

## “Stop Postponing Your Life Until You Lose Weight and Start Living Now”: Vancouver’s Large as Life Action Group, 1979–1985

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### Résumé de l'article

Le groupe pour l'acceptation de l'obésité de Vancouver, *Large as Life* (LAL), a été actif de 1979 à 1985. Les membres fondatrices du LAL se sont rencontrées lors d'un atelier de thérapie Gestalt à l'intention des femmes obèses en 1979 et ont finalement décidé que la discussion ne suffisait pas pour résoudre les problèmes qu'elles éprouvaient quotidiennement. Pour ces femmes, l'obésité n'était pas uniquement un sentiment, mais un problème matériel qui pouvait se résoudre en élaborant des sites et des services sociaux qui répondraient aux besoins des femmes obèses. Ceux-ci comprendraient des groupes de culture physique, et d'échange de vêtements, des défilés de mode et des ateliers de développement personnel. Au moyen d'entrevues avec d'anciens membres de *Large as Life* et d'articles du bulletin du groupe, *The Bolster*, cet article examine les perspectives des femmes obèses par rapport à la féminité, la santé et la mode dans les années 1980. Il fait valoir que les pratiques communes élaborées par les membres de *Large as Life* sont un exemple de la complexité de la féminité vécue dans les années 1980 et, en particulier, il offre un point de vue sur la façon dont les femmes se sentaient et se situaient elles-mêmes par rapport aux normes des années 1980 relatives à la beauté et à l'apparence physique.

# **“Stop Postponing Your Life Until You Lose Weight and Start Living Now”: Vancouver’s Large as Life Action Group, 1979–1985**

**JENNY ELLISON**

## ***Abstract***

*Vancouver fat acceptance group Large as Life (LAL) was active between 1979 and 1985. The founding members of LAL met at a Gestalt therapy workshop for fat women only in 1979, but ultimately decided that talking was not enough to resolve the problems they experienced on a day-to-day basis. For these women, fat was not just a feeling but a material problem that could be solved through the development of social sites and services that catered to fat women. These would include fitness classes, fashion shows, clothing swaps and personal development workshops. Using interviews with former Large as Life members, together with articles from the group’s newsletter, The Bolster, this paper examines fat women’s perspectives on femininity, health, and fashion in the 1980s. It argues that the shared practices developed among members of Large as Life are an example of the lived complexity of femininity in the 1980s, and, specifically, offers insight into how women experienced and situated themselves in relation to the beauty and bodily norms of the 1980s.*

## ***Résumé***

*Le groupe pour l’acceptation de l’obésité de Vancouver, Large as Life (LAL), a été actif de 1979 à 1985. Les membres fondatrices du LAL se sont rencontrées lors d’un atelier de thérapie Gestalt à l’intention des femmes obèses en 1979 et ont finalement décidé que la discussion ne suffisait pas pour résoudre les problèmes qu’elles éprouvaient quotidiennement. Pour ces femmes, l’obésité n’était pas uniquement un sentiment, mais un problème matériel qui pouvait se résoudre en élaborant des sites et des services sociaux qui répondraient aux besoins des femmes obèses. Ceux-ci comprendraient des groupes de culture physique, et d’échange de vêtements, des défilés de mode et des ateliers de développement personnel. Au moyen d’entrevues avec d’anciens membres de Large as Life et d’articles du bulletin du groupe, The Bolster, cet article examine les perspectives des femmes obèses par rapport à la féminité, la santé et la mode dans les années 1980. Il fait valoir que les pratiques communes*

*élaborées par les membres de Large as Life sont un exemple de la complexité de la féminité vécue dans les années 1980 et, en particulier, il offre un point de vue sur la façon dont les femmes se sentaient et se situaient elles-mêmes par rapport aux normes des années 1980 relatives à la beauté et à l'apparence physique.*

