said "in the beginning it was wonderful. But in reality there was really no success. With OA it's so difficult because it's food. There really is...it's so difficult to be in those rooms now, or even back then, because there really is not great success,

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 69.

not with how your body looks. With other things, fixing life things, but the food issue is so powerful. It's terrible.”

Maybe God could fix your soul, maybe he could grant serenity and peace about your body, but maybe the scale was ruled by a lower realm than heaven. OA and OV couldn't offer a universal solution to weight management or food addiction, as they saw it. Growing alongside these groups, though, was someone who thought she could: Jean Nidetch, the founder of Weight Watchers.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “THE AUTHORITY”: WEIGHT WATCHERS AND A NEW DIET LIFESTYLE, 1963-1984

I am waiting in the early hours at LaGuardia, travelling home from a visit to the Weight Watchers Headquarters in midtown Manhattan. Though I have found their organization to be as impenetrable as Fort Knox, a cordial conversation with an art intern for *Weight Watchers Magazine* proved fruitful. This intern invited me to look at their archive of the monthly publication, which is increasingly sidelined in favor of the nebulous new idea of “content.” “Most of this is moving online,” she told me, along with online weigh-ins and “meetings.” As I wait for my flight later, scrolling through the pictures I’ve taken of colorful recipes and dazzling slim career women enjoying life, the T.V. catches my attention. “I. LOVE. BREAD.”<sup>1</sup> It’s Oprah Winfrey, and she is looking into my eyes, pulling my attention away from a decade of weight-loss advice to tell me that I can have bread. I can have cake. I can have all these lovely things in moderation. The long national crisis of Atkins and gluten-free hysteria is finally over; Weight Watchers has decided that bread is good again. And, well, they’re Weight Watchers. They are “the authority.”

Weight Watchers swiftly commodified the formats of mid-twentieth-century non-profit “diet groups” like Take Off Pounds Sensibly, Overeaters Anonymous, and Overeaters

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<sup>1</sup> As the newest celebrity spokesperson, and a major shareholder in the company, Oprah Winfrey stars in a series of commercials relishing all the foods she loves, both showcasing Weight Watchers’ cornucopia of food allowed in the new flex-points program while perhaps also acknowledging the love of food that has affected her decades-long, extremely public weight fluctuations.

Victorious, and re-mystified weight loss to claim the mantle of authority for itself. By building a centrally-organized brand that went far beyond a weekly meeting, Weight Watchers diminished the local autonomy of such groups and removed any possibility of self-acceptance at a larger size. The corpulent camaraderie available at T.O.P.S., the “fat serenity” of OA, and Neva Coyle’s message of God’s love at any size could not find purchase in a new message of dieting as a middle-class consumer lifestyle.<sup>2</sup> Weight Watchers created a brand flexibility that could incorporate any cultural shifts into its paradigm of losing weight, and could adroitly juggle contradictory ideas about women’s relationship to body size. Weight Watchers brand offered consumers the ultimate buffet of psychology, spirituality, and medical science. Its brand message could even incorporate the sexual revolution and second-wave feminism— as long as feminism remained thin. By adopting a mantle of scientific expertise, and showcasing the beauty and glamor of its founder Jean Nidetch, who presented herself as a dowdy-housewife-turned-slender-celebrity, Weight Watchers created an all-encompassing weight-loss lifestyle in which “success” was undergirded by a lifelong commitment to body surveillance and dieting.

From the founding of Weight Watchers in 1963 to its purchase by Heinz in 1978 and subsequent emergence as the brand synonymous with the diet industry by the mid-1980s, the organization shifted from local, meeting-focused, and cooperative group dieting to reliance on Weight Watchers as a lifestyle brand. Furthermore, the Weight Watchers Foundation, formed and funded by Weight Watchers, Inc. to support scientific research on weight, established the scientific expertise of the brand, and Jean Nidetch’s early success at weight loss created the first

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<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, Neva Coyle, author of *Free to be Thin*, attempted to change the title of a new edition to *Free to be Me*. Her publisher declined the change. Coyle, Interview with author, February, 2017.

celebrity endorsement for the group. This blend of brand and beauty moved the group away from the typical meeting format and towards a pursuit of a lifestyle of dieting. This pivot was accelerated by a widely read *Weight Watchers Magazine*, launched in 1968, and the creation of an extensive line of convenience foods after 1978. Both of these dieting commodities, which adopted earlier twentieth-century dieting methods and branded them Weight Watchers, suggested that loyalty to a brand, not a group, could create weight-loss success.

Weight Watchers dealt with broader “women’s” problems of emotional health, sexual and romantic satisfaction, and career ambitions in its magazine and other literature. And dieters found room in the weekly meeting structure to discuss how these issues affected weight management. But at its heart, Weight Watchers offered an expert-directed, mystified program for success. The expert, of course, was the program itself. Calorie-counting and nutritional education changed into a rigid and mandatory diet, which eventually became the even further-obscured “points,” weighing-in became a secret process between member and weight recorder, and meetings were a once-weekly appointment, not a member-driven social or therapeutic endeavor. The broader Weight Watchers lifestyle was a consumer one. Magazine subscriptions, specialized food, and branded exercise equipment all created inclusion into this commercialized wellness tribe. Weight Watchers fully and successfully commodified the concept of women’s groups based around issues of body size and food intake, and in doing so moved the locus of autonomy from dieters themselves and back to a paid expert. Weight Watchers came to resemble the reducing salons of the early twentieth century, which were granted a mantle of expertise by the (mostly male) medical establishment but run by a slender female manager who worked upon her



clients and chided them into losing five, ten, fifteen pounds, only to see them back again the next year.

Weight Watchers nonetheless engaged with popular ideas about therapy and recovery, but suggested these were things that could be bought and consumed. While Overeaters Anonymous explicitly adopted the ethos of the recovery movement, even Weight Watchers originated in the ideas of group therapy. Jean Nidetch, a plump career-woman-turned-housewife in New York, participated in a medical weight-loss clinic to shed pounds. Frustrated by the lack of emotional support and understanding she found there, in 1963 she adopted the medical diet plan and, with several friends and neighbors, “added talk.”<sup>3</sup> Weight Watchers merged the public performance of T.O.P.S. and the intimate conversation of OA, and added a slick veneer of science and medicine. Charging a few dollars a week to be weighed and listen to a paid meeting leader, Nidetch rationalized the process and philosophy of the diet group movement into quantifiable numbers that would create results on the scale- a number determined by a Weight Watchers leader. Weight Watchers quickly commercialized nationally, and the brand’s marketing showcased the driving force of women who joined: appearance. While Weight Watchers’ literature cautioned against the health dangers of obesity, the copious before and after stories stressed a new youthful appearance, glamorous make-overs, happier marriages, cleaner houses, and revved-up sex drives. The “new” woman who walked out of her last Weight

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Nidetch, *The Story of Weight Watchers* (New York: Twenty-first Corporation, 1972).

Watchers meeting at her “ideal” weight was ready for anything- including a career, where thin waistlines would surely lead to fat paychecks.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the diet group movement assumed that its members were stay-at-home wives and mothers. Like T.O.P.S., Weight Watchers initially focused on problems of the domestic sphere- the issues of shopping, cooking, and pleasing a family. These groups attempted to negotiate dieting within the ethos of domesticity, and Weight Watchers especially focused on the dieter as an attractive sexual partner for her husband. Overeaters Anonymous began with similar concerns, but the role of self-help within the group soon encouraged members to think about the ways in which domestic concerns affected their eating habits, rather than how their diet might disrupt their family life. This changed, though, and in the late 1960s and into the 1970s OA and Weight Watchers specifically began to address the problem of the “double shift,” the impact of divorce on dieters, and the role of slenderness and attractiveness in the lives of career women.<sup>5</sup>

*Weight Watchers Magazine* illustrates the shifts in the brand, as it moved from a group program catered to stay-at-home wives and mothers interested in healthy new recipes to an all-encompassing dieting lifestyle embraced by all women, especially young single career women. Through their successful branding, Weight Watchers also managed to capture the waistlines and wallets of non-white women. This shift represents not only a changing demographic but the invention of a new type of wellness lifestyle with dieting at its core. Weight Watchers was a

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the complicated relationship between women, appearance, and work see Julie Berebitsky, *Sex in the Office: A History of Gender, Power, and Desire*. (New Haven: Yale University, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Nidetch, *The Story of Weight Watchers*.

pioneer in commodifying “wellness” as a middle-class marker of successful, happy living, and their messages created a paradox in which their program for dieting was aimed at busy women who didn’t have “time to diet” but also offered a consumer-based lifestyle in which one actually dieted 24/7. For these constant weight watchers, food, clothing, leisure activities, sex and love—all aspects of life revolved around the achievement of wellness through dieting. This whirlwind of surveillance activity was managed by accepting Weight Watchers as the expert, allowing the group to count your calories for you and replace them with point charts and “free” foods. Weight Watchers made shakes and snack and sugar-free soda to “simplify” weight loss. And they published a magazine that tied it all together.

All the groups discussed above published extensively. Their materials were used to introduce prospective members or were read by those who never joined a group. But the publications of T.O.P.S., OA, and OV remained group-centered. *Weight Watchers Magazine*, however, was different, and suggests that the “success” of this group was not due to its meetings but to the effectiveness of its brand, which was built on two pillars of expertise: science and celebrity. *Weight Watchers Magazine* could be consumed effectively by people who never went to a meeting, though of course its content also worked to lure them in to one. But its articles, including monthly women’s fashion spreads and copious “healthy” recipes, were modeled more after *Ladies Home Journal* than OA’s affirmation-focused *Lifeline*. Creating what essentially functioned as a woman’s magazine that told women on every page to lose weight placed slenderness as the central occupation and preoccupation of womanhood. Weight Watchers’ pre-

packaged and branded “wellness” therefore represents the vanguard of an emerging ethos of health and wellness as a consumer option, not as a community responsibility.

Weight Watchers has been examined by feminist critics, sociologists, and philosophers as a patriarchal tool of control over women’s bodies, one which demands women’s cooperation. Weight Watchers, in these studies, often functions as a stand-in for the diet industry as a whole. This is understandable, given its brand dominance, but scholars have not investigated the unique strategies that led to that dominance. Weight Watchers fits well into arguments about women’s oppression through surveillance and docility. Philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky offers three categories of discipline that produce docile female bodies, including “those that aim to produce a certain size and configuration.” Dieting is an especially powerful tool within this category, which produces a “modality of embodiment that is particularly feminine.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Susan Bordo argues that dieting is an act of adjustment that creates a docile body whether or not a diet is successful; an important consideration when examining Weight Watchers, a group that is successful even while its members are not.<sup>7</sup> Sociologist Kandi Stinson also builds on the work of Foucault to argue that dieting is an internalized form of hegemonic surveillance. Furthermore, she suggests that the “confession” aspect of dieting communities is linked to that surveillance and that “body monitoring [...] is most effective when linked to confession.”<sup>8</sup> In this estimation,

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<sup>6</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” in *The Politics of Women’s Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*. Ed. R. Weitz. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 27.

<sup>7</sup> See Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Kandi M. Stinson, *Women and Dieting Culture: Inside a Commercial Weight-Loss Group* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 13.

group “confessions” are a form of control that brings the confessor back in line with social norms, in this case by expressing dissatisfaction with the dieter’s “abnormal” body shape or size. Ultimately, Stinson finds that within communities like Weight Watchers, “feminist language is co-opted” to allow a “highly selective, watered down version of liberal feminism to promote itself.”<sup>9</sup> She goes on to liken that kernel of feminism within Weight Watchers to Overeaters Anonymous, a group which she argues works to “suppress or resist feminist metaphor.”<sup>10</sup> Judith Rolls, another participant observer in both Weight Watchers and OA, counters Stinson by framing OA as an *alternative* to the “dominant weight loss paradigm” which “functions to place and maintain women in subordinate positions and to profit financially as it does so.”<sup>11</sup>

A common critique among scholars is that the practice of dieting supports rather than confronts underlying patriarchal systems. But this assumes that confrontation should be the only goal of women’s organization in the post-war period and ignores the ways in which a focus on the self could be a radical step for many women. This critique also ignores the ways in which dieting communities could offer a stepping-stone to increased civic engagement, career opportunities, and a familiarity with tools of feminism like “consciousness raising.” Philosopher Cressida Heyes argues that, in fact, groups like Weight Watchers simultaneously increase women’s capabilities even as they uphold dominant patriarchal structures. Attending Weight

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Judith A. Rolls “Overeaters Anonymous Discourse: Resistance to the Dominant Weight Loss Paradigm” in *Communication in Recovery: Perspectives on Twelve-Step Groups*. Ed. Lynette S. Eastland, Sandra L. Herndon, Jeanine R. Barr. Cresskill (New Jersey: Hampton Press, Inc. 1999), 84.

Watchers meetings as a participant ethnographer, Heyes found that while commercial weight-loss programs “cleverly deploy the discourse of self-care feminists have long encouraged” to non-feminist ends, they nonetheless held the capacity for growth.<sup>12</sup> She argues that a critique of dieting which relies on “false consciousness” or “docile bodies” elides the “enabling moments” of dieting praxis. With this argument, Heyes employs a Foucauldian thesis “that the growth of capabilities occurs in tandem with the intensification of power relations.”<sup>13</sup> Heyes investigates Weight Watchers as a very personal process of self-care, however, and does not appreciate the ways in which dieting has historically created a network of women coordinating potentially enabling self-care while negotiating the strict, and largely unattainable bodily ideals of the twentieth century. She and other scholars also focus on Weight Watchers weekly meetings exclusively, and fail to appreciate the fact that Weight Watchers is successful because the meetings are a small part of a sprawling brand created through a variety of products, especially *Weight Watchers Magazine*, and through marketing and advertisements that integrate science, medicine, and fantasies of beauty to create diet standards.

The Foucaultian cultural history of marketing and advertising led by Jackson Lears and Roland Marchand suggests that advertisements “signify a certain vision of the good life; they validate a way of being in the world. They focus private fantasy.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, advertising

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<sup>12</sup> Cressida J. Heyes, “Foucault Goes to Weight Watchers” *Hypanthia* vol 21, no. 2 (Spring 2006), 126. See also Heyes, *Self Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

<sup>14</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 1.

historically “collaborated with other institutions in promoting what became the dominant aspirations, anxieties, even notions of personal identity.”<sup>15</sup> Advertising, then, is not just about selling goods, it’s about creating identities. It’s also about, for dieters, commodifying those identities and fat bodies. The idea that anti-fat advertisements help create fat identities is supported by Lears’ argument that consumers are not simply passive receptacles for ads; they are not a “hapless passive audience.”<sup>16</sup> Ads instead contained “dreams of personal transformation within a broader rhetoric of control” by “sanitizing exoticism and standardizing ideals of beauty” and in doing so adopted a “clinical frankness.”<sup>17</sup> Lears argues that a focus on slenderness in twentieth-century ads was the result of a new “mechanistic style of thought”—an explanation, however, that ignores gender, race, and changing ideas about women as citizens.<sup>18</sup> Arguing that in the twentieth century science was a newly “reified and venerated as an autonomous force,” Lears notes that “by the 1910s, women in advertisements were merely beneficiaries of the largesse generated by male geniuses of mass production” creating a new fashionable woman who was “Mrs. Consumer.”<sup>19</sup> Lears presents the “magical” and carnivalesque as a pre-twentieth century talisman against post-war focus on cold efficiency and the triumph of a managerial

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<sup>15</sup> Lears, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 168.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 120.

ethos. But selling a dream of slenderness is rooted in magical thinking and fantasies of apocalyptic transformation, as embodied by Jean Nidetch.

Advertisements are neither an accurate reflection of people's lives nor a clear window into their fantasies. Roland Marchand argues that perhaps instead ads show "life as it ought to be."<sup>20</sup> He asserts that beginning in the 1920s, advertisers sought to uncover "fundamental beliefs" shared by most people on which they could base their advertisements. Looking at a decade of Weight Watchers' marketing, scholars can infer the underlying beliefs that informed their images and copy, though we can't know how consumers reacted to any specific ad. Marchand notes that ads don't create attitudes, but they can "establish broad frames of reference," and "define the boundaries of public discussion" as they create a "common language," in the case of Weight Watchers, a new language for dieters. They also offered a "broader counsel and reassurance" and could potentially stand in for experts, especially when linked with an acknowledged expert's seal of approval.<sup>21</sup>

This work of Lears and Marchand is instructive in comprehending how Weight Watchers used ads and content together to reinforce their message. In *Weight Watchers Magazine*, ads consistently reinforced the consumer's need for the diet program with relentless critiques of women's bodies, dietetic foods, and exercise contraptions. Weight Watchers' magazine, more than other periodicals aimed at women, was a curated experience designed on every page to

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<sup>20</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), xvii.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.



demand slenderness via a specific program. This was linked and held together by a common underlying belief shared between readers, advertisers, and the publication itself: fat was bad.

Women's magazines have been a popular topic for feminist scholars since Betty Friedan lampooned them in *The Feminist Mystique*.<sup>22</sup> Scholars disagree, however, on their nature. Ellen McCracken, for instance, agrees with elements of Friedan's argument, and situates readers as largely passive receptacles for an oppressive narrative found within the pages of magazines. In *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms* Ellen McCracken uses literary critical theory and semiotic analysis to look at early 1980s magazines' "negative hermeneutics" and uncovers a master narrative within each magazine. McCracken notes that ads and content are hard to distinguish from each other and that both create an "illusory, distorted picture of the world."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, McCracken explores the collusion between editors and advertisers to create happy, "supporting" stories and articles via "pseudo-editorials" and a system of mutually sustaining techniques and themes that link the editorial material to purchased advertising. McCracken explains that editorial "information" which finds and exploits new problems that only consumption can solve resulted in content that was 95% advertising, but not identifiable as such by readers.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Friedan argued that women's magazines created a fantasy of the happy homemaker and ignored women's issues and discontent.

<sup>23</sup> Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 68. See also Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995* (Westport: Greenwood, 1998). Zuckerman describes magazines as decreasingly political in the twentieth century. Her text is an encyclopedia of women's magazines, but she does make the argument that in the 1920s there was a turn in white middle class women's magazines away from the political and social concerns of progressivism and to the personal and home sphere; "social improvement" was traded for "individual betterment."

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

McCracken finds that women's magazines create a longing for consumption- and promise the solution in the ads. Of course, *Weight Watchers* magazine is a bit different, as the magazine itself is the solution. Furthermore, the collusion between advertisers and editors is even harder to pull apart when the magazine is published by a commercial brand. McCracken briefly discusses *Weight Watchers Magazine* in post-Heinz 1982, noting that the magazine aims at slenderness but has a heavy focus on food.<sup>25</sup> McCracken attributes this to a desire to push Heinz's *Weight Watchers* branded food, but without a sharper understanding of the *Weight Watchers* program neglects the manner in which this advertising-editorial collusion is supported by a broader narrative of scientific expertise.

Contra Friedan, however, *Shaping Our Mothers' World: American Women's Magazines* by Nancy Walker paints a more nuanced picture of the potential of women's magazines. Walker argues that earlier scholars neglected the nature of the competition of ideas within women's magazines. Walker continues the work of complicating Friedan's analysis of women's magazines by exploring the themes of discontent within their pages. Walker argues that magazines acknowledged women's changing needs and desires from the 1920s to the 1960s and reflect middle-class aspirations.<sup>26</sup> Walker argues that women's magazines have historically been more complex and contradictory than Friedan and McCracken believe. *Weight Watchers Magazine* offers a chance to understand how an overarching and oppressive narrative suggested

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 265.

<sup>26</sup> Nancy Walker, *Shaping Our Mothers' World: American Women's Magazines* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

by Friedan and McCracken can also incorporate the contradictions and complications noted by Walker and others.

### **“At the Alter of Our Lady”: Jean Nidetch and Celebrity in Weight Watchers**

On a summer night in 1973, Madison Square Garden came alive with celebration. Bob Hope spoke, Pearl Bailey sang and joked, and a musical revue entertained the audience of over sixteen thousand. When the headliner appeared on stage her eyes shone “with the brightness of a dream come true” as she declared herself “the happiest lady in the whole world.”<sup>27</sup> Jean Nidetch, dressed in a billowing white gown, celebrated the 10th anniversary of Weight Watchers as a true celebrity, a fête reported in a lavish spread in the pages of *Weight Watchers Magazine*. In the first ten years of the group, Nidetch developed her personal brand as a success story and worked as the face of the Program. Tall and blond, lovely and newly-thin, Nidetch was the first celebrity spokeswoman for Weight Watchers fifty years before Oprah told us all to eat bread.



Figure 30. Jean Nidetch with her own “before” picture

Nidetch embodied all of the pageantry and celebration of a T.O.P.S. international convention, and stood in for all those who had found “success” in her program. Her role as the ultimate biggest loser encouraged members to see her as the authority on weight loss, rather than

<sup>27</sup> Matty Simmons, “We Go to a 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Party” *Weight Watchers Magazine* (September, 1973), 42-43, 64.

looking to each other. Nidetch was adored by dieters, who wrote her tens of thousands of letters and thronged every auditorium she spoke in across the country. They believed she held the key to not only weight loss, but beauty and glamour, as well. Dieters' love for her took on a religious fervor; for them she was "the Aimee Semple McPherson [...] of the obese."<sup>28</sup> Nidetch encouraged this image, referring to herself as "St. Jean of Slutsky from Brooklyn, NY."<sup>29</sup> This sainthood, of course, was founded in her own miraculous transfiguration, and Nidetch often referred to herself as an "F.F.H.," a formerly-fat housewife.<sup>30</sup> This cutesy nickname spoke to a transformation that went beyond weight; Nidetch sold herself as someone who changed from a dowdy, unhappy housewife to a glittering career woman who hobnobbed with senators. Weight Watchers' message was clear- "she knows all the answers."<sup>31</sup>

Nidetch embodied the mid-century female entrepreneur, blending her feminine beauty with a message of the transformative potential of women. Like Brownie Wise, the home-party guru featured by *Business Insider* and extolled as Tupperware's "charismatic female entrepreneur" in the 1950s, Nidetch used her outsized personality to build a brand. Wise created a model for Nidetch to follow; her home-party empire was built on her relationships to her

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<sup>28</sup> McPherson founded the Foursquare Church, an early megachurch in the Pentecostal revivalism of the 1920s and '30s, in which faith healing and charismatic leadership prevailed. For more see Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Simmons, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Nidetch, "Introduction," *Ask Jean: Questions to Jean Nidetch* (New York: New American Library, 1975).

<sup>31</sup> Simmons, 43.

saleswoman and distributors, who saw in her their aspirational potential.<sup>32</sup> Wise threw lavish yearly Tupperware “Jubilees” for her salesforce, a wonderland replete with beauty pageants and the power of positive thinking.<sup>33</sup> Wise was the female face and force of Tupperware, uneasily partnered with Earl Tupper until her ouster in 1957. Nidetch, too, partnered with a businessman to monetize her own success- family friend Al Lippert.

The story of Weight Watchers begins in a New York T.O.P.S. club. Carol Holtz, the granddaughter of T.O.P.S. founder Esther Manz, still recalls Nidetch’s involvement with the group like it’s fresh gossip, eager to share that “she started at TOPS, you know, Jean did.”<sup>34</sup> This tidbit is a vivid part of T.O.P.S. history and lore, a bitter memory of competition in which T.O.P.S. was, financially, at least, the loser. Nidetch, possibly eager to distance herself from her friends-turned-competition, did not acknowledge this link in her own writings or memoirs. Instead, she crafted herself as a unique visionary who pulled together a variety of weight loss methods into the only true model of success.

In fact, Nidetch did everything she could to lose weight for years. She knew of the older model of “reducing salons,” she was a patient of the vast emerging medical network of weight loss clinics in the 1950s and 1960s, she went to therapy, and she took diet pills. Nidetch took elements of all of these models, and turned them into a booming NYC business, with her image

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<sup>32</sup> See Bob Kealing, *Life of the Party: The Remarkable Story of How Brownie Wise Built and Lost a Tupperware Party Empire*, (New York: Crown-Archetype, 2016)

<sup>33</sup> For instance, Wise had her saleswoman put their dreams into a Tupperware container and toss them into a well. Her message of positive thinking also featured in her 1956 book, *Best Wishes, Bonnie Wise*.

<sup>34</sup> Carol Holtz, Interview with author, July, 2016.

as the heart of her new brand. Jean Nidetch, like so many women, tried everything to lose weight. Unlike most women, though, she took what she learned from her myriad dieting attempts and created a multi-million dollar dieting empire. She blended the group format she learned at T.O.P.S. with the diet prescribed by the New York City Board of Health in 1961, and invited six “fat friends” to join her in weekly discussion groups.<sup>35</sup> Nidetch lost seventy-two pounds this way, dyed her hair blond, and marketed herself as a dieting authority, speaking to other groups of women. Within two years, Weight Watchers incorporated and Nidetch formed almost three-hundred groups in New York City, charging a three-dollar registration fee and weekly two-dollar fee to attend “classes” with other successful lecturers.

Nidetch, with “the flavor of an old-time revival preacher and the polish of a highly-paid nightclub entertainer” was Weight Watchers’ first celebrity endorser.<sup>36</sup> Her speaking engagements drew thousands, and her ten-year anniversary fete was held at Madison Square Garden and shared a professional producer with the Rolling Stones.<sup>37</sup> Weight Watchers claims to authority were based on Nidetch’s personal success and image of beautiful slenderness, and a strict diet created by a medical doctor and approved by a government body. Basing the program around Nidetch left no room for personal interpretation or deviance.

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<sup>35</sup> Nan Ickeringill, “Weight Watchers, Inc.: They Talk Their Way Out of Obesity” *New York Times* March 20, 1967.

<sup>36</sup> Shearlean Duke, “Jean Nidetch: Weight Watchers’ Superstar: High Priestess of Weight Watchers” *Los Angeles Times* September 14, 1972.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

### **“Join Us. We Know How You Feel”: The Weight Watchers Meeting**

The preface to a 1975 collection of letters to Jean Nidetch which had appeared in *Weight Watchers Magazine* promised that the replies within could be taken as the gospel truth, since the slim and vivacious Jean “knows all the answers.” Her expertise was on display in the standardized and slimmed-down Weight Watchers meetings. Unlike T.O.P.S., whose meetings often went well over an hour, and whose activities included extra-meeting social and fundraising activities, or OA, where members could attend a meeting every day of the week, Weight Watchers offered a professionalized meeting. The weekly meetings were referred to as “classes,” and goal weights were chosen by the leader and based on an official Weight Watchers chart. A model class was led by a “pert” size seven who’d lost 100 pounds and members were under the strict eye of this lecturer, who celebrated “victories” like a woman who wouldn’t eat cake at her daughter’s wedding.<sup>38</sup> This leader told members to call her for “moral rearmament” and gave “newbies” a food plan “evolved by the renowned Dr. Norman Joliffe” and “incorporated into the Weight Watchers program by a tall, blond patient, Jean Nidetch, who knew the battle could not be won alone.”<sup>39</sup>

Though Nidetch tirelessly boosted her program and gave speeches and classes almost daily, she could not keep up with the demand for more classes or the spread to new states. Weight Watchers International granted franchises to graduates of the program, select women who had the silhouette and the personality to rival Nidetch’s. One new member in a Los Angeles

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<sup>38</sup> Nidetch, *Ask Jean*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

franchise described a lecturer with “a routine that was only slightly less funny than a Joan Rivers night club act.”<sup>40</sup> That leader was Jean Seltzer, and she asked her congregants “how do you fill up a hole in your heart? With string beans? Never.” Though Sletzer believed that fat people ate because they were naturally more kind and sensitive than others, she promised them new rapture in self-abnegation, when she “rubbed her hands over her own lovely figure” and proclaimed “when you put your hands down here and get nice little bones, it’s a whole magic thing.”<sup>41</sup>

These women guided new members into the strict and unforgiving Weight Watchers program. Weight Watchers’ assertion of themselves as the ultimate expert in reduction was mirrored in their terminology- weekly gatherings were called “classes” and “meetings” interchangeably and meeting leaders were “lecturers.” Promotional pictures of meetings show the back of a dozen heads and a female lecturer pontificating in front of a wall of “success” pictures.<sup>42</sup> New members entered a world of dieting replete with its own language. They learned that they must always work toward a fixed and fleeting “goal” which was defined as “the ideal

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<sup>40</sup> “The Skinny on Weight Watchers” *Los Angeles Times* March 12, 1967.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> “One Meeting is Worth a Thousand Resolutions,” 1975. This Weight Watchers print advertisement also contained the tagline “you don’t have to be alone anymore.” Other print ads in the early 1970s promised that new members would “find plenty of friends” in group “classes” and that they would “feel the friendly, warm atmosphere” of Weight Watchers classes.



weight for a member according to Weight Watchers goal charts.” They learned that others in their life might not understand their draconian new diet rules, but such people were “civilians,” who did not “wage the war against compulsive eating” and even those who did struggle with food or weight wouldn’t understand if they weren’t in “The Program,” so “for Weight Watchers members, civilians might mean the rest of the world.”<sup>43</sup>



Figure 31. Weight Watchers "Class" Courtesy of Weight Watchers Magazine

Members learned that unlike such civilians their food choices should be based not on nutritional or calorie content, but the difference between “legal” and “illegal” foods, meaning food permitted or not on the program.<sup>44</sup>

This program moved across the nation via such franchises in the 1960s, most of them organized by graduates of New York clubs. The first Weight Watchers in LA was formed by Sylvia Levy in 1965, who lost 119 pounds in New York before moving west. She had “a

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<sup>43</sup> Nidetch, *Ask Jean*.

<sup>44</sup> 1965 Weight Watchers Instruction Manual.

missionary zeal about her work” and opened several chapters in and around LA.<sup>45</sup> Though Weight Watchers incorporated earlier ideas about the benefit of group support and talk therapy, they claimed that their unique program was the only path to success, telling prospective members that they could expect “some talking, some listening, and a Program that works.”<sup>46</sup>

The promise of success based on Nidetch’s image and claims of scientific expertise led to a swift growth nationwide via franchises. Chicago locations sprouted up in the late 1960s and early 1970s in churches, V.F.W. halls and hospitals, with three hundred and eighty weekly classes held by 1972.<sup>47</sup> This membership boom was helped by tapping into a growing demographic of men who wanted to slim down with increasing urgency.<sup>48</sup> Though Weight Watchers’ membership remained predominately female, the strict parameters of diet and meeting, the veneer of science, and the growing popularity of the group seemed to appeal to men in a way that T.O.P.S. and OA never did. The Chicago chapter of Weight Watchers, for instance, was founded by Richard Cooper, and newspaper articles about the group reported him in masculine terms- he was “slim and alert”, he “gives no quarter, allows no concessions, and makes no compromises.” To backsliders he “fires back concise and stinging rejoinders.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Lynn Lilliston, “Weight Watchers’ Vigil on the Way of All Flesh” *Los Angeles Times* April 18, 1967.

<sup>46</sup> 1971 Weight Watchers ad copy.

<sup>47</sup> “Weight Watchers Grow in Chicago” *Chicago Daily Defender* February 20, 1971.

<sup>48</sup> On the changing body standards for men see Jesse Berrett, “Feeding the Organization Man: Diet and Masculinity in Postwar America, *Journal of Social History* Vol 30 No 4 (Summer, 1997), 805-825. Berrett discusses evolving standards for straight men, for issues of size for men in gay communities see Nathaniel C. Pyle and Michael I. Loewey, “Double Stigma: Fat Men and Their Male Admirers” in *The Fat Studies Reader* Eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 143-150.

<sup>49</sup> “Weight Watchers Grow in Chicago.”

Weight Watchers' business model relied on high volume to meet high turnover. Studies presented at the 1979 International Congress on Obesity showed that Weight Watchers lacked the membership longevity of groups like T.O.P.S.<sup>50</sup> For this reason, Weight Watchers targeted women who were as little as ten pounds "overweight" by their charts. These women would have "success" in a matter of a few weeks or month, leave the group, and return the next year with the same ten pounds to lose. *Weight Watchers Magazine* and ads supported this cycle of yo-yo dieting by reminding women to always keep an eye on the scale, to buy and consume "diet" food, eventually including Weight Watchers branded convenience meals, as part of their constant surveillance of weight. This yo-yoing was also encouraged by the rigidity and deprivation of the program, which required dieters to follow a low-calorie diet, designed by an obesity clinic and meant to be undertaken with direct doctor supervision, not simply a meeting lecturer. This diet ensured short-term weight loss, but also a high rate of recidivism and quick regain of pounds when the dieter returned to an appropriate caloric intake. This pattern re-enforced the belief that the Weight Watchers program was the only solution, and any failure lay with the disobedience of the dieter.

### **"You Can't Deviate": Diet & Disobedience**

To create her first fail-proof and "medical" diet in the early 1960s, Nidetch used the unforgiving diet of the New York City Public Health Clinic for Obesity. She sold this plan as the best way to lose weight, and insisted that deviating from any minute aspect of it would result in failure or worse, weight gain. The Weight Watchers method strictly forbade calorie counting or

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<sup>50</sup> George A. Bray *Recent Advances in Obesity Research II: Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Congress on Obesity* (Westport, Conn.: Technomic Publications, 1979).

food substitutions. The diet required the dieter to eat fish *five* times a week and liver at least once. Within this plan a dieter had no authority to establish a healthy meal plan for herself or avoid foods she didn't like. Regional Weight Watchers cookbooks tried to solve this problem with recipes like "Hide the Liver Soup."<sup>51</sup> Nidetch answered hundreds of letters from women complaining about fish by replying "get used to it." Weight Watchers also forbade foods that are now considered "healthy": nuts, coconut, honey, and olive oil, for instance.<sup>52</sup>

A sample day of food included an egg, half a grapefruit, and a piece of dry bread for breakfast, four ounces of meat, another piece of dry bread and a vegetable for lunch, and six ounces of meat and two servings of undressed vegetables for dinner. Though dieters could not count calories, this comes out to about nine-hundred calories for the entire day.<sup>53</sup> This was not only a dangerous and unpleasant program, it was unforgiving as well. The prescribed diet served to re-mystify food by telling members that only these exact foods in this exact combination could produce weight-loss. A deeper understanding of nutrition, and an approach to food based on personal choice and autonomy was tantamount to disobedience.

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<sup>51</sup> *Pacific Northwest Cookbook*. Compiled by Lucie Anderson, Dietician for Weight Watchers of Greater Puget Sound, Inc., 1972.

<sup>52</sup> New nutrition information that made this diet obsolete did not, however, lessen Weight Watcher's claims of expertise. Contemporary Weight Watchers materials look back on this diet and compare it to the "flex points" of 2010 as a way to show that the brand has developed alongside scientific understandings of diet. It does not leave room to consider that the new model may prove as faulty as the old. For more on how changes to the diet suppress dieting dissent even as they enrich dieters' personal capabilities and understanding of their own bodies and nutrition, see "Foucault Goes to Weight Watchers".

<sup>53</sup> Jean Nidetch, *The Memoir of a Successful Loser: The Story of Weight Watchers* (New York: Weight Watchers Intl, 1972).

The rigidity of the plan and dieters' confusion over it are on display in letters to Jean Nidetch, in which the most frequent questions were about food substitution. The responses were firm, and Nidetch told watchers that "tuna cannot be counted as a fish meal if it is eaten at breakfast" and "if you wish to have your daily twelve-ounce bonus of tomato juice plus eight ounces of tomato juice at breakfast- a total of twenty ounces that day- then you must subtract one fruit."<sup>54</sup> In letter after letter Nidetch reminded the doubtful dieters that The Program (a phrase that was always capitalized) must be followed exactly, for "everything on it is the result of careful research into the problems of weight gain and loss."<sup>55</sup> Like the dictatorial salon managers of old, Nidetch found that the chief job of Weight Watchers weekly lecturers was to enforce the diet and discipline the dieter, to "browbeat them into eating everything the diet recommends."<sup>56</sup>

Calorie counting was "illegal" on the Program. Weighing one's self at home was illegal, as well, though weighing food was compulsory. When a member confessed that she weighed herself at home and saw that she lost five pounds, her good work was undone when a fight with her husband sent her into the arms of a candy bar. "I was upset" she repeated to her leader, who admonished her by suggesting that the gain was not due to emotional distress but a result of disobeying the program, and made her "promise to never weigh" herself at home again.<sup>57</sup> Weight Watchers strictly prohibited alcohol, and members confessed their boozing sins when the scale

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<sup>54</sup> "Ask Jean Nidetch" *Weight Watchers Magazine* December, 1968, and *Ask Jean: Questions to Jean Nidetch* New York: New American Library, 1975, 76-80.

<sup>55</sup> Nidetch, *Ask Jean*, 65.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> "Weight Watchers Grow in Chicago" *Chicago Daily Defender* February 20, 1971.

didn't budge. One member who gained 1¾ pounds after an evening cocktail told fellow members "this proves that you can't deviate."<sup>58</sup> Another member admitted that she had imbibed a "rum and coke, even though it was diet coke" and failed to lose that week. When she returned to the strictures of the diet, though, "she lost four pounds immediately."<sup>59</sup> When members weighed in with no loss, or even a quarter-pound gain, leaders were prone to scolding, telling members "you must have been doing something wrong."<sup>60</sup>

In 1971, Weight Watchers unveiled a "New Plan" based on a traditional exchange diet, one that grouped food into type and allowed dieters to make substitutions and eat more to their own tastes. It also allowed Weight Watchers to grow as a brand with extensive lines of cookbooks, recipe cards, and eventually their own line of convenience food. Like the original plan, though, these cookbooks and recipes did not include calories or nutritional values.<sup>61</sup> They did offer some gruesome food options, though, including popsicles that were just frozen black coffee and a "slender quencher" drink made from water, sherry, and beef bouillon.<sup>62</sup> This was

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<sup>58</sup> Lynn Lilliston, "Weight Watchers' Vigil on the Way of All Flesh" *Los Angeles Times* April 18, 1967.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> A "legal" liver loaf pate from *Weight Watchers New Plan Cookbook*, (New York: New American Library, 1978).