In the late 1970s and early 1980s women in Canada began meeting in living rooms and church basements to discuss the possibility of fat acceptance. These groups were locally based, and, initially, unaware of the existence of other Canadian women meeting to talk about similar issues. Some of the participants were familiar with American fat liberation groups, including the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA, 1969 to present); but rarely did they see their interest in fat as a direct extension of this earlier activism.<sup>1</sup> Nor did these women see their interest in fat as part of any singular political or ideological project. For this reason, fat acceptance activities do not fit easily into existing social movement histories. The basic premise — that it was okay to be fat — had different applications depending on what each group believed the solutions to this problem might be.<sup>2</sup>

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1 In 1969 William Fabrey formed NAAFA (then known as the National Association to Aid Fat Americans). NAAFA was initially conceived as a social group for self-identified fat people and any empathetic individual. In 1970 Fabrey told the *New York Times* that his inspiration for the organization grew out of difficulty he had meeting fat women as a student at Cornell University. After some investigating he had discovered that the university had a policy against admitting overweight students because they “would have trouble climbing the steep Ithaca hills.” For reasons unexplained Joyce Fabrey subverted this policy and was admitted to Cornell where she met her enthusiastic future husband. NAAFA was inspired by this and other forms of discrimination Joyce experienced. By the early 1980s the group’s focus had expanded. Around this time the group changed its name to the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance and began to advocate against discrimination of fat people in the work place and by insurance companies. NAAFA also began to argue that the effects of overweight on health were being exaggerated in medical and popular reporting on health. By the mid-1980s the group had over 1000 members, about 65 percent of which were female. See Charlotte Cooper, *Fat and Proud* (London: The Women’s Press, 1998); Maureen Downey, “Fat people’s advocacy group battles attitudes,” *Atlanta Constitution* (8 September 1987), D1; Sharon McCormack, “Society’s Attitudes Changing / Fat People Fight for Self-Esteem,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (5 July 1989); Marcia Millman, *Such a Pretty Face* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980); Judy Klemesrud, “There are a lot of people willing to believe that fat is beautiful,” *New York Times* (18 August 1970).

2 The seven examples of organizations I found organized by fat women for fat women in Canada in the 1980s and 1990s ranged in size from five to over 100 members. They are: Large as Life Vancouver (1981–1985); Large as Life Calgary (1982 to circa 1984); Large as Life London (1997 – 1998); LG5 (*lesbiennes grosse cinq*) of Montreal (1984–1992), NAAFA-CASA Canada (1989 to circa 1994); Above Average of Prince Albert, Sask. (c.1989); and Hersize of Toronto (1987 to circa 1992). Most organizations were based in urban centres: Vancouver,

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This paper focuses on the activities of one fat acceptance group, Vancouver’s Large as Life (LAL), which was active between 1979 and 1985. The founding members of LAL met at a Gestalt therapy workshop for fat women in 1979, but ultimately decided that talking was not enough to resolve the problems they experienced on a day-to-day basis. For these women, fat was not just a feeling but a material problem that could be solved through the development of social sites and services that catered to fat women, which would include fitness classes, fashion shows, clothing swaps, and personal development workshops.

In terms of membership and activities, LAL is the most significant example of organizing for fat women in Canada in the 1980s. Between 1981 and 1985 the names of over 100 members appeared in LAL’s newsletter, *The Bolster*. In 1982 the newsletter itself claimed a circulation of 500 individuals and groups.<sup>3</sup> The 31 issues of *The Bolster* contain first-person narratives, critiques of newspaper and television advertisements, medical research, fashion and fitness tips.<sup>4</sup> Using *The Bolster* as my starting point, I was able to contact and interview nine former members of LAL.

Interviews with former Large as Life members and *The Bolster* together provide insight into fat women’s perspectives on femininity, health, and fashion in the 1980s. What emerged from these sources was a range of sometimes conflicting opinions about the relationship of fat to femininity, feminism, and politics in this period. LAL members’ willingness to work across differences, a characteristic Jill Vickers suggests is common to women’s organizing in Canada in the 1970s, was based on the assumption of a shared fat women’s experience.<sup>5</sup> The basis of this shared claim was that fat women were excluded and marginalized in the worlds of fashion, fitness, and beauty. The goal of the group was to develop social sites and services that catered to fat women. In this sense, LAL’s activism confirms the oft-repeated claim that a new normative

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Calgary, Toronto, and Montreal. One group was based in Prince Albert, Sask., and there is also evidence that women from rural Canada received newsletters and communicated with the urban groups. I also have evidence of “Fat is a Feminist Issue” consciousness raising groups meeting in Winnipeg, Calgary, and Montreal in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

3 Ingrid Laue, “Editor’s Sphere,” *The Bolster* (September 1982): 21.

4 The newsletter was not given the title *The Bolster* until the September 1981 issue. Thus, the August 1981 and September through November 1984 issues are cited as *Large as Life (Newsletter)*. The August 1981 to May 1983 newsletters are available in the Canadian Women’s Movement Archives, Ottawa. All issues after September 1983 were shared with me by former members during the course of our interviews.

5 Vickers says that Canada’s geography and linguistic differences have necessitated a tolerance for conflicting opinions within the “second wave” of the Canadian women’s movement. Jill Vickers, “The Intellectual Origins of the Women’s Movement in Canada,” in *Challenging times: the women’s movement in Canada and the United States*, ed. Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 41-3.

femininity emerged in the 1980s, which placed increasing pressures on all women to be thin and toned.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the shared practices developed among members of Large as Life, including aerobics classes and clothing swaps, offer an example of the lived complexity of femininity in the 1980s. This paper contributes to a growing Canadian literature on this topic, including Valerie Korinek's *Roughing It In the Suburbs*, Mona Gleason's *Normalizing the Ideal*, Kathryn McPherson's *Bedside Matters*, and Jarrett Rudy's *The Freedom to Smoke*, that examine how the symbolic dimensions of masculine and feminine ideals played out in practice. Like these studies, this paper examines competing claims about the "truth" of women and their bodies and how these claims relate to popular ideals of the time.<sup>7</sup> Where I depart from these other texts is in my focus on women who, even when they did not intend or wish to do so, lived on the boundaries of what was considered acceptably feminine. LAL's history was characterized by this tension: between members' critique of normative femininity and their desire to take part in feminine culture. My focus, therefore, is not on the history of fat bodies, but on how one group of women talked, felt, reflected on, and used their bodies in interactions with each other. The result is a history that looks at some of the trajectories of women's organizing outside of the feminist movement in the 1980s, and, specifically, offers insight into how women experienced and situated themselves in relation to the beauty and bodily norms of the 1980s.

My use of the term fat, rather than large or obese, is deliberate. Fat has been adopted in both activist and academic discussions of the subject as a dou-

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6 Estelle B. Freedman, *No turning back: the history of feminism and the future of women*, 1st ed. (New York: Ballantine, 2002), 226; Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 274; Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Toronto: Random House, 1990), 4. This sort of critique has also been the basis for studies of fat women in the fields of Fat and Cultural studies. Works by Mary Russo, Angela Stukator, and Kathleen LeBesco liken fat women to the transgressive and "low" body described by Mikhail Bakhtin. These authors argue that fat offers a potentially resistant subjectivity from which women can challenge feminine and bodily norms. See Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolt Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 124.; Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," in *Feminist Studies Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 59; Angela Stukator, "'It's not over until the fat lady sings' Comedy, the Carnavalesque and Body Politics," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 201.

7 Jarrett Rudy, *The Freedom to Smoke: Tobacco Consumption and Identity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005); Kathryn McPherson, *Bedside Matters: The Transformation of Canadian Nursing, 1900–1990* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Valerie Korinek, *Roughing it in the Suburbs: Reading Chatelaine Magazine in the Fifties and Sixties* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Mona Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal: Psychology, Schooling and the Family in Postwar Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

ble act of politicization and reclamation of the term.<sup>8</sup> Although fat has not been consistently adopted by activists working in Canada, it was preferred to euphemistic and infantilizing words such as chubby, as well as medical terms such as obesity.<sup>9</sup> Like fat, the term fat acceptance does not have a singular definition. I use the term to describe the processes LAL members went through in their attempts to come to terms with their body size. Some LAL members believed that personal acceptance by fat women would lead to greater social acceptance of fat people. Occasionally, I also use the terms fat oppression and fat liberation, which were used by activist groups with an explicitly Marxist or feminist agenda. These activists argued that oppression was reproduced in the material conditions of day to day life, including social spaces, clothing, and medical services, which did not accommodate fat bodies.<sup>10</sup> My research shows that more moderate Canadian activists drew on ideas and literature produced by these groups, including Fat Underground of Los Angeles and LG5 (*lesbiennes grosse cinq*) of Montreal.