<sup>62</sup> "Slender Quenchers" Weight Watchers recipe card, 1974.

still a marked improvement from the original diet, and Weight Watchers-branded cookbooks marveled “who ever heard of a diet that lets you eat peanut butter, dried fruits, crispbreads, graham crackers, popcorn, sweet potatoes, liverwurst, and fruit-flavored gelatin?”<sup>63</sup> Who, indeed. Though the new plan offered a virtual cornucopia of foods and increased flexibility, it was still distressingly high in liver and low in calories; an average day from a



Figure 12. A “legal” liver loaf pate from *Weight Watchers New Plan Cookbook*

365-Day meal plan cookbook contained just under one thousand calories, at least two-hundred calories less than the bare minimum needed for a woman.<sup>64</sup>

Changing the plan from the inflexible original diet to an exchange plan pleased members, but it also played into Weight Watchers’ claim of nutritional expertise. Ads announced that the plan represented “the latest knowledge available about health, food, values, nutrition” and was the “most scientifically advanced” diet program available.<sup>65</sup> In fact, diet exchanges had been used for years by doctors and dieters alike, but branding it a “new” Weight Watchers program suggested that some fundamental understanding about nutrition had changed, and that Weight Watchers was uniquely prepared to disseminate that information. In the preface of an official

<sup>63</sup> *Weight Watchers New Plan Cookbook*.

<sup>64</sup> Calculated from Week 1, Day 2 of *Weight Watchers 365-Day Menu Cookbook*, New American Library; New York, 1981, 13.

<sup>65</sup> 1971 Weight Watchers Ad Copy, “The New Program”.

“new plan” cookbook, Nidetch told readers that there was only one nutritional “label” they needed to look for, “two simple words: Weight and Watchers.”<sup>66</sup> Though the cookbook mentioned Weight Watchers “classes,” Nidetch noted that their “label” could also be found on “cookbooks, magazines, camps for overweight youngsters, and an ever-increasing array of food products,” all of it “backed up by the expertise of highly skilled professionals.”<sup>67</sup>

**“Through Knowledge and Understanding”: The Weight Watchers Foundation and Scientific Authority**

In the 1960s, Weight Watchers established a vision of success based on Jean Nidetch’s glamorous performance of slenderness and the supposed scientific expertise that went into creating the original diet and eventually the “new plan.” To further their position as authorities on nutritional science, Weight Watchers, Inc. created the Weight Watchers Foundation. Founded in 1968, but not activated until 1971, the foundation sought to support scientific projects on metabolism, psychological, social, economic factors, and epidemiological studies on “the age group or economic groups that is most seriously affected by” overweight. They also sought to improve “our methods of educating the obese individual on how to lose weight and maintain the loss.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Jean Nidetch “A Note from Jean Nidetch” *Weight Watchers 365-Day Menu Cookbook*, New American Library: New York, 1981, v.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Weight Watchers Foundation Report, 1972, 3. Indiana University Ruth Lilly Special Collections.



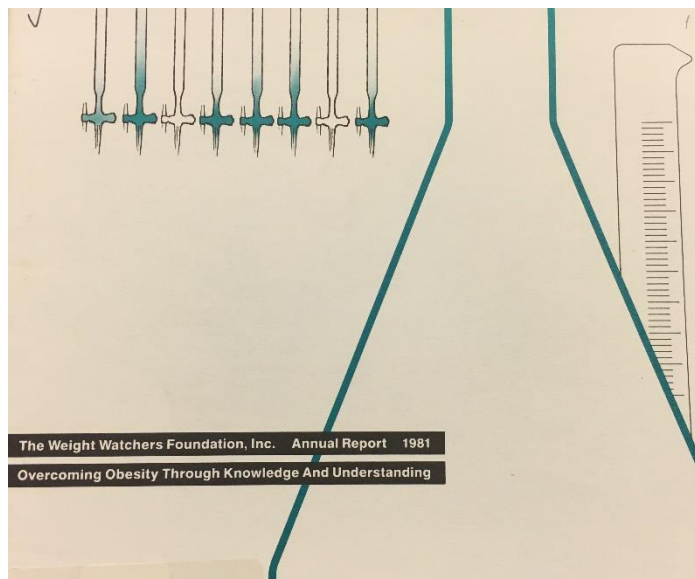


Figure 33. Weight Watchers Foundation Annual Report, Courtesy of the University of Indiana

The Foundation reports show that they encountered a variety of often contradictory scientific findings, few of which were applicable to Weight Watcher’s commercial program. Though some, like Dr. Albert J. Stunkard’s “Characteristics of Obese Persons as Revealed in Psychoanalysis” or “The Role of Mother in Establishment of Inappropriate Food Preferences and

Overeating in Kittens,” could be at least turned into useful magazine articles, suggesting that weight-loss was linked to being a good mother for humans, as well. A 1978 meeting of the Federation for Experimental Biology featured thirty papers on obesity, twelve of which were published by foundation grantees. It was a challenge, though, to find studies that supported Weight Watchers as a uniquely successful weight-loss strategy. Some funded research, like studies refuting the idea that protein-sparing low-calorie diets reduced feelings of hunger, were contrary to Weight Watchers’ core diet. Even worse were foundation-sponsored projects like that of Dr. David Levitsky, who received a ten-thousand dollar grant from Weight Watchers Foundation for his work in trying to discover the linkage between brain and fat. Unfortunately for Weight Watchers, Levitsky’s research suggested to him that the body has an “ideal weight”

and that the brain works to maintain that weight by tricking a person into eating more or less.<sup>69</sup> What mattered, though, was the existence of a scientific foundation that bore Weight Watchers name. Weight Watchers remained the largest benefactor of the foundation. By 1979 the business gave seventy-five thousand dollars to the foundation, with only a hundred dollars coming from outside donations.<sup>70</sup>

In the 1970s, the Foundation's slogan, "overcoming obesity through knowledge and understanding" was folded into Weight Watchers' mythmaking and marketing. Lecturers and Area Directors used the Foundation as a marketing tool and a way to assure new members that the Program was sound. Greater Kansas City Area Director Janet Stone told a reporter in 1973 that her local groups were "constantly applying new medical knowledge" acquired through the Foundation, and that she expected their work to lead to a "breakthrough in the treatment" or prevention of obesity within the decade. Stone believed that the Foundation established Weight Watchers as "the foremost scientifically based weight reduction program in the world."<sup>71</sup> The Foundation offered Stone, and lecturers everywhere, a tool to support their claims of unique expertise, and an assurance that the difficult diet they demanded was scientifically sound. This claim of scientific authority also placed any blame for failure squarely at the feet of the dieter.

The Foundation also offered a masculine authority to complement Nidetch's feminine figure. Stern warnings about the perils of obesity penned by male doctors featured heavily in the

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<sup>69</sup> Al Hansen, "Comfort for the Fat", *Daily Star*, August 13, 1973.

<sup>70</sup> Weight Watchers Foundation Report, 1979. Indiana University Ruth Lilly Special Collections.

<sup>71</sup> "Weight Watchers Celebrate 6<sup>th</sup> Year" *The Independence Examiner*, September 27, 1973.

introductory materials of Weight Watchers publications. These voices gave a veneer of science to the new commodity of wellness that was largely sold through aesthetics. The claims to scientific and medical expertise, laid by the foundation, were continued across Weight Watchers publications, especially their monthly magazine. The magazine will be discussed further below, but it is instructive to examine how its articles adopted a stance of scientific expertise and advice. This veneer of science was often in tension with the more aesthetic sensibilities of the magazine as a whole and the performance of Nidetch in particular.

In the forward of one collection of medical advice, Nidetch reminded readers to consider the health risks of obesity, not simply the aesthetic, noting that “somehow it seems we’re always saying, ‘wow look how fat you are. Lose that weight and you’ll look great!’ But this book has its emphasis in areas other than the cosmetic advantages of losing weight.”<sup>72</sup> Yet, in this and other publications, even medical advice almost always returned to the message that fat was an unsightly burden getting in the way of love, career, and happiness. Discussions of science in Weight Watchers publications often spoke of increasing expectations of medical capabilities. Though perhaps a fanciful invention, one article reported that a patient believed “medical science has done all kinds of wonderful things. My friends tell me they take pills and the fat just rolls off them.”<sup>73</sup> The reports warned against use of appetite-suppressing amphetamines, the use of which could turn a chubby teenager into a “nervous cripple.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Jean Nidetch, Introduction, *Medical Reports from Weight Watchers*. This book aggregated dozens of “medical” articles printed in *Weight Watchers Magazine* between 1968-1975. At the time of publication, the magazine had over two million subscribers.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

Within the pages of *Weight Watchers Magazine* Dr. Theodore Rubin, psychiatrist, frequent *Weight Watchers* contributor, and author of *Forever Thin* encouraged unhealthy deprivation, assuring readers that though “food deprivation makes many dieters edgy when they start a weight-loss regimen [...] if their goals are strong enough, the physical discomfort fades within a few days.”<sup>75</sup> A dieter’s testimony supported this conflation of deprivation and strength, recalling that after seventy-two hours of a dangerously low-calorie diet, she “became almost euphoric” and “reveled in the hunger pains” which signified to her that she was “losing the hateful fat.”<sup>76</sup> Of course, mainstream medical research did not support this advice. The Minnesota Starvation Experiment of 1944-1945, the complete findings of which were published in 1950, showed that semi-starvation produced acute emotional distress within days.<sup>77</sup>

The collection of medical articles did not, as promised, move far beyond aesthetic concerns. Multiple “reports” from psychiatrists and behavioral therapists discussed the fear of promiscuity felt by fat women getting thin, who felt “safer” fat, “because nobody is attracted to” them.<sup>78</sup> Discussions of weight and sexual activity began with the assumption that fat was unattractive and that “we all want to be admired by the opposite sex.”<sup>79</sup> Rather than offer

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<sup>75</sup> *Medical Reports from Weight Watchers Magazine*, 36.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>77</sup> Keys, A., Brozek, J., Henshel, A., Mickelson, O., & Taylor, H.L. *The Biology of Human Starvation: Vols. 1–2* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1950).

<sup>78</sup> *Medical Reports from Weight Watchers Magazine*, 38.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

anthropological or biological research on body size and sexual activity, medical advice from *Weight Watchers* began with assumptions like “we admit that the thin person is regarded as sexier” and that “overweight makes one a “less desirable sex partner.”<sup>80</sup>

Even worse, marriage advice presented by psychiatrists and psychologists in the pages of *Weight Watchers Magazine* offered a grim outlook for fat wives, women whose “otherwise pretty face” was “encased in layers of fat and her body has taken on the configuration of a giant pudding.”<sup>81</sup> Articles on marriage and divorce purportedly written by a psychologist spoke of a fat women whose husband worked long hours at a law firm, rarely made it home for dinner, and chronically neglected his wife, who spent her days cleaning, cooking, and caring for their two small children. Yet the fault of the divorce was placed squarely on Angela’s weight gain. Her husband’s behavior was not critiqued, her own aspirations beyond home-life not mentioned. Likewise, “Pat” a lively and fun woman thirty pounds overweight, married a shy and awkward computer analyst who quickly advanced his career while Pat stayed home. When he discovered fifteen years later that Pat “had failed to keep up with him socially, culturally, and intellectually” he embarked on an affair with a younger co-worker.<sup>82</sup> Again, the obvious moral failings of an unfaithful partner or the gender inequity that kept Pat stunted were not considered; Pat should have lost the weight and kept her man. In the reverse situation of a slender wife and chubby husband the criticisms were still placed at the feet of Linda, who didn’t accept her husband, lost

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 69-70.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>82</sup> *Medical Reports from Weight Watchers Magazine*, 82.

respect for him, and turned away from him in bed, which made him “feel less of a man” and doubt his desirability.<sup>83</sup> The only husband criticized was a mean and miserly “Fred” who failed to provide for his wife and three children. When “Madge” lost 35 pounds, though, she was able to find a job to support herself and the confidence to announce to Fred that she and the children were leaving.<sup>84</sup> The message here was clear: weight gain ruins happy marriages and weight-loss saves them. There was no option for a fat woman to have a happy partnership. This role of expertise defining how body size impacted personal identity was made possible through Weight Watchers’ expensive reach. An important component of that reach was *Weight Watchers Magazine*; with two million subscribers by 1975 it carried the brand message far beyond the walls of the diet group meeting room.

#### **A “Magazine for Attractive People”: Weight Loss as Middle-Class Lifestyle**

The image of Jean Nidetch as an all-knowing success story and the establishment of Weight Watchers as scientifically-girded experts was further encouraged by *Weight Watchers Magazine* beginning in 1968. From its founding through the 1980s, the publication developed into a lifestyle magazine that commodified and sold wellness as a personal identity. The magazine encouraged an entire lifestyle of reduction with a paradoxical premise that dieting was a 24/7 ordeal in which emerging professional women had “no time” to diet. This paradox was solved, of course, by putting the personal project of reduction into the hands of the experts: Weight Watchers. The magazine supported this endeavor by constantly reminding readers of the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 82.



full-color ad for Sugar Free Dr. Pepper showed a woman standing in front of a mirror in a bikini; this rather slender model was featured with her stomach pushed out, while her mirror-self has sucked it in. Despite the obvious chicanery here- the difference was literally one of taking a breath or letting it out- the ad copy instructed readers to “keep sipping” this diet soda, “and pretty soon you’ll start looking better and better too.”<sup>86</sup>

Early issues confined small before and after pictures to the “Ask Jean Nidetch” letter bag, but in a sense every page served as a before and after. Articles on the grim lives and looks of the overweight were juxtaposed with smiling slender women in advertisements and fashion spreads. The before and after image was a fantasy on every page, only occasionally made explicit by featuring an actual “success” story, like the January 1969 larger spread about a woman who lost 206 pounds and “gained...a fiancé.”<sup>87</sup> These before and afters stressed the grim reality of the before, describing a woman as “a mountainous 351 pounds” who “206 pounds later” is revealed to have “a pretty face that was there all the time.”<sup>88</sup> Not only does this description imagine weight as a unit of time, it suggests that an inner beauty is buried inside all fat readers.

The message that losing weight was the only avenue to happiness in love was not accepted by all readers. In 1971 Nidetch replied to a letter from a fat happy woman, who begged that she stop her “monotonous” message of “look at that ugly tub, now here she is thin and

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<sup>86</sup> Diet Shasta Ad, “The Minimum You. Even the Midi Demands It”, 1971. Sugar Free Dr. Pepper Ad, “Sugar Free Dr. Pepper will taste even better after you try on last year’s bathing suit”, 1971.

<sup>87</sup> “Ann Thoman-200 Pounds= Mrs. Charles Holland” *Weight Watchers Magazine* January, 1969.

<sup>88</sup> November 1969 *Weight Watchers Magazine* article reprinted in *Ask Jean*, 18.



happy, and, oh, yes, everything's changed- she's going to be married soon."<sup>89</sup> *Weight Watchers* published this letter with Nidetch's reply that she found it "difficult to believe you mean what you are saying. I don't think fat is beautiful- the word itself is unattractive. Fat people don't look good, don't move well, and don't, as a rule, feels as well as they are entitled to." Nidetch went on to say that she believed the letter-writer would change her tune when she is "able to admit that thin is beautiful."<sup>90</sup> Nidetch was often the most strident voice against remaining fat and happy. In another letter, Nidetch admits that there is prejudice against fat people but though "any kind of prejudice is wrong," believes that "this is something the person who is being prejudiced against can and should do something about."<sup>91</sup> In fact, women should not only attempt to lose weight at all costs, they needed to guard against weight gain vigilantly. A letter between Nidetch and a teenage girl indicates the devastating rigor with which women were expected to surveille their bodies from a very young age. This particular fifteen-year old girl wrote with concern that she was 120 pounds, not the 116 pounds she "should weigh." Rather than acknowledge her growing and changing body, or assure her that she was well within a healthy weight range, Nidetch wrote back "I want to congratulate you for thinking about your being overweight, though the pounds involved are still small in number." She further instructed the girl to "keep your eye on the scale" and use "recipes from *Weight Watchers Magazine* to take off that four pounds."<sup>92</sup> This exchange

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>91</sup> *Ask Jean*, 25.

<sup>92</sup> *Ask Jean*, 85.

displays not only the unforgivingly rigid body standards women faced, but how *Weight Watchers* both enforced those standards and used them to create a never-ending diet quest in which their brand was a constant companion.

Nidetch was no more kind to women facing divorce, like the writer who wondered if her husband was less attentive because she's gained weight. Nidetch told her "it could well be that the fear of losing your husband's interest will finally get you to do something about your weight. Certainly, it should. Your husband must be like most men who prefer a wife who looks her best." She added that the letter-writer "cannot be as attractive" as she "should be."<sup>93</sup> The most disheartening advice, though, went to a woman who was sexually assaulted at knifepoint, which resulted in her having an abortion and gaining weight as she ate to soothe her feelings of guilt. Nidetch expressed sympathy but told her firmly that it was "necessary to forget" the assault and that she must "work on putting this whole miserable situation out of your mind" because "your best bet, your only bet, is to lose all the weight and start over again." Nidetch suggested, even, that while the weight gain was understandable, a refusal to focus on weight-loss was tantamount to sin, telling the poor woman that "you were the victim, but you are making yourself into the villain by your own attitude."<sup>94</sup>

*Weight Watchers Magazine* shows an evolving focus on young, single women as a prime demographic. Though early features refer to members as "the prototypes of the young suburban matron" and a September 1968 cover aimed at men showed a fedora and a briefcase next to a

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 78.

deliciously legal breakfast, the early issues also hint at a generation of young women desperate to be thin. In 1968 the magazine told a story about “the raincoat brigade” and a young woman named Cindy who was “maybe 250 pounds who knows.” Cindy reported that she “belong[ed] to a minority group no one ever talks about” and faced economic disadvantages because of it, telling readers that “sometimes even the good jobs...are impossible.”<sup>95</sup> The article was written by Dr. Morton B. Glenn, president of the American college of nutrition, and presented as a sympathetic account of his patients, who he called “my raincoat brigade because they are basically so embarrassed about their figures that they hide in the hottest weather in raincoats.”<sup>96</sup> Morton found that young single women were the most likely to diet, and believed it was because “it’s the one time in their lives that they’re willing to do the most about looking their very best.”<sup>97</sup>

*Weight Watchers Magazine* often focused on issues of sex and love, juxtaposing ideas about romance and intimacy with colorful picture of food to link the two in readers’ minds. For instance, a March 1970 article “obesity and your sex life” was featured on the cover next to a picture of spaghetti and meatballs. The article, by Evelyn Jacobs was not about having great sex while fat, but about how you might be using fat and food to hide from sex. She wrote that “overeating may be used as part of a defense against having to deal with the opposite sex.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Morton B. Glenn “The Raincoat Brigade” *Weight Watchers Magazine* (December, 1968), 50.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Evelyn Jacobs, “Obesity and Your Sex Life” *Weight Watchers Magazine*, March 1970, 41.

Over the 1970s, sex was a frequent topic, and it shifted to focus on sexual satisfaction but also displayed a pre-Cosmo preoccupation with sexually pleasing men.<sup>99</sup> By 1979, the magazine was printing advice from a “woman therapist” tackling issues of “Love, Sex, Passion, and Weight Loss,” “sex fantasies: what they reveal” and asking readers if they were “sexually fulfilled?”

Not only was weight loss the key to love and happiness, it was the key to career success, as well. Weight Watchers emerged as a dominant brand as women’s involvement in the corporate white collar world grew.<sup>100</sup> Women had to contend with hiring and promotions stunted by sexism, a structural concern that Weight Watchers elided by focusing on women’s body size as the largest impediment to the career she wanted. In December 1968, an

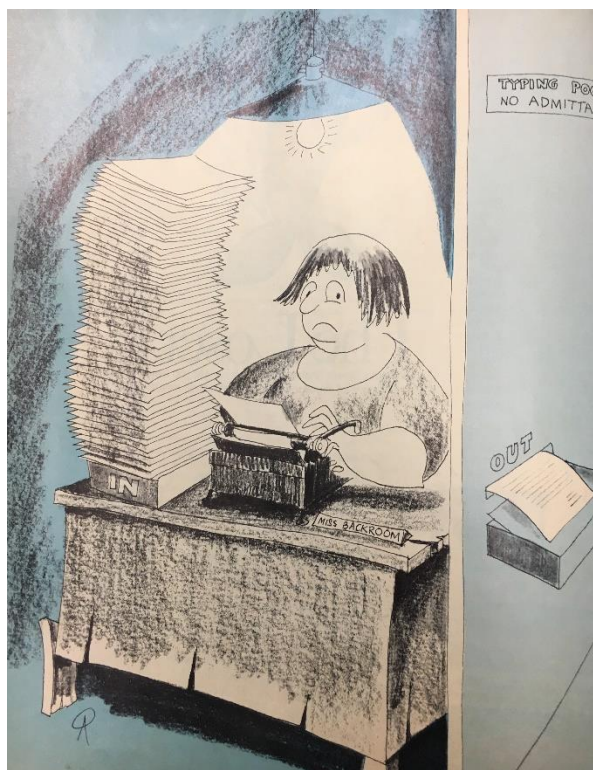


Figure 35. "Miss Backroom" courtesy of *Weight Watchers Magazine*

article warned white-collar working women that fat women would forever be a “Miss

<sup>99</sup> "What makes a woman a great lover? Surprising answers from men!" *Weight Watchers Magazine*, September, 1979. The answers this article offered were not actually surprising, as young men demanded “loyalty, ability to accept a man as he is, ability to understand and respect the man, sensitivity to male needs.” Furthermore, “a good lover must be totally sensitive to her man's needs, keeping in mind his desires and temperament and the conditions of lovemaking” said a 21-year-old college student.

<sup>100</sup> See Julia Kirk Blackwelder *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997) and Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Incorporating Women: A History of Women and Business in the United States* (New York: Twayne, 1998).

Backroom” because “no executive wants a fat girl working for him” and that “her fat is a handicap.”<sup>101</sup> This conversation was continued the next month, comparing plump Miss Backroom vs a svelte Miss Upfront, and noting that “for a fat girl, finding a job- any kind of job- is hell.” This article also claimed to have talked to a man who turned a “Miss Backroom” away, declaring that “the only time a fat girl can get a secretarial job is when the boss’s wife does the hiring.”<sup>102</sup> On fat employees, another particularly judgmental reader wrote that “fat women” “lacked drive and enthusiasm to carry a project through to completion.” They were “easily distracted, lacked initiative and energy,” were “generally a few minutes late,” and of course, “lunches were very big deals.”<sup>103</sup> Indeed, the magazine often published “quotes” from vague masculine “sources” who all encouraged weight loss as a way to get ahead in business.

#### **“This Isn’t Dieting, It’s Living!” Weight Watchers and the Celebrity Endorsement**

Nidetch was the first Weight Watcher “success” story, and their first celebrity, as well. As Nidetch aged and regained, lost, and regained weight, the role of paid celebrity endorser grew. In August of 1975, *Weight Watchers Magazine* featured a slimmed-down playboy bunny on their cover. Though this move resulted in some angry letters, the feature was a hit, overall. The following issue adopted a new subtitle- “magazine for attractive people” and kicked off a bevy of cover-girls to replace the usual pictures of “legal” foods. In October, the cover featured a fashion model who “traded fat for fame,” and the lead article, “for the working woman: you can

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<sup>101</sup> “Obesity and Your Job” *Weight Watchers Magazine* December, 1968.

<sup>102</sup> “Obesity and Your Job: Being Fat Does it Hurt Your Earning Power?” *Weight Watchers Magazine* January, 1969, 28.

<sup>103</sup> Reprinted in *Ask Jean*, 26.

create success!” This blend of beauty, career, and slenderness marked a turn in the magazine and the brand that adopted new popular concerns like second-wave feminism and pointed them back to weight. Articles advised women looking for a career boost to “join a consciousness-raising group, learn to think about and accept your femininity in stimulating new ways. Like a therapy group, this will comfort you with the knowledge that you are not alone with your feelings of sexual inadequacy or social inexperience.”<sup>104</sup> This blend of celebrity, sex, and career continued through the 1970s, with covers of Linda Carter, Shirley McClain, Astronaut Rhea Seddon, a ballerina, a ski champion, a tennis star, and a lady chemist.

This shift was complemented by advice for women working late, and engaged in the issues of pop feminism with articles asking “Is the Pill Fattening?” “Is Divorce Fattening?” and “Is College Fattening?” as well as, of course, “The Best Way to Tell a Friend ‘You’re Too Fat’.” The answer to all of these quandaries, of course, was that yes these things were fattening but Weight Watchers was there to help. A 1977 ad showed a slim woman in a pantsuit, looking sternly at the camera with the copy “I take my nutrition seriously. Just as Weight Watchers does.” The copy adds that “because sometimes I’m too busy to worry about eating right, much less prepare a meal [Weight Watchers] has done the planning and preparation I don’t have time for.” It added that these meals passed “the rigid requirements of Weight Watchers nutritional staff.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Barbara Ribakove, “For the Working Woman: You Can Create Success” *Weight Watchers Magazine for Attractive People*, October 1975, 19.

<sup>105</sup> *Weight Watchers Magazine for Attractive People* April, 1977.

The late 1970s was also the time that Weight Watchers adopted a new slogan: “The Authority”. Shifting the locus of authority and expertise from the person of Jean Nidetch to the



Figure 36. 1985 Lynn Redgrave Ad, courtesy of *Weight Watchers Magazine*

brand was critical, as there was no guarantee that Nidetch would remain slim, and indeed she did not. But following shifting scientific ideas about diet, nutrition, and fat, and adopting a revolving door of celebrity endorsers maintained an image of knowledge and success for the larger Weight Watchers brand. Celebrity endorsement emerged at a time when Weight Watchers was facing increasing competition from brands like Slim Fast, and when dieters were turning away from the idea of group help to focus on convenience food as the solution. By the early 1970s, Weight Watchers

was offering a line of pre-packaged low-cal food “for people who enjoy eating but can’t afford to look like it.”<sup>106</sup> Heinz Co bought Weight Watchers in 1978 for 71 million dollars, and embarked on an extended and enduring line of frozen and convenience Weight Watchers branded foods. Part of a widespread ad campaign to push Weight Watchers packaged foods, British Actress Lynn Redgrave was the first official Weight Watchers celebrity endorser in 1984. Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York brought a royal glamour to the role in 1997, and again in 2015, fighting against the cruel nickname “the Duchess of Pork.” Charles Barkley was the first male celebrity to endorse Weight Watchers in 2011, an ad campaign which used a blend of

<sup>106</sup> Ad for Weight Watchers Food Line, May 1973.

transphobia and misogyny to tell viewers they could “lose like a man” over an image of Barkley in a Nidetch-esque evening gown. Redgrave first set the tone for these endorsers, portraying Weight Watchers as an all-encompassing “lifestyle” change. She was “an almost fanatical” evangelizer for the program, especially the new line of branded frozen food.<sup>107</sup> “Pie,” she intoned at the camera, announcing that Weight Watchers had made dessert “legal” again with its line of food. In every commercial she ended by tearing off a shapeless red shift to reveal her slender figure with a tightly-cinched waist as she announced “this isn’t dieting, this is living.”<sup>108</sup>

The message that Weight Watchers wasn’t dieting, but instead was “living” illustrates the successful creation of a brand by the 1980s. Weight Watchers represents an early commodification of “wellness” with a broad variety of products to complement and even supplant the notion of weekly meetings. The current commodification of “fat” bodies in the form of a fifty-billion dollar diet industry, including popular reality shows like *The Biggest Loser* is built on the success of Weight Watchers as a brand. Yet the examination of Weight Watchers as a specifically and historically constructed brand demands a critique of the commodification of “wellness” that goes beyond dieting and questions the current debate between health as a personal responsibility and not a human right.

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<sup>107</sup> Kim Foltz, “The Media Business: Advertising ‘Georgy Girl’ Then and Now in Weight Watchers Spots *The New York Times* August 31, 1990.

<sup>108</sup> 1984 Weight Watchers Commercial.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### “WE’RE HERE, WE’RE SPHERE”: FAT LIBERATION AND THE RADICALIZATION OF FAT BODIES

I’m in Hartford Connecticut in early January, visiting the Mayer Collection of Fat Liberation at UConn. It’s very cold, campus is deserted, and there’s not much to do. There is TV at the hotel, though, and I end up watching *My 600-lb Life* on TLC. It’s the season premier: a two hour revel in close-up shots of fat bodies overlaid with tremulous voices telling viewers they feel “like a monster,” “not even human,” and “disgusting,” narrative framing which constructs the fat body as extraordinary.<sup>1</sup> A marathon follows the premier, and I watch episode after episode. It’s the fat woman at the circus, with the addition of bloody and graphic scenes of bariatric surgery, copious close-ups of the numbers on a scale, and slow-motion shots of food going into mouths. Every episode features a fat body bathing. A fat body going to the bathroom. A fat body getting into a car. Cameras follow fat people shopping, and catch the looks of horror, mirth, and disgust they elicit in public. Yet every commercial break offers a jarring escape from this spectacle of shame, announcing fresh new episodes of *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* where fat-acceptance activist Whitney Way-Thore lifts weights, confronts a pregnancy scare, wins a dance contest, and finds new love with another woman. *MBFFL* proudly proclaims the liveability of fat bodies, and

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars of fat studies have investigated these portrayals. Heather Lang positions *My 600 lb-Life* within the history of the freakshow, and suggests that the contemporary “medical documentary” pathologizes the fat body while simultaneously claiming it as a “site of reclamation”. Likewise, Lauren Bosc argues that framing and narrative of the show create a “postmodern freakshow” of fatness. Lang, “Fatness and Freakery: The Visual Rhetorical Construction of ‘Obesity’.” Bosc, “Gazing Upon the Freak: The Spectacle of Fatness in *My 600-lb Life* and *Half Ton Killer*.” Presentations at the Popular Culture/American Culture Association’s National Conference, New Orleans, April 2015.

rejects the compulsory slenderness of *My 600-Lb Life*. Do I have to tell you which has higher ratings? That these two shows exist side-by-side signals evolving notions of fatness, with a nod to the “body positivity” movement and “health at every size.”<sup>2</sup> TLC, by showing a vivacious “small fat” next to the strident tone of death for those deemed “really fat” shifts the parameters of what is an acceptably fat body while maintaining the explicit horror of fatness itself. On the surface, *MBFFL* may seem like a banner of fat liberation, but exploring the fat liberation movement of the 1970s and ‘80s exposes it as fat lib lite.

In the early 1970s, a group of women, small in number but weighty in impact, created the

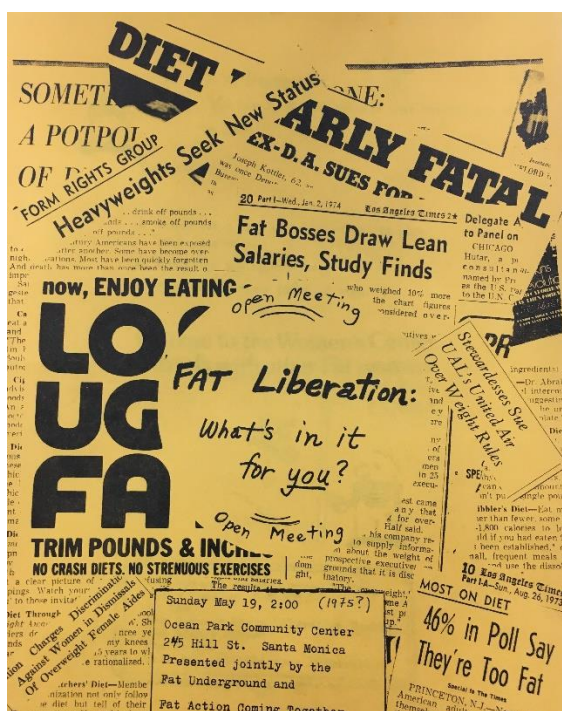


Figure 37. Fat Liberation Flier, Courtesy of the Vivian Mayer Collection

fat liberation movement. Evolving alongside feminist consciousness-raising collectives, radical therapy groups, and the women’s health movement, a vocal contingent of activists, many of them lesbians, articulated the intersection of sexism and sizeism in their lives. These women worked not only against the medical establishment and the diet industry, but against their fellow feminists who replicated anti-fat ideologies and practices. Fat liberationists in the 1970s and early 1980s found themselves caught between political feminists

<sup>2</sup> Health at every size, or HAES, is a grassroots movement which resists the connection between fat and illness through body acceptance, approaching healthy behaviors without linking them to weight loss, eating based on internal cues, and enjoying movement and exercise in larger bodies. For more see Deb Burgard, “What is ‘Health at Every Size?’” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, Eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009) 41-53.

ambivalent or antipathetic to fat women and a-political pro-fat groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Americans.

Groups like Fat Underground (F.U.), Fat Avengers, and the Fat Liberation Front formed communities around body size that explicitly rejected reduction in any form and embraced a fat-feminist identity in opposition to compulsory slenderness. To this end, fat liberationists espoused a philosophy of fatness which rejected all previous notions of expertise: that of doctors, the diet industry, and the government. Fat liberation spent considerable energy working against these specific foes: doctors, psychiatrists, the diet industry, the FDA, and insurance companies. In rejecting established, patriarchal experts, fat liberationists built on the work of the women's health movement, but faced considerable pushback from their fellow (often thin) feminists. In locating allies, fat activists worked to radicalize groups like the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (NAAFA) by making the organization more welcoming to lesbians and feminists and to fatten up radical groups like the Boston Women's Health Collective by making women's health more welcoming to fat women.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In understanding the different purposes of NAAFA and Fat Liberation, sociologist Mary Bernstein's work on queer identities is instructive. Using her schema and applying it to these groups, it is apparent that NAAFA created an "identity for education" whose aims were "challenging how dominant cultures perceive stigmatized individuals and communities in an attempt to gain legitimacy" while Fat Liberation created an "identity for critique" and that such an identity "confront[ed] the values, categories, and practices of the dominant culture." Mary Bernstein, *Celebration and suppression: the strategic uses of identity by lesbian and gay movement*, 1997.

Much of fat-libbers' activism focused on de-mystifying weight and wellness. In creating a positive fat identity, fat liberationists also claimed their rights of citizenship in public spaces. They used space as a locus of activism, refusing to be ashamed of "taking up space" with fat female bodies. They "flaunted" their fat bodies, and they created performances which celebrated the fat female body in motion.<sup>4</sup> A network of women created this disparate movement and communicated through letters, radio shows, articles in feminist and lesbian-feminists publications, and performance art. Fat liberation was a coastal

movement of the 1970s and early 80s, coordinated by Judy Freespirit and Fat Underground (FU) in the west and Aldebaran and the Fat Liberation Front (FLF) in the east.<sup>5</sup>

Freespirit and Aldebaran met in 1972 at an LA consciousness-raising group and became interested in radical therapy, a "movement that accused traditional psychiatrists of 'cultural mystification' and teaching individuals to adjust to social oppression rather than showing them



Figure 38. Fat Lip Flier, Courtesy of UCLA

<sup>4</sup> "Flaunting" is a concept used in queer studies to complement the notion of "coming out." Flaunting reflects an intentional rejection of, in this case, compulsory slenderness and/or fat shame. "Flaunting" fatness includes behaviors like talking about/enjoying food publicly, wearing form-fitting or brightly-colored clothes, and referring to oneself as "fat" without negative connotations.

<sup>5</sup> Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran chose these names for themselves. Freespirit's papers are archived under that name, while Aldebaran's are archived under her birth name of Vivian Mayer. Both women will be referred to by their chosen names throughout.

how to recognize that oppression and even oppose it.”<sup>6</sup> Feminist therapy worked in opposition to sexism, and acknowledged oppression as the root of their patient’s distress. Feminist therapists resisted institutionalization and diagnoses of women, including diagnoses of “eating disorders.”<sup>7</sup> Fat libbers adopted these methods and further explicitly and militantly rejected the pathologising of fat women and the diet industry. Miriam Cantor, an early fat libber in Los Angeles who had rejected patriarchal *beauty* standards but not *size* standards recalled that “one day while at Weight Watchers, only ten pounds from her goal weight, she saw a connection between the pressure to be beautiful and the pressure to be thin. She walked out.”<sup>8</sup> Fat-libbers took this anti-diet message to doctors, nutritionists, and even to universities that accredited medical professionals, like when F.U. “marched into” a UCLA class on weight loss “with our overalls and flannel shirts and [...] took over the podium and read the [Fat Liberation] Manifesto and left.”<sup>9</sup> Rejecting compulsory slenderness and fat temporality, F.U. and other liberation groups explicitly re-politicized female fatness, and viewed all reduction as oppression. The proceedings of the First Feminist Fat Activists’ Working Meeting in 1980 list their goals and priorities as: “stop dieting for everyone,” “shut down compulsive eating groups,” “expose profiteering off our bodies,” “expose and destroy weight watchers,” and “burn Jean Nidetch in effigy.”<sup>10</sup>

Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran’s papers are a rich source describing the evolution of fat liberation, the formation of a fat-feminist community and identity, and the negotiations within

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<sup>6</sup> Greta Rensenbrink, 217.

<sup>7</sup> Burstow, xi.

<sup>8</sup> Rensenbrink, 216

<sup>9</sup> Judy Freespirit, from an interview with Greta Rensenbrink, quoted in “Fat’s No Four-Letter Word”, 219.

<sup>10</sup> “Proceedings of the First Fat Feminist Activists’ Working Meeting April 18-20, New Haven Connecticut” Vivian Mayer Collection, University of Connecticut Special Collections, 12.

that community, as well as the tactics used to oppose fat oppression of women. These sources illuminate the struggle fat liberationists faced against the mainstream medical and psychiatric establishment in wresting authority away from doctors and returning it to fat women. They also show the centrality of public presence and public performance in the creation of a fat identity. A more complicated story of fat liberation can also be seen in the pages of feminist publications, like lesbian-feminist news journal *Off Our Backs* and the revolutionary text of the women's health movement *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. Combined with the records and letters of Freespirit and Aldebaran, a story emerges of the struggle fat liberationists faced within the wider feminist and lesbian-feminist community. Fat liberationists faced pushback from what they saw as anti-fat "liberal" feminists, and these conversations happened in private and in public.