### The Forgotten Woman

Kate Partridge, Janet Walker, and Joan Dal Santo met for the first time on 22 October 1979, at the Cold Mountain Institute on Cortes Island, British Columbia.<sup>11</sup> The women were three among 20 in attendance at a workshop,

8 Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco, eds., *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 2; Cooper, *Fat and Proud*, 130; Christine Donald, *The Fat Woman Measures Up* (Charlottetown, P.E.I.: Ragweed Press, 1986), 7; Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser, eds., *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (Iowa City: Aunt Lute Publishing Company, 1983), xi; Allyson Mitchell, “Pissed Off,” in *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, ed. Don Kulick and Anne Meneley (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 213.

9 For example, Suzanne Bell, interview by author, New Westminster, B.C., 4 October 2005; Sandra Friedman, interview by author, Sechelt, B.C., 7 October 2005; Ingrid Laue, interview by author, North Vancouver, B.C., 3 October 2005; Kate Partridge, interview by author, Crediton, Ont., 20 September 2005; Janet Walker, interview by author, White Rock, B.C., 6 October 2005.

10 See Marie-Michele, “Une torche sert à éclairer; une <<grosse torche>> à insulter ou C’est dans la tête qu’on est grosse! Hommage à LG5.,” *Treize..!* III, no. 1; Judy Freespirit and Vivian [Aldebaran] Mayer, “Fat Liberation Manifesto,” in *Shadow on a Tightrope*. ed. Schoenfielder and Wieser; Elana Dykewoman, “Fat Liberation,” in *Lesbian Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Bonnie Zimmerman (New York: Garland, 2000); Kate Partridge, “Dear Friends,” *Large as Life (Newsletter)* (August 1981), 1; Pat Lyons and Debbie Burgard, *Great Shape: The First Exercise Guide for Large Women* (New York: Arbor House — William Morrow, 1988).

11 Today Cold Mountain Institute is known as Hollyhock. The institute was a non-profit education centre that opened in 1968, offering personal growth seminars and workshops. Bachelor’s and Master’s level degrees could also be obtained through an affiliate program with Antioch College. Ellen Tallman, interview by author, Vancouver, B.C., 12 October 2005; Cold Mountain Institute, “Cold Mountain Journal” (January–April 1978).

“The Forgotten Woman: For Fat Women Only.” The workshop was advertised in the September–November Cold Mountain Institute workshop flyer as,

... An intense experiential exploration of our relationship to our body size and shape. In an effort to get at *forgotten*, unknown or unexplored material in relation to our weight, we will be on a juice fast, use journals and dream material and appropriate therapeutic techniques.

This program is suitable for anyone who considers herself overweight, but may be of most use to those who are considered by others to be overweight. Medical permission required. Fee: \$250.<sup>12</sup>

The idea for the workshop came out of an individual therapy session between Dal Santo and Miriam Ulrych, an instructor at Cold Mountain. Having reached a plateau in her therapy the recently divorced Dal Santo told Ulrych she felt it was time to work on the fact that she was fat and “seemed to be stuck with it.”<sup>13</sup> Partridge, at the time a Ph.D. candidate in Psychology, was familiar with the work of Ellen Tallman, a Gestalt therapist who led the workshop. At 32 Partridge felt it was time to deal with “the whole self-image thing.”<sup>14</sup> Janet Walker came to Cortes at the recommendation of her therapists, who paid the workshop fee for the recently divorced mother of two. Walker was uncertain about leaving her children with a babysitter, but felt that she “had to go. It was sort of like life and death, it was really important.”<sup>15</sup> All three women described themselves as having been fat their entire lives.<sup>16</sup>

Tallman’s goal was to get participants to take “responsibility for” their “own existence.”<sup>17</sup> This reflected Tallman’s training as a Gestalt therapist, a type of therapy which encouraged the patient to “experience himself.”<sup>18</sup> Through greater awareness of “how” people function “as an organism and as a person,” Gestalt proposes to restore participants’ whole selves.<sup>19</sup> “The Forgotten Woman” used group therapy techniques, such as role playing and movement exercises,

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12 A copy of this flyer was given to me by Ellen Tallman. The flyers were available from the institute and also probably mailed out to potential/former Cold Mountain participants. Cold Mountain Institute, “Vancouver Workshops” (September–November 1979).