Fat is a relatively new topic of consideration for scholars. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay's foundational *The Fat Studies Reader* brought together fat activists and academics in 2009. This collection established the emerging interdisciplinary field of fat studies with essays on fatness and medicine, fatness and social inequality, and fatness in popular culture. Elena Levy-Navarro, one of the few historians involved with the project, suggests a paradigm for creating a fat history in her essay "Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go from Here?" Levy-Navarro insists that fat studies must make a historical turn in order to create "an alternative to what sometimes seems an all-to oppressive present."<sup>11</sup> She suggests that fat historians look to queer history as a model for critiquing oppressive normativity. Building on Levy-Navarro, Jackie Wykes asks "is fat queer?" in her 2014 introduction to *Queering Fat*

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<sup>11</sup> Elena Levy-Navarro "Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go From Here?" in *The Fat Studies Reader*, 15.

*Embodiment*. Wykes argues that “compulsive heterosexuality and compulsive thinness are mutually constitutive.”<sup>12</sup> Using the tools of queer theory, these historians examine fat performativity, fatness and the “closet,” and the spatial aspects of “orientation,” all of which inform the lived fat experience in ways that align them with “queerness.”<sup>13</sup> Sociologists Abigail C. Saguy and Anna Ward also explicate the association of fatness with queer theory in their 2011 article “Coming Out as Fat,” in which they trace the use of the schema of “coming out” which demands that fat bodies be seen as “valuable, not pathological” and in which coming out is a precursor to “claiming the rights of citizenship.”<sup>14</sup> Saguy and Ward’s work can help historians conceptualize the fat liberation movement and its members’ “coming out” as celebrating their body size, and refuting any notions that they are trying to be thin. For fat liberationists, unlike many (but not all) LGBTQ people, coming out is not “disclosing, but affirming” and reclaiming the word fat as a positive identity.<sup>15</sup>

Few historians, however, have taken up the task set by Levy-Navarro and examined the fat liberation movement. A notable exception is Greta Rensenbrink’s 2012 essay in *Fat History* “‘Fat’s No Four-Letter Word’: Fat Feminism and Identity Politics in the 1970s and 1980s.” Rensenbrink notes that “fat feminism crested in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the context of grassroots feminist movements.”<sup>16</sup> In the broader milieu of liberation activism,

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<sup>12</sup> Jackie Wykes “Introduction: Why Queering Fat Embodiment?” in *Queering Fat Embodiment* Ed Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Wykes, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Abigail C. Saguy and Anna Ward, “Coming Out as Fat: Rethinking Stigma” *Social Psychology Quarterly* Vol 74 No 1 (March, 2011), 56.

<sup>15</sup> Saguy and Ward, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Rensenbrink, 213.

Rensenbrink argues that the fat liberation movement “created a radical fat feminist identity politics that challenged the larger culture to redefine fat from a sign of sickness and failure to a sign of power, beauty, and resistance.”<sup>17</sup> Rensenbrink asserts that “like the larger women’s movement from which it drew, fat feminism was initially dominated by white, middle-class women with histories of activism in the civil rights and antiwar movements.”<sup>18</sup> This description ignores several important realities of the early fat liberation movement: most of its founders, including Judy Freespirit, Aldebaran, and Judith Stein, were Jewish and lesbian or queer. They did participate in civil-rights activism, but they also emerged out of radical therapy and various types of diet groups (which they rejected, ultimately). Furthermore, though many groups developed alongside consciousness-raising groups, there was immediate and long-lasting conflict between fat feminists and thin. Rensenbrink describes the movement as a “feminist revolt against conventional standards of acceptability” but it was a specifically *fat* feminist revolt, and one that was explicitly rejected by many non-fat feminists. Rensenbrink acknowledges that by the middle of the 1970s “fat feminism still existed very much on the fringes of even feminist politics” but does not analyze this as a continuation of a longer fatphobia within feminism.<sup>19</sup>

Rensenbrink examines the mutability and possible limits of a fat identity which “exposed some of the problems inherent in a simple understanding of the relationship of bodies to biology, culture, and the self.”<sup>20</sup> Much of the tension over fat bodies and identity was felt in the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 214.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Rensenbrink, 219.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 215.



relationship between fat liberationists and the women's health movement. Rensenbrink describes their early work as "influenced by the Women's Health Movement" which elides the more complicated and discursive relationship between fat liberation and proponents of women's health.<sup>21</sup> It also neglects the much longer relationship between fat women and the medical establishment.

Activist-scholar Charlotte Cooper is at the vanguard of the evolving field of Fat Studies, which as she notes has "no need to justify its presence."<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, fat studies has worked hard to establish itself as a broad interdisciplinary field which acknowledges the political nature of fat bodies. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay announced the arrival of fat to the academy with the *Fat Studies Reader* and in 2012 launched *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*. Furthering the field, the journal in 2012 announced that "fat studies is a field of scholarship that critically examines societal attitudes about body weight and appearance, and that advocates equality for all people with respect to body size."<sup>23</sup> This inaugural essay attributes Marilyn Wann as one of the first activists to use the term, when she wrote that "a fat studies approach offers no opposition to the simple fact of human weight diversity, but instead looks at what people and societies make of this reality."<sup>24</sup> Tracing the history of the movement, Rothblum notes the emergence of fat activism with Freespirit and Aldebaran, but argues that the fat activism, or "size-acceptance" movement of the 1980s and

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>22</sup> Charlotte Cooper, *Fat Activism* (London: HammerOn Press, 2016), 6.

<sup>23</sup> Esther D. Rothblum, "Why a Journal on Fat Studies?" *Fat Studies* vol 1 no 1 (2012), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Marilyn Wann, "Fat Studies: An Invitation to Revolution" in *The Fat Studies Reader* ed. E.D. Rothblum and S. Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), x.

'90s was mostly concerned with the health aspects of fatness and dieting. She sees a change toward a more interdisciplinary approach that incorporates literature, cultural studies, and theater. Though fat studies is an expanding field, this chronology neglects the cultural work done by activists continually from the 1970s on. In fact, attempting to distinguish activists from scholars is a futile exercise in the field, as most of the founding fat-libbers were themselves academics and approached the subject with a scholarly rigor and critique, even as they worked out their own lived experiences with fat.

This blend of academic activism is on display in Cooper's 2016 *Fat Activism*. With this work, Cooper considers how fat people negotiate and resist oppression to make "livable lives" for themselves. Cooper is broadly critical of contemporary notions of "body positivity" for placing the onus of change on individual fat people.<sup>25</sup> Body positivity is also rooted in consumption and easily co-opted, as evidenced by a fresh wave of "body positive" messages from Dove and Lane Bryant. Cooper offers the figure of the "killjoy" instead, the person who "won't go along with a compulsory happiness within an oppressive system."<sup>26</sup> This killjoy is located in contemporary activism but also in the history of a fat liberation movement which critiqued broader patriarchy and imperialism. Conducting interviews with fat liberationists, Cooper uncovers the "hidden work" of community-building in fat activism. She finds that many fat activists first encountered the community in public performances of fat dance, theater, and poetry. These performances functioned as a place to discover and create personal fat identities. A

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<sup>25</sup> Cooper, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Cooper uses Eve Kosofsky's essay "Axiomatic" in *Queer Theory* edited by Iain Morland and Annabelle Wilcox (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 81-95.

fat-libber going by the pseudonym Verity, for instance, recalled hearing Judith Stein reading poetry in the basement of a feminist bookshop as her first encounter with a “consciously fat woman.”<sup>27</sup> Verity recalled that “Judith made that space for [her]” by creating such “spaces of micro fat activism.”<sup>28</sup>

The interdisciplinary and political nature of this field means significant involvement with non-academic activists and activist academics. Much of the work of fat liberation, and the scholarship of fat studies, involves a critical assessment of the prevailing anti-obesity medical culture and locating schema by which to reclaim authority and autonomy for fat bodies. In this way, fat liberation is in conversation with the ongoing women’s health movement. The history of the Women’s Health Movement, like that of fat liberation, is written by participant activists. In *Into Our Own Hands: The Women’s Health Movement in the United States, 1969-1990* Sandra Morgan recalls her ethnographic work at a women’s clinic from 1977-1979. In that work, Morgan experienced a microcosm of the movement, as she “learned what it meant for women to work together without bosses or professional or male authority figures to act, to create change.”<sup>29</sup> She also experienced “political divisions, conflict between high ideals and daily realities” and “burnout.”<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, Morgan notes that groups like these affected a fundamental shift in medical care for women, increased knowledge and authority over their bodies, and laid the groundwork for campaigns against AIDS and breast cancer in the 1990s and 2000s. Morgan

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<sup>27</sup> Cooper, 63.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>29</sup> Sandra Morgan *Into Our Own Hands: The Women’s Health Movement in the United States, 1969-1990* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), x.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, xi.

locates the genesis of the broad and diverse women's health movement with the Boston Women's Health Book Collective and the Los Angeles Feminist Women's Health Center in the 1970s and '80s. These women rejected their feminine "duty" to listen to a doctor's orders, and set out to understand their bodies and health outside of a patriarchal, capitalist paradigm. They fought against a medical establishment they found "condescending, paternalistic, judgmental, noninformative." In one of the most troubling episodes, for instance, doctors hid potential risks of "the pill".<sup>31</sup> To combat this, the women's health movement focused on empowering and educating women, but also affecting policy change to codify patients' rights.

Women's health activist Barbara Seaman published *The Doctor's Case Against the Pill* in 1969, and in 1975 co-founded the National Women's Health Network. In 2012 she and fellow activist Laura Eldridge compiled *Voices of the Women's Health Movement Vols I and II*. These works offer an encyclopedic history of the movement alongside primary sources. They trace activism such the women's organization Speakoutrage, which in 1972 held a public hearing for women who had been harmed by abortion, forced sterilization, and unnecessary surgeries.<sup>32</sup> They recall Margaret Lazarus' 1973 documentary *Taking Our Bodies Back*, which helped women understand their shared common experience with the medicalization of their bodies. They also describe D.C Women's Liberation, closely associated with the feminist news journal *Off Our Backs* which attended the 1970 senate hearings on the safety of the birth control pill and demanded patients' voices be heard.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>33</sup> Seaman, et al, *Voices of the Women's Health Movement Vol II*, 167-177.

Activists also grappled with issues of size, yet in *Voices* the editors repeat a critical mistake of the women's health movement itself when they privilege non-fat voices in their chapter on fatness. They don't refer to the issue as "fatness," but rather "overweight," an immediate signal that it wasn't conceptualized by fat feminists. Instead, *Voices* reprints a section of Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* and Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, feminist writers who saw fat as a result of an eating disorder and a symptom of patriarchy, not a natural state. Though the collection also includes an excerpt from Marcia Milliman's *Such a Pretty Face: Being Fat in America*, which demands societal and not personal change, as a whole the chapter replicates the feminist view of fat as pathology that fat-libbers confronted in their sisters in the 1970s and '80s.<sup>34</sup>

Fat Liberation emerged from a radical therapy movement that was aligned in principle with the broader women's health movement. In 1971's *The Radical Therapist Collective* writers developing theories of radical therapy argued that "therapy is a social and political event" and that therapists and mainstream psychiatry needed to "stop therapy's perpetuating and legitimizing oppression."<sup>35</sup> They argued that therapy "reinforce[d] and exemlifie[d] the sexist practices of society, making it hard to get real help."<sup>36</sup> Early writers on radical therapy argued that traditional therapy was a power relation- "one up, one down."<sup>37</sup> This work continued with the 1976 *Love, Therapy & Politics*, which included essays from *Issues in Radical Therapy*, a

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Glenn, *The Radical Therapist: The Radical Therapist Collective Produced by Jerome Agel* (New York: Ballantine, 1971), ix.

<sup>36</sup> Glenn, x.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, x.

journal the Berkeley Radical Psychiatry Center began in 1976. The collection, which included an essay on fat liberation by Aldebaran and "An Open Letter to My Former Shrinks" by Judy Freespirit, declared that "we can take care of our own heads and souls in the same powerful way that many women's health collectives are taking care of women's bodies."<sup>38</sup> Echoing both feminist and Marxist roots, radical therapist Hogie Wyckoff insisted that women must "seize the means of producing and preserving our own mental health."<sup>39</sup> Wyckoff and others infused women's consciousness-raising groups with radical therapy to produce women's "problem-solving" groups to comprehend and attack the roots of women's oppression.<sup>40</sup> Radical therapy suggested that people should work to change the world around them rather than re-create themselves to adjust to it. This had crucial implications for oppressed people, particularly women. Bonnie Burstow, in 1992's *Radical Feminist Therapy* suggests that "feminist therapy [was] rooted in women's knowledge, in women's help and ways of help."<sup>41</sup> Such therapy worked to address the "unnecessary yet unavoidable, individual yet common, suffering born of the patriarchy and other systematic oppression."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Freespirit, "An Open Letter to My Former Shrinks," in *The Radical Therapist Collective*.

<sup>39</sup> Hogie Wyckoff, "Introduction" *Love, Therapy & Politics: Issues in Radical Therapy- The First Year* Ed. Hogie Wyckoff (New York: Grove Press), 3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Bonnie Burstow, *Radical Feminist Therapy: Working in the Context of Violence* (London: Sage, 1992), viii.

<sup>42</sup> Burstow cites Broverman, Broverman and Clarkson's 1970 study "Sex Role Stereotypes and Clinical Judgements of Mental Health" and Phyllis Chesler's 1972 *Women and Madness*. Burstow, ix.

### **“YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE”: The Birth of Fat Liberation**

As a foundational document, the 1973 *Fat Liberation Manifesto* by Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran echoed their roots in activism and their history of reduction, as well as their involvement with radical therapy.<sup>43</sup> These founders of fat liberation understood their oppression as part of a larger system of inequality, writing "we see our struggle as allied with the struggles of other oppressed groups against classism, racism, sexism, ageism, financial exploitation, imperialism and the like."<sup>44</sup> Freespirit and Aldebaran were clear about the apparatus of oppression and internalized fat-hatred, and named diet groups as enemy number one to liberated fats, writing "we single out as our special enemies the so-called 'reducing' industries."<sup>45</sup> These included "diet clubs, reducing salons, fat farms, diet doctors, diet books, diet foods and food supplements, surgical procedures, appetite suppressants, drugs and gadgetry such as wraps and "reducing machines." Freespirit demanded that they "publish long-term studies proving any statistical efficacy of their products," perhaps a pointed jab at Weight Watchers, which has never done so and claims not to maintain such records. Freespirit took aim at the weight loss narratives of before and after, and "new me"s, and replaced them with a sobering statistic: "over 99% of all weight loss programs, when evaluated over a five-year period, fail utterly."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Boston-area fat liberationist Judith Stein recalls that many fat liberationists in the 1970s and '80s had been involved in the civil-rights and anti-Vietnam-war movements. Interview with author, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran, "Fat Liberation Manifesto," 1973, Box 1 Folder 14, Judy Freespirit Papers, UCLA Special Collections.

<sup>45</sup> "Fat Liberation Manifesto," 5.

<sup>46</sup> "Fat Underground: An Introduction to Fat Militancy," Box 1 Folder 14, Judy Freespirit Papers.

Freespirit, Aldebaran, and the F.U. went even further than rejecting diet narratives of apocalyptic transformation; they rejected the science and medicine of weight loss that had

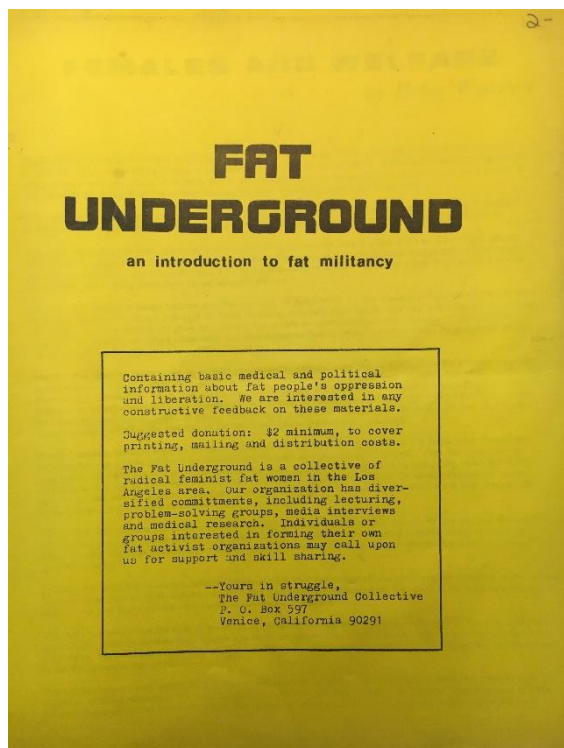


Figure 19. 1973 Fat Liberation Manifesto, Courtesy of UCLA

undergirded TOPS and Weight Watcher's recruitment and sustained legitimacy. The decades-long struggle over expertise of women's bodies was meaningless if, as Freespirit claimed, the science of obesity was "mystified" and "in collusion with the financial interests of insurance companies, the fashion and garment industries, reducing industries, the food and drug industries, and the medical and psychiatric establishment."<sup>47</sup> For Freespirit and Aldebaran self-actualization, wellness, and authority could not be found in negotiating for autonomy within these structures. But like

reducing, rejecting reduction was imagined as a group endeavor, something that women could only do with each other's support, writing "WE refuse to be subjugated to the interests of our enemies. We fully intend to reclaim power over our bodies and our lives. We commit ourselves to pursue these goals together." "FAT PEOPLE OF THE WORLD, UNITE! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE....."<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



The activism of Freespirit and Aldebaran in the 1970s and early '80s, centered on Freespirit in LA and Aldebaran in New England, shows the vitality and creativity of these groups. Their personal stories and their activism illuminate the network of feminist, lesbian-separatists, and women's health activists that allowed for the creation of this new fat feminist identity. In a 1981 interview with fellow fat liberationist Cathy Cade, Freespirit detailed her lifelong struggle against compulsive slenderness. She first "dieted" at the age of eight, when her mother took her to a doctor who prescribed Dexedrine for weight loss. So began decades of yo-yo dieting that damaged Freespirit's body and sense of self, influencing her to study psychology at Pepperdine University. In the 1960s, Freespirit joined a weight-loss group under the supervision of a psychiatrist. In her 1971 "Letter to My Former Shrinks" Freespirit wrote that from 1963-1967 she met with Dr. A, "therapist for four years to a group of fat women who met each Wednesday evening with you for two seemingly endless hours."<sup>49</sup> Freespirit joined this group at 27, when she was the mother of a two year old son. She later accused this psychiatrist of usury, recalling that he was "interested in us as a group for research purposes, and I understand that [he] published several articles about us."<sup>50</sup> In her wry, creative style she wrote "while you gained information, can you guess what we gained? Right." For Freespirit, this group mattered not for the doctor's care but for the community she found there, noting that after group they would go to the basement to get snacks and "talk for several hours over these tidbits, thereby gaining the real purpose of having endured the previous nonsense [...] In that basement we

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<sup>49</sup> Freespirit, "Letter to My Former Shrinks" 1971, Box 1, Folder 1, Judy Freespirit Papers.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

talked, as woman to woman, giving each other help and support without the imposition of "Big Brother" watching us."<sup>51</sup>

In her interview with Cade, Freespirit was frank about the painful process of rejecting the fantasy of thinness which psychiatry facilitated, recalling that as FU grew from the LA radical therapy collective at first Freespirit "didn't want to deal with it, and I didn't want to see

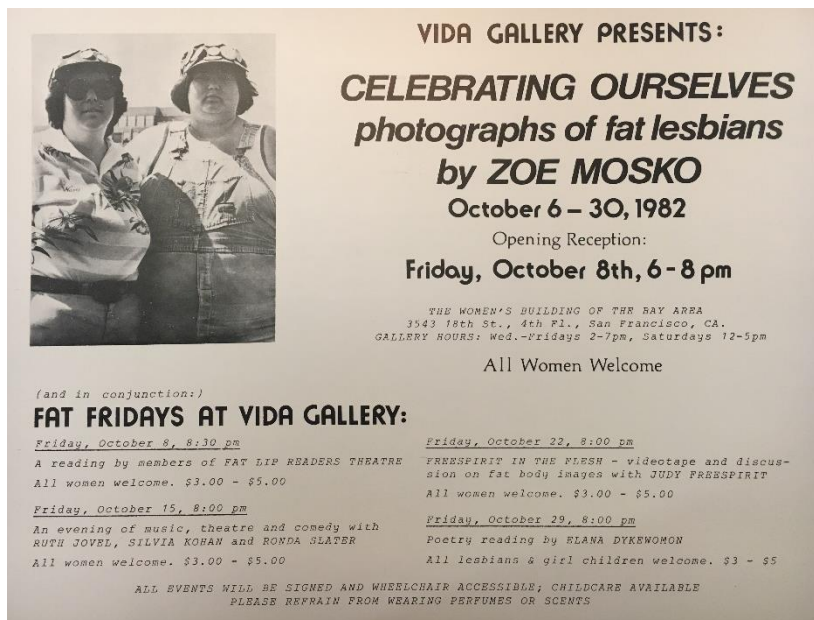


Figure 20. 1982 Poster Courtesy of UCLA

it, because what it meant was that [...] I had been wasting 35 years of my life, in starving and suffering and suffering."<sup>52</sup> Freespirit found a feminist home in LA in the late 1960s at the Crenshaw Women's Center. She met lesbians there for the first time and practiced a radical therapy that engaged with the sexism and homophobia feminist lesbians faced. She recalled that at the women's center "my collective was my family, and my co-workers and my friends." F.U. grew out of this community of radical women, and began with seven or eight lesbians, all single. Freespirit told Cade that during one meeting of this group, a woman read *Stigma* by Eric Goffman and asked everyone "How come we're all- none of us have lovers? And how come

<sup>51</sup> Judy Freespirit, "Letter to My Former Shrinks," Box 1, Folder 1, Judy Freespirit Papers.