13 Joan [Dal Santo] O’Brien, interview by author, Sechelt, B.C., 7 October 2005.

14 Partridge interview.

15 Walker interview.

16 Upon reflection, Dal Santo noted that she had not been “that fat” as a teenager. A similar shift in perspective was noted by other interview subjects in my wider study. O’Brien interview; Partridge interview; Walker interview.

17 Frederick Perls, Ralph Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1951), 15; Tallman interview.

18 Ellen Tallman interned with Frederick Perls, the originator of Gestalt therapy. Tallman interview.

19 Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*, 17.

in order to increase awareness of the *conscious* self and to restore “various parts of” the self “that were not connected.”<sup>20</sup> Tallman saw fat acceptance as a psychological issue that could be resolved through individual work on the self. Vancouver was a hot-bed for the New Left and the counter-culture in the 1960s and 1970s, a period when most Large as Lifers were in their teens and twenties. Tallman’s, and later LAL’s approach, certainly echoes the counter-cultural notion that “personal transformation” was the key to a “consciousness revolution” and had the potential to “liberate the individual and radically transform society.”<sup>21</sup> This shared preoccupation with the self-actualization can be seen as a part of a general late-twentieth century preoccupation with the self that has been identified in sociological and historical literature.<sup>22</sup>

Over the course of their five-day workshop, participants in “The Forgotten Woman” were encouraged to explore their feelings about fat as well as their bodies. Tallman recalled that many women had come with “a sense of shame and despair over what they hadn’t been able to shift and change in relation to their body size.” What she was attempting to teach the women was to “care for themselves as they were and not be their own enemy.”<sup>23</sup> One visualization exercise began with the women lying on the floor, fully clothed. They were instructed to “feel and care” about each part of their bodies, and encouraged to “pay extra attention” to parts of their body they didn’t like.<sup>24</sup> Another activity asked participants to “get into their bodies” and dance freely around the room. The description of this exercise is taken from a 1980 *Chatelaine* article by Eve Rockett. Joan Dal Santo recalled this activity as a positive one, “I just remember us dancing freely and enjoying the movement in our bodies which is something that I think a lot of us, me for sure, and I think others too, didn’t do often.”<sup>25</sup>

Both Dal Santo and Partridge felt that their time at Cold Mountain shifted their perceptions of fat women. Dal Santo acknowledged that prior to the workshop she tended to avoid close friendships with fat women.<sup>26</sup> Partridge similarly described attempts to disassociate herself from other fat women

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20 Tallman interview.

21 Frank Zelko, “Making Greenpeace: The Development of Direct Action Environmentalism in British Columbia,” *BC Studies*, no. 142-143 (2004): 214, 38.

22 Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal*; Roy F. Baumeister, “How the Self became a problem: a psychological review of historical research,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52, no. 1 (1987); Steven Ward, “Filling the World with Self-Esteem: A Social History of Truth-Making,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 21, no. 1 (1996); Michel Foucault, “About the beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self,” in *Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999).

23 Tallman interview.

24 Eve Rockett, “Five Days on a Fat Farm,” *Chatelaine* (May 1980): 42.

25 O’Brien interview.

26 *Ibid.*



before “The Forgotten Woman.”<sup>27</sup> This avoidance changed for both on their return to Vancouver, when some of the workshop participants began to meet regularly.<sup>28</sup> Despite the strength she found in this contact with other fat women, Partridge continued to be discouraged by her own food and weight issues.<sup>29</sup> Her developing sense of confidence was also frustrated by the lack of exercise opportunities and clothing stores for large women in Vancouver. In the spring of 1981 she decided to contact the fashion editor of the *Vancouver Sun* who did a story on the dearth of fashion choices for plus-sized women. Readers were encouraged to contact Partridge if they were interested in doing something about this problem. The resulting phone calls reflected so much interest that Partridge called a public meeting at a local community centre in June 1981; over 50 women attended.<sup>30</sup>

### Large as Life

When asked if there was anything distinctive about the women in attendance at this first meeting, Dal Santo said:

[I]t wasn't just a bunch of educated middle-class women, it wasn't a bunch of intellectuals, it wasn't anything. It was a whole cross-section of people, housewives, and business people, women feeling, I think they all felt that they were forgotten, that they were put down, that they were not cared for in society in any way, not valued.<sup>31</sup>

Prior to LAL's June 1981 meeting, Evelyn Booth had never been in a roomful of large women. Booth recalls being “impressed” by the number in attendance, “I was pleased that there were so many women who were rebellious. That in itself powered me up. It was like da da da daaaaa, Joan of Arc.”<sup>32</sup> Janet Walker was likewise impressed by the women in attendance, noting, “there seemed to be an aliveness that you didn't associate with fat at the time.”<sup>33</sup> Although virtually all of these women had at some point felt stigmatized by their weight, they saw in each other intelligence, style, and potential. Booth used the metaphor “coming out of the closet” to describe what it was like to join a group of fat woman talking about being large.<sup>34</sup> Given that weight is a highly visible physical characteristic, the idea that being fat was a secret may seem absurd.

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27 Partridge interview.

28 Rockett, “Five Days on a Fat Farm,” 148.

29 Kate Partridge, follow-up interview by author, Exeter, Ont., 16 April 2006.

30 Partridge interview.

31 O'Brien interview.

32 Evelyn Booth, follow-up interview by author, Vancouver, B.C., 12 August 2006.

33 Walker interview.

34 Booth follow-up interview.

However, activities such as shopping in plus-sized clothing stores, exercise, and eating had been shrouded in shame and embarrassment for many of these women.<sup>35</sup> Coming out of the closet in this case was not necessarily a revelation for friends and family members, but rather an acknowledgment to herself: I am fat. What now?

Partridge outlined her vision for the organization at the first meeting. Ingrid Laue recalled that Partridge focused on specific issues, including the stigmatization of fat women, the notion that fat women eat “inordinately much,” the “clothing issue,” job discrimination, and low self-esteem.<sup>36</sup> Partridge felt that to “just stand up there and say, I’m Kate, I’m fat, I’m okay and so are you” was very powerful.<sup>37</sup> After her speech Partridge encouraged attendees to speak up. Initially, the women were reticent, but, eventually, a lively discussion occurred.<sup>38</sup> Partridge had come up with the name Large as Life for the organization and the membership was pleased with it.<sup>39</sup> The choice of the term large over fat seems to have been intentional. Partridge recalled being aware of “a more radical fat liberation movement” that “never appealed to me.”<sup>40</sup> Members were also aware of the existence of NAAFA in the United States and wished to distance themselves from the social and dating function of that organization.<sup>41</sup> Contrary to “political” American organizations, such as NAAFA or the Fat Underground, most felt LAL’s approach to fat issues should be “practical.”<sup>42</sup> This practical focus consisted of activities that would improve members’ experience with fashion, fitness, and beauty.

Large as Life’s focus on fashion, their use of the term large, as well as the lack of explicit links to women’s liberation, would have signalled to potential members that it was not a radical group. As previously noted, Vancouver had a significant population of anti-consumerist New Left activists and self-identified Hippies conversant in radical politics in this period. The city also had its own alternative paper, *The Georgia Straight*, which circulated information on radical and alternative events in the city.<sup>43</sup> Partridge chose to approach the *Vancouver Sun* and never thought or sought to publicize LAL in the *Georgia*

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35 For example, Bell interview; Booth, interview by author, North Vancouver, B.C., 11 October 2005; Susan Masterton, interview by author, North Vancouver, B.C., 11 October 2005.