<sup>52</sup> Judy Freespirit, Interview with Cathy Cade, 1981, Box 1, Folder 1, Judy Freespirit Papers.

we're not being lovers with each other?"<sup>53</sup> In this way, F.U.'s work engaged with the intersection of body size and sexuality. FU confronted fat-phobia they found in lesbian community and celebrated a frank, fat sexuality.

F.U. worked on raising awareness of the myriad issues faced by fat women specifically. Freespirit and the F.U. were sensitive to the economic inequalities faced by fat people, fat women especially. Rejecting the Weight Watchers message that losing weight would lead to better jobs, fat liberation, along with NAAFA, made job discrimination a workable problem. In their 1974 position paper on job discrimination, FU noted that "fat people are forced onto welfare or stuck in low-paying jobs."<sup>54</sup> This economic injustice was particularly felt by fat women, who were more likely to be passed over for jobs than fat men. Many of Freespirit's fliers also invited fat women to critique internal assumptions they carried, and encouraged them to liberate themselves before attacking patriarch, like the 1974 flier "Stereotype Yourself!" written by Lynn Mabel-Lois, who finished her checklist of assumptions about fat women with the message "tough luck, America, fat people have gotten uppity too."<sup>55</sup> They also located sites of oppression that led to increased violence against fat women, and fewer resources for them in their essay on "Fat women and women's fear of fat."<sup>56</sup> This essay describes the reaction to fat women who are sexually assaulted, reporting that "when Katherine was raped, the police laughed at her and refused to take down the report. Katherine is fat."<sup>57</sup> Fat women's experience of sexual

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<sup>53</sup> Judy Freespirit, Interview with Cathy Cade, 1981, Judy Freespirit Papers.

<sup>54</sup> Fat Underground, "Job Discrimination" flier, Box 1, Folder 14, Judy Freespirit Papers.

<sup>55</sup> Lynn Mabel-Lois, "Stereotype Yourself!" 1974 Flier, Box 1, Folder 14, Judy Freespirit Papers.

<sup>56</sup> 1974 Flier, Box 1, Folder 14, Judy Freespirit Papers.

<sup>57</sup> "Fat Women and Women's Fear of Fat," Box 1, Folder 14, Judy Freespirit Papers.

violence illustrated the unique experienced of sexism they faced. Fat Underground saw “sexism as a tool of oppression which is particularly injurious to fat people.” This unique role of fat women played out in their rejection of compulsory slenderness, as FU noted that their “defiance” of the “national mania for thinness” was seen as “willful rebellion,” and as such was a punishable "crime". In effect, fat women, like women of color, were victims of sexism but were denied the thin veneer of chivalry afforded other women. FU stressed the use of fatphobia as a tool of patriarchy, and declared that "fat is a women's problem. Whereas both men and women are oppressed concerning their weight, woman's' body is the limit of her social esteem under sexism." Furthermore, they



Fat women are encouraged to participate in sports but ironically are made to feel self-conscious and uncomfortable when they do

pointed out that fat women were “denied our very sexuality. And since this is a sexist society, those denied their sex have no place.”<sup>58</sup>

In order to make a place for fat women, FU made space for fat women. Judy Freespirit created several fat women’s theatrical groups- including Fat Lip and Fat Chance. In a 1982 interview Freespirit described the Fat Chance theater group as “a reclaiming [of] power over being able to move my body.” The group formed around "ten [fairly] fat women who got

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<sup>58</sup> “Sexism,” Undated, Box 1, Folder 14, Judy Freespirit Papers.

together for the purpose of doing political theater around the issue of fat oppression," and created theater which reflected "fat politics, which is that we really are all right as we are."<sup>59</sup> Pre-saging the HAES movement, Freespirit encouraged fat women do move and enjoy their bodies at the weight they were, rather than waiting for an impossible thin future-self. Though Fat Chance only did five performances before it "ended pretty badly politically" their focus on movement and dance taught Freespirit that "it's ok for me to move my body, and to be graceful and to say hey, look at me."<sup>60</sup> Beyond issues of play and performance, the designs of public space, especially urban public space, limited fat women's civic involvement. In 1974 's FU flier "Furniture in the Public" Lucia S. Williams claimed the rights of fat people to be accommodated in public spaces, including theaters, auditoriums, universities, parks, and public pools.<sup>61</sup>

Given their history in therapy, though, fat liberation leaders spent considerable effort de-pathologising fat women. Freespirit and Aldebaran's work against the psychiatric establishment culminated in "P S Y C H I A T R Y" a 1974 position paper which quoted Claude Steiner's *Radical Psychiatry Manifesto* and demanded that "psychiatry must stop its vast mystification of the people and get down to work" and that when it came to fat people "psychiatrists paste the dignity of science onto everyday prejudice."<sup>62</sup> In the FU essay "Fat Liberation: Outline for a Radical Therapy Approach" liberationists noted that doctors "say that fat people are not okay" but "with demystification and stroking contact, fat people can resume control over their own

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<sup>59</sup> Judy Freespirit, Interview with Cathy Cade.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Louis S. Williams, "Furniture in Public" 1974, Box 1, Folder 14, Judy Freespirit Papers.

<sup>62</sup> "Radical Therapy" Box 1, Folder 1, Judy Freespirit Papers.

bodies and feel okay"<sup>63</sup> FU argued that medical oppression intersected with other forms of injustice for fat people, and that "the unhealthy argument justified economic and medical discrimination against fat people." Moreover, linking food to health and health to social and civic involvement, FU utilized the therapeutic notion of "strokes", or positive experiences, when they pointed out that doctors asked fat people to give up "food strokes" in exchange for "social strokes," and "many fat people believe the don't deserve other strokes until they stop being fat, therefore tend to be wary, disbelieving, deflecting of whatever strokes they get."<sup>64</sup> The heart of the Fat Underground approach to radical therapy was that "fat people to get all the strokes they can," "fat is okay," "eating is okay," and "body pleasure is okay."<sup>65</sup>

FU further linked fat to sexism and women's oppression in "Health of Fat Women.....the Real Problem" a flier in which FU accused "the medical/psychiatric professions of gynocidal malpractice on fat women's bodies and minds. After decades of believing that doctors want us to be healthy, we have come to the furious realization that they value chiefly our looks, in the way of all sexist males."<sup>66</sup> In the 1974 flier "Compulsive eating in six easy steps" (which had an alternate title of "sicks easy steps") FU referred to the treatment of overeating as a guide to gaslighting a woman so she doesn't trust her own body, her own hunger cues, and instead follows diet books, "then switch diet books on her and tell her they all work better than her own senses." F.U. suggested such therapists were in collusion with the diet industry, writing that "when she's

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<sup>63</sup> "Fat Liberation: Outline for Radical Therapy Approach," Box 1, Folder 1, Judy Freespirit Papers.

<sup>64</sup> "Fat Liberation: Outline for Radical Therapy Approach," Undated, Box 1, Folder 1, Judy Freespirit Papers.

<sup>65</sup> Aldebaran, "Outline for Radical Therapy Approach," 1978, Fat Liberation Press, Vivian Mayer Collection.

<sup>66</sup> Aldebaran, "Health of Fat Women...The Real Problem," Vivian Mayer Collection.

starving,” they “urge her to kill the hunger pangs by eating non-nutritive foods like celery and diet soda. This will prevent her from recognizing real fullness.”<sup>67</sup>

Freespirit credits Aldebaran with much of the early written work of F.U. in LA.<sup>68</sup> Aldebaran returned to the east coast to pursue a PhD in Metallurgy at the University of Connecticut and helped form a vibrant fat community there, one which found its mission in combating medical ignorance and working with feminists to incorporate fatness into the women’s health movement. Aldebaran worked tirelessly, and like many activists burned out. By 1980, she wrote in a private letter that “I confess that the mention of the word ‘fat’ makes me yawn.”<sup>69</sup> Yet the community she founded continued without her, via Fat Liberator Publications, the New Haven Fat Liberation Front, and Fat Activists Together, a national coalition for feminist fat activists.

### **“Weighty Wimmin Wanted”: Creating an East Coast Network**

Like early efforts to form diet groups, Fat Liberation membership grew slowly via community networks. The problem for liberationist organizers, though, was to find fat women who were willing to stop dieting, and give up the fantasy of slenderness that hounded them. These women maintained relationships largely through personal letters, organizing occasional conferences, and eventually publishing a newsletter for fat activism. They were also part of an emerging network of fat zines in the ‘80s. Fat Lib groups used existing networks of feminists, and especially feminist lesbians, to find each other and build coalitions with a common goal of

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<sup>67</sup> Fat Underground, “Compulsive Eating in Six Easy Steps” 1974, Box 1, Folder 14, Judy Freespirit Papers.

<sup>68</sup> Freespirit notes that Aldebaran did most of the written work of F.U., because Freespirit was preoccupied pursuing romance and sex.

<sup>69</sup> Aldebaran, letter to Allon, 7/11/1980, Box 1, Folder 1, Vivian Mayer Collection on Fat Liberation.

ending fat oppression and combating the dieting culture of medicine and corporations like Weight Watchers.

When she returned to Connecticut from LA, Aldebaran worked to form networks of fat

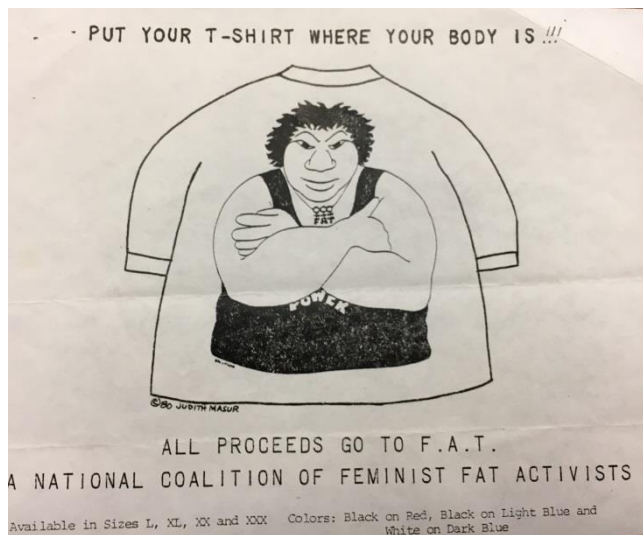


Figure 42. F.A.T Flier, Courtesy of the Vivian Mayer Collection on Fat Liberation

women via consciousness-raising groups, NAAFA, and a new fat-feminist press, Fat Liberation Publishers, which she began in 1978. To find other fat women and facilitate resistance to dieting among them Aldebaran wrote “A Fat Women’s Problem-Solving Group: Radical Change” in 1974, and republished it with Fat Liberation Press in 1978. Fat women, she knew, found it

difficult to give up the dream of a successful diet, even if they had never had personal success. Aldebaran was frank with them, noting in the first sentence of this guide that “the ultimate failure rate for all reducing diets is greater than 99%. Therefore it is pointless for therapists to counsel fat people to lose weight as solution to the problems they face for being fat.”<sup>70</sup> Instead, she suggested the creation of groups in which bingeing was explicitly condoned- even suggesting that members find a “safe space to eat” either alone or with a fellow binger who would “eat with you and support you to eat freely” and to “keep plenty of ‘binge’ foods around the house,”

<sup>70</sup> Aldebaran “A Fat Women’s Problem-Solving Group: Radical Change,” Fat Liberation Press Pamphlet, 1978, APC PAM 593, Vivian Mayer Collection.



because “you deserve to enjoy food.”<sup>71</sup> To this end, fat libbers held an “all day Permission Marathon” in which “the high points were a (planned) eating orgy in the afternoon and an (unplanned) sex orgy in the evening, after the marathon was over and the facilitators had gone home.”<sup>72</sup>

A 1978 letter reflects Aldebaran’s attempt to build a larger network of fat liberation groups around the New Haven Fat Liberation Front, “some sort of network to tie together people who are not that interested in NAAFA’s primarily social/sexual emphasis.”<sup>73</sup> “Fat admirer” William Fabrey founded NAAFA in 1969 to fight discrimination against fat people but also to facilitate a social network of fellow male fat admirers and fat women. Aldebaran and New England fat liberationists found themselves in conflict with Fabrey about NAAFA’s ambivalence toward dieting. Aldebaran maintained an extensive conversation with Fabrey via personal and professional letters, pushing him to take a more radical stance. Fabrey maintained that NAAFA was “we are in most instances, a middle of the road self-help charitable organization, and not truly radical by the usual radical standards”<sup>74</sup> Given this stance, Aldebaran confided to fellow activist Louise Wolfe that she felt “powerless to influence NAAFA in any way.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Some fat libbers later recalled that though they hoped that de-coupling binging from negative feelings would result in natural eating cues and a stable (though still fat) weight, but found that they gained weight after all. Rensenbrink.

<sup>72</sup> Aldebaran “A Fat Women’s Problem-Solving Group: Radical Change,” 6.

<sup>73</sup> NAAFA offered a very heteronormative social space, where fat women could meet “fat admirer” men. Partly because of this, fat lesbians were less involved in the organization.

<sup>74</sup> Bill Fabrey, letter to Aldebaran, Jan 3 1978, Box 1, Folder 12, Vivian Mayer Collection.

<sup>75</sup> Aldebaran, Letter to Louise Wolfe, Box 1, Folder 12, Vivian Mayer Collection.

While Aldebaran felt that NAAFA offered important support and social space to fat people, she also believed that they were not truly fat liberationist, but rather “much more anxious to fulfill the needs of non-activists, who would much rather be involved in a slim people’s group but feel NAAFA is what they must settle for.”<sup>76</sup> Wolfe recalled in a letter to Aldebaran that her reason for joining NAAFA was “solely social (i.e. to find a boyfriend).” But she felt that after finding fat liberations she was due to “become the next NAAFA renegade.”<sup>77</sup> For fat activists romantically and/or sexually attracted to men, NAAFA offered the one thing fat liberation lacked— boyfriends. But even for straight women looking for love, Aldebaran and Wolfe believed that NAAFA could be a gateway to radicalism, and a place for support and acceptance. Women like Wolfe operated as a link between moderate NAAFA and radicals, noting that even as she attended NAAFA dances and parties, she was also “organizing a fat woman’s consciousness-raising group in New Haven.” She acknowledged that many of the women she met through NAAFA were not quite ready to be radical, noting that her group was “not part of the Fat Liberation Front, and of course the women who have joined it are not at a place in their lives where they could readily identify themselves as fat.”<sup>78</sup> Further elucidating the complications of organizing women who resisted a fat identity she wryly quipped that “eight women are involved- a record number for any fat organizing.” Likewise, Wolfe understood that many women who joined a community of size would take what they needed from it without becoming activists, yet she hoped for “a core of radical fat women developing out of the group,

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<sup>76</sup> Aldebaran, Letter to Louise Wolfe, Feb 3 1982 Box 1, Folder 12, Vivian Mayer Collection.

<sup>77</sup> Louise Wolfe, Letter to Aldebaran, 1978, Box 1, Folder 12, Vivian Mayer Collection.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

in the same way as members of the first Fat Women's Radical Therapy Problem-Solving Group in Los Angeles moved into the Fat Underground." Looking for solutions to fat oppression which were not losing weight was a challenging schema for many of the women she found, who talked positively, "however, needless to say, the ultimate goal of each group member is (privately) to lose weight."<sup>79</sup> Using groups like these and NAAFA, Aldebaran and Wolfe hoped that as fat women came to feel better about themselves they would also work to change society rather than themselves. To further this goal Diane Rubinstein published an "Introduction to Fat Consciousness" for NAAFA in 1981.<sup>80</sup> This pamphlet explained that fat consciousness was a tool "to make us aware of the societal pressures that oppress fat people" and "to develop pride in being a fat person."<sup>81</sup>

Though liberationists never succeeded in radicalizing NAAFA, it continued to be a place to recruit fat women, and Fabrey agreed to make the Fat Liberation Manifesto available on their reading lists, and NAAFA was on the mailing list of the *Fat Activists Together (F.A.T.) Coalition Newsletter*. Running from June 1980-Jan 1982 this newsletter, meant for activist reached about fifty women, including 29 lesbians, 12 straight women, NAAFA and Fat Liberation Press, and the Boston Women's Health Collective. The newsletter detailed the relationship between fat liberationists and feminist groups, describing work like pushing for Take Back the Night collective to acknowledge dieting as violence against women. Also: they needed much bigger march t-shirts.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Rubinstein, "Introduction to Fat Consciousness," Box 2, Folder 33, Vivian Mayer Collection.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> *Fat Activists Together Newsletter*, October 1980.

### **The Fat Illusion: FLF and Medical Science**

Aldebaran worked tirelessly against the medical establishment's indictment of fat people as unhealthy overeaters. In her 1978 work "The Calorie Controversy" Aldebaran exposed "overeating" as a scientifically useless term.<sup>83</sup> In "The Fat Illusion" Aldebaran described "figure control as social control" and called diet groups "hunger clubs."<sup>84</sup> For Aldebaran, "the fat illusion" was the belief that "body size is a personal choice that can be changed through will and adherence to proscriptive behavior."<sup>85</sup> She wrote that in rejecting the fat illusion, "Fat Liberation rejects ...moralizing of size, activity, food intake." Aldebaran maintained an extensive correspondence with obesity Dr. Paul Haskew who ran groups at u conn student health services, where Aldebaran expressed criticism of his treatment plan of low-calorie diets. UConn nutritionist allowed Aldebaran to write a brochure "calorie counters are losers."<sup>86</sup>

Aldebaran fought against the medicalization of fat bodies, and met resistance from doctors and scientific publications, such as *Science for the People*, who ultimately rejected "The Calorie Controversy" for, among other things, appealing only to "those fat people who have already become aware of their oppression and its causes."<sup>87</sup> Aldebaran also gave tools to fat women to work against the medical establishment in their personal lives, such as the flier "Dear

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<sup>83</sup> Aldebaran noted that since scientists defined "overeating" as any consumption that resulted in weight gain, anorexics returning to a healthy weight were by that definition "overeating," a paradox which left the term scientifically nebulous and used instead as a way to shame fat people, especially women.

<sup>84</sup> Aldebaran, "The Fat Illusion," 2.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Aldebaran, letter to Dr. Paul Haskew, Box 2, Folder 8, Vivian Mayer Collection.

<sup>87</sup> Letter to Aldebaran, 12/7/77, Box 2 Folder 1, Vivian Mayer Collection.

Doctor" which a women cold hand to her physician to instruct them that as a patient, they "refuse to define my body weight as a disease" and to "please throw out any height-weight charts you own, especially ones compiled by insurance companies to justify collecting more money from fat people."<sup>88</sup> Fat libbers spent considerable energy working on medical discrimination, and encouraged women through interpersonal agency to create an atmosphere within doctors' offices that didn't focus on weight loss. Like TOPS, fat liberationists wanted to claim expertise over their own bodies, but not as partners with the medical establishment, but rather as an alternative to understanding fat bodies. They rejected doctors' claims to unique comprehension of fat bodies, and all attempts to medicalize size.

In 1974's "Health of Fat People: The Scare-Story Your Doctor WON'T Tell You," Aldebaran explicated the scare tactics of doctors and the medical establishment, adopted by the diet industry, tactics which "mean that "fat people fear for their future." Like Aldebaran, Judy Freespirit and the FU maintained that "'FAT IS HEALTHY" and argued that what made fat people unhealthy was not their size, but stigma. They noted that a 1960s study of obese Italian Americans were "virtually free of the diseases supposedly brought on by fatness" because, FU asserted, "they thought being fat was just great." Their good health "came from their sense of self-acceptance and peace." FU advised women on "how to take care of yourself" when "you run into opposition from your doctor." F.U. gave women scripts with which to navigate conversations with their doctors, suggesting that "you may trying telling your doctor that your body size is your own business: the doctor is employed by you to treat you within the limits of what you decide to allow."<sup>89</sup> The most important message fat liberationists gave to women about

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<sup>88</sup> Aldebaran, "Dear Doctor," Box 2, Folder 1, Vivian Mayer Collection.

<sup>89</sup> "The Health of Fat People," Box 1, Folder 14, Judy Freespirit Collection.

their doctor was that "if your doctor tells you that reducing diets are perfectly safe, get another doctor."<sup>90</sup>

### **“Help Us Throw Our Weight Around!” Fat Lib and Feminism**

Fat liberationists struggled against both the prevailing medical establishment and the critique thereof within feminist movements. Though feminists in the 1970s and ‘80s engaged in an urgent and necessary critique of the medical treatment of women and female bodies through groups like the Boston Women’s Health Collective, fat liberation worked further to include a rejection of compulsory slenderness within their mandates. Fat liberation activists were concerned that feminists rejected corporate diet culture but simply substituted an enthusiasm for “health food” that obscured an enduring commitment to restriction of food intake for aesthetic purposes. In a 1981 interview, fat liberationists RaeRae Sears and Judith Stein, the co-founder of the Boston Fat Lesbian Liberation Group, recalled that the response of feminists to fat liberation was “very bad,” and one feminist publication sent back a letter saying “I don’t believe this, this is bullshit.”<sup>91</sup> Fat libbers faced condescension and disbelief from some fellow feminists; one early activist “was told to go to Weight Watchers, and that would solve her problems.”<sup>92</sup> Sears and Stein further argued that even by 1981 feminists did not address the “twenty-seven thousand diet and weight loss related deaths a year.”<sup>93</sup> In order to maintain compulsory slenderness while claiming to reject patriarchal diet standards, “within the feminist community, dieting is sort of

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<sup>90</sup> “The Scare Story,” Box 1, Folder 14, Judy Freespirit Collection.

<sup>91</sup> RaeRae Sears and Judith Stein Interview with *The Second Wave*, Box 2, Folder 27, Vivian Mayer Collection.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

disguised under health food, [feminists] wouldn't go to Weight Watchers or TOPS....but they will go on some kind of extreme health food diet."<sup>94</sup>

Fat libbers also found an enduring fatphobia that mirrored not only prevailing cultural ideas about women and body size, but echoed first-wave feminisms' linkage of slender bodies to good citizenship and acceptable public female performance.<sup>95</sup> This "phatophobia in the wimmin's community" was felt especially keenly by fat lesbians, who spoke of the pain of meeting a "womon" who liked them as a "friend" but "just couldn't be sexual" with them because they were "fat."<sup>96</sup>

The struggle of fat liberationists to find a voice

in feminist communities took place in private letters, consciousness raising groups, and in

personal friendships as well as institutional spaces. Two episodes can be instructive in

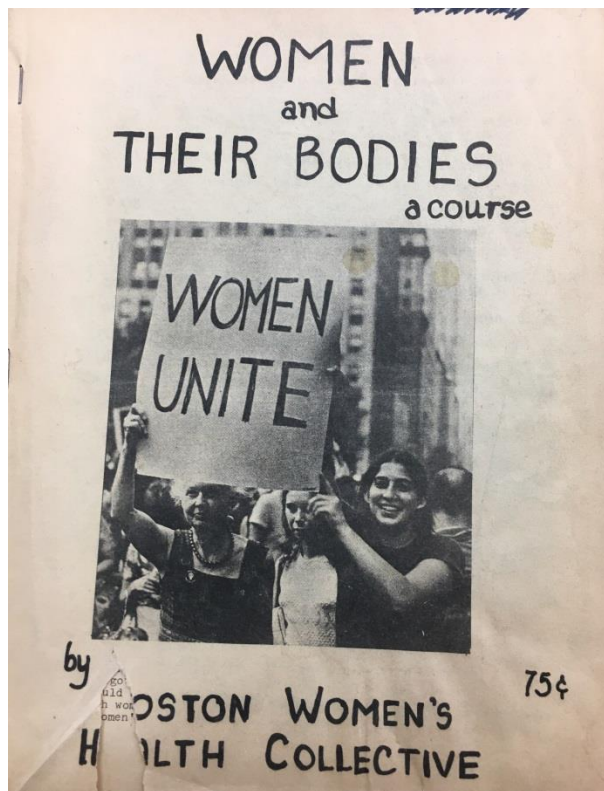


Figure 43. 1970 Boston Women's Health Collective Course, Courtesy of Vivian Mayer Collection

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> See Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011). Farrell argues that in the 1910s anti-suffragists showed suffragists as fat, menacing, taking up too much space and threatening kitchen-based violence. She notes that the fight for inclusion in the public sphere met with visual propaganda of women taking up too much space with fat bodies. First-wave feminists embraced this rhetoric and responded with images of svelte and lovely activists and imagined anti-suffrage women as "fat, inferior, and resistant to progress." 83.

<sup>96</sup> Laurie Ann Lepoff, "Fatophobia in the Wimmin's Community" *Off Our Backs* vol 13 no 3 (March 1983), 31.

understanding the parameters of this struggle: The New Haven Women's Health Weekend in 1980 and a series of published letters about fat-feminism in the pages of feminist news-journal *Off Our Backs* from 1978 to 1984.

### **Our Fat Bodies, Our Fat Selves**

Fat liberation and the women's health movement emerged side by side in the 1970s. Aldebaran kept copies of a Boston Women's Health Collective 1970 Course "Women and Their Bodies," and found that the health movement mirrored many of her own concerns.<sup>97</sup> While fat liberators agreed with the women's health movement that medicine and concepts of health were used as a means to control women, that women had the right to claim authority over their bodies, and that health care for women should be defined by women, there was one area in which they disagreed. The 1970 course book included suggestions that the course could grow to include other topics such as "strengthening our bodies" through "diet, exercise, karate, etc."<sup>98</sup> While a focus on strength, not size, was an anti-patriarchal position, fat libbers found that for many feminists "diet" still meant maintaining a small size. Fat Libbers wrested control over their medical treatment, as the collective encouraged, but went a step further to reject the association between fat and health.

Nonetheless, the Boston women's health collective, like fat liberationists, believed that they, not doctors, ultimately had authority over their bodies. Recalling the early meetings of the collective, members were excited and nervous, they felt at first that "we were just women; what

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<sup>97</sup> "Women and Their Bodies, A Course," 1970, Box 4, Vivian Mayer Collection.

<sup>98</sup> "Women and Their Bodies."



authority did we have in matters of medicine and health?”<sup>99</sup> These activists wrote that “it was exciting to learn new facts about our bodies, but it was even more exciting to talk about how we felt about our bodies, how we felt about ourselves, how we could become more autonomous human beings, how we could act together on our collective knowledge to change our health care system for women and for all people.” The women’s health collective critiqued the relationship between “women, medicine, and capitalism” as a means of “control and submission” because women couldn’t control medical priorities- “that’s done by corporations and the AMA.” With this foundational document the Boston Women’s Health Collective declared that “health care [...] must be defined by us.”<sup>100</sup>

Organized by Judith Stein, Judy Freespirit, and Aldebaran, the First Feminist Fat Activists’ Working Meeting on April 18-20 coincided with the New Haven Women’s Health Conference. <sup>101</sup> Aldebaran, Judith Stein, Elena Dykewoman, and other “lesbians and womyn” from Oakland, Minnesota, Atlanta, New York, Cambridge and Somerville organized the event.<sup>102</sup> Liberationists planned three fat lib workshops and a keynote for the conference, and included separate workshops for a lesbian caucus and a heterosexual women’s meeting. Their speeches and proceedings were also transcribed and circulate by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, which published their “Statement of Purpose.” These fat liberationists proclaimed “to be healthy women must have control over their own bodies. This involves

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>101</sup> Judith Stein, Letter to Aldebaran, April 23, 1980, Box 1, Folder 16, Vivian Mayer Collection.

<sup>102</sup> Fat Liberation Publications Press Release, 1980, Box 1, Folder 2, Vivian Mayer Collection.

positive self-image, knowledge of one's body, and the political and personal power to act on that knowledge."<sup>103</sup> Within these proceedings, Judith Stein was vocal and critical of the feminist health movement— which she found was skeptical of almost all medical info about women except that which regarded fatness. She said, “there has been, from the women's health movement, and the individuals in it, from women's health centers and from feminist health providers, an absolute unwillingness to question the medical information about fat.”<sup>104</sup> Frustrated with women who showed a willingness to critique assumptions about other women's health issues, but not fat, Stein declared that the medicalization of fat women's bodies was “the same lie that we were taught about birth control, about menstruation, about sexuality, about vaginitis. It is lies from the same source, from the same people, for the same motives- profit and control over our lives.”<sup>105</sup> A report compiled by Judith Stein and published by Fat Liberation Publishers described the event as productive, yet private letters show conflict between fat activists and health activists, and tensions over class and sexuality within the fat activist community that culminated in a passive-aggressive lesbian orgy at a homophobes house.

Libbers faced pushback from non-fat feminists in their workshops, as well. The Women's Health Weekend included three workshops for fat women- “How to Assert Yourself at the Doctor's Office,” “Eating Problems,” and “Intro to Fat Liberation.” Meant to welcome fat women into liberationist politics, thin-allies and anti-fat feminists complicated these workshops with un-examined personal ideas about diet and body. Stein reported that “it never fails,

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<sup>103</sup> Judith Stein, *Proceedings of the First Feminist Fat Activists' Working Meeting, April 18-20, New Haven CT* (Minneapolis: New Liberator Publications), 36. Illustrations by Beryl-Elise Hoffstein, 5.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>105</sup> Judith Stein, *Proceedings*.

whenever a fat liberationist talks there is some woman in the audience who has just lost 100 pounds, used to eat like a pig, now eats normally, and feels great. Or so she says. I tend to regard such self-descriptions skeptically. I remember being anorexic, having lost 80 pounds, feeling just great.”<sup>106</sup>

Aldebaran and the Connecticut fat libbers found that the conference replicated their struggle to have fat liberation recognized as “legitimate issues in women’s health.” Yet they comprehended that though feminists understood patriarchal oppression, there were further “conceptual shifts” that needed to occur. Aldebaran believed that “not only must attitudes about fatness and women be opened up enough to hear alternative information. The very concept of what is “women’s health” has somehow been dictated by the patriarchal view of women as cunt and womb, [feminists] must enlarge (pun intended) their view.”<sup>107</sup>

Aldebaran and other east-coast fat libbers continued to plan workshops and conferences on fat liberation. Aldebaran, especially, continued working to get solid scientific evidence about fat into the hands of women’s health activists. Though women’s health advocates rejected much of the medicalization of women’s bodies, and saw a patriarchal medical industry whose proclamations were not infallible, they nonetheless maintained a resistance to fat liberation. Judith Stein, who worked in the Boston area to organize fat liberation groups and educate women, recalls that though these feminists were “more ready” to hear about liberationist medical ideas, she believed that the issue of fat “hit them too personally.” Feminists, she recalls, were not immune to a culture which told women that fat was unhealthy, unfeminine, and undesirable. She

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Aldebaran.

felt that non-liberationist women viewed them as angry women with an “ax to grind.” Fat was “much too personal,” and even feminists felt “the terror of becoming this terrible thing. We stood for their very worst fears. There we were, in the flesh.”<sup>108</sup>



Figure 44. Our Bodies Ourselves Founders in 1975, Esther Rome Bottom Right. Courtesy of Our Bodies Ourselves

Though initially resistant, however, the editors of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* were sensitive to the intersection of sexism and fatphobia. Editor Esther Rome and others were critical of the diet industry and extended that criticism to compulsory slenderness in general.<sup>109</sup> Rome reached out to Stein after the 1980 New Haven Women’s Health Conference, and asked Stein to consult with her on the 1984 edition of *OBOS*. Rome and Stein incorporated fat liberationist messages into the section on “Body Image and Weight,” including Stein’s writing in “Being Fat in an

<sup>108</sup> Judith Stein, Interview with Author, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>109</sup> Rome believed that women were pressured to harm their bodies to gain the affection of men, and advocated on issues of domestic violence, HIV, cosmetic surgery, and dieting until her death in 1995. See *Sacrificing Ourselves for Love: Why Women Compromise Health and Self-Esteem, and How to Stop*, (Boston: Boston Women’s Health Collective, 1996).

AntiFat Society.” This excerpt encouraged readers to consider the oppression faced by fat women, from slurs and jokes, to lack of public accommodations and medical malpractices which ignored serious health concerns for fat women that were unrelated to their size.<sup>110</sup> *OBOS* also told readers that “no matter what anyone says to you, you have the *right* to go anywhere and do anything you like...to go dancing, to enjoy life...take up all the space your body occupies...practice being big.”<sup>111</sup>

In contrast to *OBOS*, other women’s health resources, like the 1987 *Medical Self-Care Women’s Book of Health: The Authoritative Guide for Taking Care of Your Own Well Being* positioned “overweight” as uniformly unhealthy, and while critical of commercial diet praxis and products, still offered advice on achieving a “permanent ideal weight.”<sup>112</sup> Likewise, *The Complete Book of Women’s Health* devoted pages to the dire consequences of “overweight,” and *The Black Women’s Health Book* ignored the issue of weight entirely.<sup>113</sup>

### **Feminism is a Fat Issue**

Fat Activist Diane Denne recalled in a letter to Aldebaran that while learning about fat issues, she “found the book *Fat is a Feminist Issue* and read about sixty pages before I got bored and started feeling crazy.”<sup>114</sup> Susie Orbach’s *Fat is a Feminist Issue* brought body size into the

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<sup>110</sup> Stein, “Being Fat in an AntiFat Society,” in *Our Bodies Ourselves* (Boston: Boston Women’s Health Collective, 1984), 8.

<sup>111</sup> Stein, “Being Fat in an AntiFat Society.”

<sup>112</sup> Bobbie Hasselbring, *Medical Self-Care Women’s Book of Health: The Authoritative Guide for Taking Care of Your Own Well Being* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 248.

<sup>113</sup> *The Complete Book of Women’s Health* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1982), *The Black Women’s Health Book* (New York: The Seal Press, 1990).

<sup>114</sup> Dianne Denne, Letter to Aldebaran, Box 1, Folder 5, Vivian Mayer Collection.

realm of mainstream feminism in 1978. While Orbach linked fat to women's oppression, she saw fat as a physical *symptom* of oppression that women could understand and therefore abolish. She did not advocate for an acceptance of fat as a permanent state, but instead believed that women could identify the patriarchal roots of their compulsive overeating and thereby find a path to slenderness. Fat libbers confronted Orbach's work and pointed out that "because Orbach fails to recognize fat as an oppression, she omits an understanding of women's particular relationship with food separate from compulsive overeating." Libbers believed that Orbach propagated the "theory of fat as a sign of visible distress, as something we have to accept only in order to get rid of."<sup>115</sup> Likewise, fat libbers critiqued Kim Chernin's 1983 "Womansize," arguing that though Chernin worked to offer positive images of fat women, like Orbach she "confuse[d] fat with psychological problems" and linked fatness to a "fear of sexuality."<sup>116</sup> Orbach and Chernin presented a published stance on fatness that was prevalent in the broader feminist movement of the 1970s and '80s. Aldebaran discoursed with Orbach via letters, and wrote that "if you teach that fat is caused by overeating, you do not appreciate (or even see) the falseness of that accusation." She further accused Orbach of "falling into that female-stereotypic trap of symbolic/emotional speculation about subjects of which much is known empirically."<sup>117</sup>

The fundamental debate between non-fat-lib feminists and fat-liberation feminists was the relationship of body size to patriarchy. Non-fat-lib feminists saw both over and underweight as a pathological reaction to patriarchy and sexist oppression. They believed that size was linked

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<sup>115</sup> Tina Jenkins and Heather Smith, "Fat Lib" *Spare Rib* 1987, 16.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Aldebaran Letter to Susie Orbach, January 14, 1980, Folder 1, Box 2, "letters from some struggles with the establishment (medical or radical)," Vivian Mayer Collection.

to neurotic compulsive eating and/or anorexia, both of which were born from a desire to create a de-sexed body. Fat liberationists, however, argued that fat was a natural state, and that fat oppression intersected with sexist oppression, but fat itself was not a reaction to patriarchy. They also argued that it was fat oppression that de-sexed fat female bodies, and that feminists were guilty replicating that oppression and offering “solutions” to fat that were as damaging as the patriarchal diet industry and mainstream beauty standards.

Non-fat-liberationist feminists argued that both weight gain and anorexia served to de-feminize female bodies, creating a category of other that set these women apart and left them out of mainstream feminism. Wendy Stevens, writing in 1979 of her struggle with both patriarchy and anorexia nervosa, noted that “while women in the women’s movement can find confirmation of the impossibility of women’s role by talking to one another, anorexics struggle in increasing isolation.”<sup>118</sup> Margaret House, in the same *Off Our Backs* exploration of body size and feminism, wrote that “the issue of women’s overeating has not been accorded the political status of other feminist problems such as abortion.”<sup>119</sup> An author writing under the initials T.D. compared it to nineteenth-century hysteria, arguing that “both bring attention to women, reinforce the idea of being out of control, undisciplined and passive, eliminate or reduce sexual contact and give women a strange control over other people.” These women saw fat as a *symptom* of oppression, not as a category of oppression unto itself, arguing that “eating for women is as much a consequence of our oppression as women as heroin addiction is of racism in the ghetto.” More aligned with OA than FU, women like Margaret House noted that:

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<sup>118</sup> Wendy Stevens, “A Thin Excuse” *Off Our Backs* Vol 9 No 4 (April, 1979), 28.

<sup>119</sup> Margaret House, “Another View,” 28.

Some groups like Overeaters Anonymous, composed almost entirely of women, at least don't say women are weak, gluttonous undesirables. They take the guilty burden off women and say overeaters are powerless in the face of the obsession. The focus is the obsession, not thin looks. But they have no analysis of why women eat and the idea of telling women they are powerless reinforces too much the idea of feminine passivity and ignores the enormously strong battle women put themselves not to extinguish their pain with food. What is needed are feminist food-support groups.<sup>120</sup>

Deborah Slawson wrote of these overlapping needs and identities in *Off Our Backs* in 1983. She wrote as a member of OA, to encourage fellow feminists to view eating disorders as an addiction born of patriarchal oppression, but she also carefully negotiated the body-positivity of fat liberation groups. She argued that fat liberationists ignored what she saw as addiction, and glossed over the painful elements of being fat, and furthermore that “we oppress ourselves [...] by denying ourselves the complete truth of what our lives are like not so much because we are fat but because many of us are addicts.”<sup>121</sup> She also shed light on the identity issues at play when she said “I wish such a [fat] Lesbian group were open to me as a thin person; the wounds of fat oppression are not healed by becoming thin.”<sup>122</sup> These simmering tension between fat liberationists and anti-fat feminists erupted onto the pages of *Off Our Backs* after the publication of Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* in 1979. Orbach wrote of her own struggles with compulsive eating and her work in feminist consciousness-raising groups focused on food issues. As a therapist, Orbach saw body size and food issues as a treatable symptom of patriarchal oppression, and believed that consciousness-raising could overcome those issues and return women to a “normal” size.

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<sup>120</sup> Margaret House, “Another View” *Off Our Backs* Vol 9 No 4 (April, 1979), 28.

<sup>121</sup> Deborah Slawson, “Compulsive Overeating” *Off Our Backs* vol 13, no 4 (April, 1983), 22.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.



In April of 1979, *OOB* began a years-long debate between readers when the editors ran two reviews of Orbach's work alongside *The Fat Liberation Manifesto*, an article about anorexia nervosa, and one about compulsive overeating. *OOB* faced an immediate backlash from fat liberationists for their implicit endorsement of Orbach's work. In May of 1979, a group of "fat dykes" from Seattle going by "Lizard," Helen, and Shan, accused *OOB* of supporting anti-fat attitudes by supporting Orbach and reprinting the "Fat Liberation Manifesto" merely as a form of "tokenism, since it required no apparent thought about the issue of fat oppression and seemed to be stuck in to make sure your all the bases were covered and your asses were kept clean."<sup>123</sup> The group argued that putting such pieces next to Orbach, the editors "opt[ed] out of dealing with oppressive attitudes about fat by stating that fat women are self-destructive" and "suggests that fat women are fat because they don't want to be sexual."<sup>124</sup> These fat libbers asked and answered the question "Does Orbach truly believe that if patriarchy and its oppressive institutions disappeared all women would be thin? Bullshit."<sup>125</sup> KR echoed their criticisms in the same issue, and rejected the thesis that "fatness and weight gain are a response to sexism" insisting that "women don't take on fat oppression in order to minimize sexual oppression, or in order to insulate ourselves from it. Fat is not a covering—fat tissue is a part of our selves."<sup>126</sup> Seattle fat liberationists found anti-fat messages infused in *OOB*, as KR wrote to critique a cartoon in the

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<sup>123</sup> Lizard, Helen, and Shan, "thin thinking" *Off Our Backs* Vol 9 No 5 (May, 1979), 28.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> KR, "free to be fat" *Off Our Backs* Vol 9 No 5 (May, 1979), 28.

pages of the magazine “showing management to be fat and workers as thin; I’ve seen enough of this portrayal of the evil upper classes as fat.”<sup>127</sup>

“Fatphobic feminists” by Elly Janesdaughter addressed Susie Orbach’s *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, the original subtitle of which was “The Anti-Diet Guide to Permanent Weight Loss.” Janesdaughter compared that to a hypothetical book titled “Lesbianism is a Feminist Issue: A Guide to a Permanent Sex Life With Men” and asked how the feminist community would react to such a thing.<sup>128</sup> Janesdaughter suggested that “glowing reviews of Orbach’s book are only possible because fat women, unlike lesbians, haven’t organized against our oppression” and because of this “the feminist community doesn’t acknowledge that fat oppression exists.”<sup>129</sup> She also asserted that “compulsive overeating, like the vaginal orgasm, is a fiction propounded by the medical and psychiatric establishments to keep women out of touch with our instincts and preoccupied with the basics of life.”<sup>130</sup> An unsigned letter alongside Janesdaughter, however, rejected fat feminism, arguing that “fat is a feminist issue” only had meaning when rejecting “the pre-adolescent figure of high fashion as the ideal for all women.” This anonymous feminist went on to describe her “fat friend” who is smelly, “dangerously loaded” with adipose, and who “can’t haul herself” around to do fun things. She declared that if wanting to see her fat friend get thin “is sexist oppression, then I’ll wear the title proudly.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Elly Janesdaughter, “fatphobic feminists” *Off Our Backs* Vol 9 No 7 (July, 1979), 28.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Janesdaughter.

<sup>131</sup> “Fat Kills” *Off Our Backs* Vol 9 No 7 (July, 1979), 28.

The argument over Orbach's book evolved into an ongoing discussion between feminists in the pages of *Off Our Backs*. The December 1979 issue continued the debate with a letter from Ruth Silverman of Connecticut referring to dieting as "the modern footbinding" and accusing the editors of *OOB* of perpetuating the stereotype that fat people are "ignorant, stupid, or weak-willed."<sup>132</sup> She asserted that "the right to my own body includes more than the rights to an abortion, and to choose whether or not to wear cosmetics or a bra," it included a "fundamental" right to respect as a fat woman.<sup>133</sup> Next to Silverman's letter was a complementary note from Aldebaran, who accused *OOB* of perpetuating fat stereotypes and making editorial decisions that privileged anti-fat feminists, which Aldebaran wrote left her "fairly speechless with pain."<sup>134</sup> Aldebaran accused her fellow feminists of discounting fat liberation based "upon prevailing medical and nutritional lies that the patriarchy has taught about fat."<sup>135</sup> Aldebaran saw these "lies" repeated in letters responding to fat liberation and printed by *OOB*, and in bold letters announcing "fat kills" next to work from fat libbers. She asked the editors,

Is it to remind us of this central "fact" that you think has slipped our minds? Does it not occur to you that we, too, think about health, and that our analysis of fat women's health differs from the one you've been hearing all your lives? That our analysis is based upon the same radical feminist principles that have involved us in other aspects of women's liberation?<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Ruth Silverman, "Dieting: the modern footbinding" *Off Our Backs* Vol 9 No 11 (December, 1979), 31.

<sup>133</sup> Silverman, 31.

<sup>134</sup> Aldebaran, "oob perpetuating stereotypes" *Off Our Backs* Vol 9, No 11 (December, 1979), 31.

<sup>135</sup> Aldebaran, "oob perpetuating stereotypes."

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

Damningly, she asserted that “I have seen no evidence that you have studied fat liberation at all.”<sup>137</sup> *OOB* exploited the “popular stereotype of fat liberation as mindless, self-indulgent, and irresponsible. Rather like saying that radical dykes are too stupid to tell the girls from the boys and too depraved to care.” In her typical acerbic style, Aldebaran finished by declaring that “the suggestion that fat liberationists have somehow missed out on those facts everyone else knows is just amazing.”<sup>138</sup> In subsequent issues, Aldebaran wrote letters critical of the “liberalism” of *OOB* which manifested as a “passive approach of publishing letters from fat liberationists and also publishing letters from those who oppose fat liberation.”<sup>139</sup> This both-sidesism of *OOB*, in effect, was a perpetuation of fat women’s oppression and “its origins, mystifications, etc.”<sup>140</sup> Aldebaran echoed Stein and others’ criticism of feminists approach to fat as a cultural artifact, noting that “when the subject is fat, all of the radical ways we have learned as feminists of looking at situations, questioning the status-quo, valuing the voice of those who reject their oppression, seem to fly out the window.”<sup>141</sup> Aldebaran signed this letter “in continuing struggle.”

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> “liberal on fat” *Off Our Backs* Vol 10 No 3 (March, 1980), 31.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Aldebaran, “liberal on fat.”

In 1983, *OOB* ran a fat-liberationist article “THE FATS OF LIFE,” replete with fat liberation materials and images. However, fat-libbers were once again dissatisfied by *OOB*’s editorial choice to position fat-positive pieces next to letters decrying the health risks of fat or

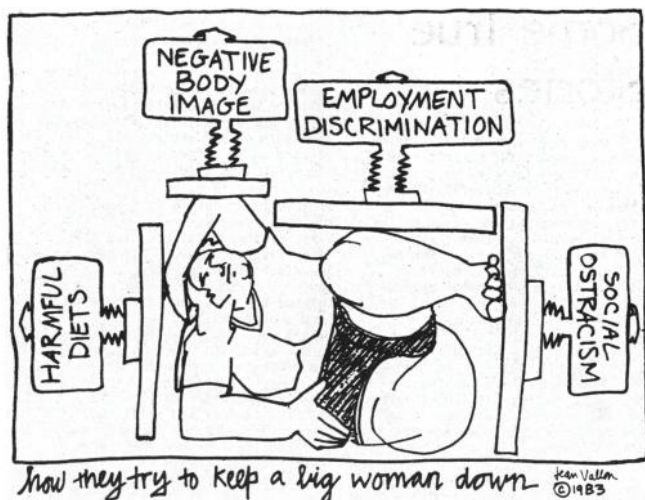


Figure 45. Illustration in *Off Our Backs*, 1983

compulsive overeating. Marjory Nelson, part of the active San Francisco fat liberation community, praised the original pro-fat piece, arguing that “control over our own bodies, including control over the amount of fat we carry, must be the bottom line of feminist politics” and that “the fat liberation movement has helped me to feel good about my body in a way that was

never touched by any of my other political work in the women’s movement or the Left.”<sup>142</sup> Yet she found the accompanying letter, which “perpetuates fat oppression” by detailing weight loss in an OA group stood as an editorial refutation of THE FATS OF LIFE and accused *OOB* of “collaborat[ing] in praise for a woman who has lost weight” and “deny[ing] that fat women can be healthy and beautiful.”<sup>143</sup> Kathy Freepers♀ had unequivocal praise for THE FATS OF LIFE, applauding *OOB* for “doing an excellent job of keeping us who take up space alive” and publishing the “needless violence and neglect” that are “heaped upon fat womyn” who are

<sup>142</sup> Marjory Nelson, “thinly veiled insult” *Off Our Backs* Vol 13 No 5 (May, 1983), 30.

<sup>143</sup> Nelson, 30.

“punished for taking up space.”<sup>144</sup> Freepers♀n again discussed the fatphobia she found in feminist and lesbian-feminist communities, particularly with “so-called feminist women” who “call themselves spiritual healers and offer holistic diets and drawings of the thin line figure after the ugly lumpy thick-line drawing.” Furthermore, Freepers♀n questioned feminists’ unchallenging acceptance of medical information about fat, which she argued came from the same “straight schools’ data and university courses” as the homophobic “science” feminist-lesbians rejected so strongly.<sup>145</sup>

The evolving conversation in *OOB* continued after the publication of *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* in 1983. Edited by Aldebaran under the name Vivian Mayer, this collection embraced the radical potential of fat bodies with essays by Mayer, Freespirit, Stein, Dykewoman and others. Their work explored the daily lived experiences of fat women, fat women’s relationship to exercise and physical expression, and the often-disastrous medicalization of fat female bodies.<sup>146</sup> *OOB* again displayed the “liberal” both-sidesism when they offered a review of *Shadow* alongside an essay by Loraine Hitchins about her personal struggle with compulsive overeating and the healing she found in OA. Fat liberationists explicitly rejected the connection between fatness and compulsive behavior, considering compulsive a “very destructive term” used to accuse “fat womyn” of being “out of control, sick, [and] weak.”<sup>147</sup> Freepers♀n saw the label “compulsive overeater” as a victim-blaming tactic to

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<sup>144</sup> Kathy Freepers♀n, “heavy punishment,” *Off Our Backs* Vol 13 No 5 (May, 1983), 30.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser, Eds., *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (Iowa City, Iowa: Aunt Lute Books, 1983).

<sup>147</sup> Freepers♀n, “Fighting Against Compulsive Hostility,” *Off Our Backs* Vol 15 No 10 (November, 1985), 25.

“throw back responsibility for a political condition on women, fat women.” She accuses OA of this particularly, writing that “I am against Overeaters Anonymous because in the politically perilous situation where we are on the boarder edge of starvation as women and female children in RAY-gun-omics, that is like saying to a drowning womyn, I can’t throw you a life raft until you fix your hair- off the point.”<sup>148</sup>

Who gets to be radically fat? Rensenbrink notes that in the early 1980s the most radical edge of fat activism declared themselves *really* fat and “positioned themselves as the most radical edge of the fat feminist movement.”<sup>149</sup> There was no earlier time, however, in which fat libbers had not “used fat as a weapon against patriarchy.” These women were not emerging from a larger group to further radicalize, they were instead reminding new, less radical embracers of fat that they were always militant. The really fat used Freespirit’s distinction that “it’s not a matter of pounds, it’s access” explaining that the really fat “can’t get through a turnstile, can’t sit in a movie seat.” Of course, as Americans in general expanded in size, commercial venues expanded with them, constantly complicating the mutable categories of size. As the “body positivity” and “fat acceptance” movements work to normalize fat bodies, standards shift to embrace larger bodies via media like *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*. Yet these new standards retain methods of surveillance and draw strict lines around acceptability. Acceptable fat bodies, like those shown in dove commercials or on TLC, are typically young, often white, maintain other standards of beauty, and feature a Rubinesque sensuality that still presumes a male gaze.

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<sup>148</sup> Freepers ♀n, “Fighting Against Compulsive Hostility.”

<sup>149</sup> Rensenbrink, 235.

Alongside the “freakshow” of *My 600 lb Life*, they remind women that even fat bodies must be surveilled and scrutinized lest they become “truly” fat.



## CONCLUSION

From the early twentieth century, when advice columnists, salon managers, and doctors sought to establish authority over women's body size, fat and fat-fearing women talked back. They talked back in T.O.P.S., by claiming an equal partnership with the AMA in helping women lose weight, and by creating narratives of dieting that suited their lives and needs in the 1950s and '60s. They shut out the doctors and talked to each other and to God in groups like OA and OV in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. In these groups, women undertook body work through interpersonal relationships, as they attempted to understand and to articulate what it meant to be fat in their time. The meaning of fat is historical. A fat woman in 1948 was in danger of being a bad citizen, an ineffective mother, and a lousy wife. A fat woman in 1968 heard messages that she would not succeed in college, in a career, or in love and sex. Weight Watchers, in the 1970s and '80s, built an empire on those fears, and sold a weight-loss program to emerging career woman, folding weight-control into the evolving image of a shoulder-padded corporate woman.

In 2017, the diet industry continues to expand. Weight Watchers, thanks to their partnership with Oprah, announced increasing revenue for the first time in years.<sup>1</sup> New apps pop up daily to track our food, weight, exercise. The obesity epidemic is part of our daily news experience. Fat looms large. The house GOP has just voted to gut the ACA, or "Obamacare" and

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Giammona, "Weight Watchers Surges After Oprah Effect Helps Fuel Profit," *Bloomberg*, May 3, 2017. Online.

their rhetoric of “personal responsibility” for health is built on a fundamental assumption that individuals largely have control over their health and wellness. Though attention to wellness and well-being is related to overall good health, the true lines between health and illness remain largely structural: Poverty, environment. “Obesity” looms large in conversations of personal responsibility, marking fat people as visibly careless of their health, a drain on supposedly scarce resources, and a public health menace. The moralizing of health is disproportionately aimed at fat people, and their supposed selfish and weak-willed disregard over their own health used as a shorthand for the GOP stance on health. It’s not the government’s problem if you can’t stop eating! America teeters on a precipice of a health care disaster, one in which fat women can be denied health care based on either their gender or their size.<sup>2</sup>

There is an alternative. One that acknowledges structural forces in health, and does not create an axiomatic relationship between fat and wellness, one that seeks community-based solutions to health care. The above communities have two important things in common: they are built around the ideas that only fat women can understand and help each other, and that all aspects of health and well-being are shared problems. They suggest that approaches to health work best when de-coupled from capitalism. Further, they tell us that holistic health includes not only mental, physical, and emotional care, but also an understanding of how personal health

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<sup>2</sup> The AHCA passed by the house on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017 allows states to opt out of protecting citizens with pre-existing conditions. The bill as passed would allow insurance companies to list the following as pre-conditions: obesity, domestic violence, rape, and C-sections. Sarah Spellings, “In Trump’s America, Being Sexually Assaulted Could Make Your Health Insurance More Expensive,” *New York Magazine*, “The Cut,” Online. May 4, 2017. <http://nymag.com/thecut/2017/05/new-healthcare-bill-ahca-sexual-assault.html>.

relates to systematic oppression or injustice. The women in this story got together and chewed the fat, let's keep it going.

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## VITA

Amelia Serafine received a B.A. in modern European history from the University of Pittsburgh in 2007 and an M.A. in American history from Loyola University in 2010. During her time as a doctoral student and candidate at Loyola University, Serafine received an invitation to the Alpha Sigma Nu Jesuit honor society and the Ramonat Graduate Fellowship. She also served her academic community in numerous roles, including serving as president of the History Graduate Student Association.

Interested in the histories of gender, sexuality, and popular culture, Serafine has published work on southern belle's and popular romance, and has presented on a wide variety of topics- from frontier history in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to the hobo in literary culture. Serafine's current work focuses on the negotiation of body size in the twentieth century, and the experience of fat women in America.