36 Laue interview.

37 Partridge interview.

38 Booth follow-up interview; Partridge interview; Laue interview.

39 There is a discrepancy in former members’ accounts of how the name Large as Life came about. Partridge recalls thinking of it one night while lying in bed. She then took the idea to the meeting where things were put to a vote. Laue recalls that the group came up with the name collectively. Laue interview.

40 Partridge interview.

41 Bell interview.

42 Partridge interview.

43 Ibid.

*Straight.* The *Vancouver Sun* article's focus on fashion in sizes fourteen and higher would further have signalled to potential members that the group was directed toward women who were large enough that they had difficulty finding clothing in so-called regular clothing stores. Otherwise, fat was not explicitly defined by LAL. No one was ever refused because they were not considered fat enough, but former members do not recall anyone attending whom they did not consider fat. Meetings, open to members and potential members, were held monthly (except July and August) between September 1981 and April 1985. The format of these evenings usually involved a combination of social time and a speaker with discussion and questions to follow. The executive and subcommittees would meet separately to plan events, such as fashion shows, aerobics classes, and clothing swaps.

A broad range of subjects were covered at the meetings. In addition to fashion and self-presentation talks, such as "What to wear when your zippers won't zip,"<sup>44</sup> language, fat as a human rights issue, job discrimination, navigating public space, dieting, and sexuality were subjects for discussion. Janet Walker described LAL meetings as a place where members could "come together as large women, to be accepted as individuals, and not fear that someone will get out the scales and pronounce that we blew our diet this week!"<sup>45</sup> Walker refers here to the format of commercial weight loss programs, such as Weight Watchers, where participants weigh-in on a weekly basis. Most LALers had come of age in the 1960s, a period when dieting was becoming pervasive and was "here to stay," according to *Chatelaine*. Valerie Korinek has noted that the 1960s saw increased media interest in "Cinderella Stories" of successful dieters in *Chatelaine*.<sup>46</sup> Such narratives of successful, often dramatic, weight loss continued to be popular in the magazine into the 1980s, when Large as Life formed. Terry Poulton, who later wrote a book lampooning her experience, was the subject of a feature on losing 60-lbs in six months in 1982.<sup>47</sup> LAL members had tried and failed at such diets. This frustration led many to join the group in the first place, and meetings offered a safe haven from a culture that was

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44 Large as Life Action Group, "Next Meeting," *The Bolster* (April 1982): 3.

45 Janet Walker, "October Meeting," *The Bolster* (November 1982): 19.

46 *Ibid.*, 205.

47 Terry Poulton, *No Fat Chicks: How Big Business Profits by Making Women Hate Their Bodies — and How to Fight Back* (Toronto: Birch Lane Press, 1998); Terry Poulton, "Chatelaine's 6-Month Slimdown Plan, Part One," *Chatelaine* (January 1982); Poulton, "Chatelaine's 6-Month Slimdown Plan, Part 2," *Chatelaine* (February 1982); Poulton, "Chatelaine's 6-Month Slimdown Plan, Part 3," *Chatelaine* (March 1982); Poulton, "Chatelaine's 6-Month Slimdown Plan Part 4," *Chatelaine* (April 1982); Poulton, "Chatelaine's 6-Month Slimdown Plan, Part 5," *Chatelaine* (May 1983); Poulton, "Chatelaine's 6-Month Slimdown Plan, Part-6," *Chatelaine* (June 1983); Poulton, "Fat Like Me," *Chatelaine* (September 1985). Poulton willingly participated in the slim-down plan in 1982, but went on to pillory the process, and dieting, in her later writing.

preoccupied with dieting and slenderness. Their format paralleled not only diet clubs, but consciousness raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s, where women met to “uncover their oppression by speaking their experiences.”<sup>48</sup> Michelle Murphy argues that women in such groups sought each other out, turning “what had previously been seen as individual idiosyncrasies into commonalities.”<sup>49</sup> As the remainder of this paper will show, fat was the common denominator that brought women with differing opinions together in search of safe spaces to exercise and find clothing.

### Sex and Politics

Power differentials between the researcher and researched are generally conceived in terms of gender and ethnicity, but my interviews suggest that the age and body of the researcher may be also be criteria that impact the interview process. Participants asked questions and commented on my appearance and demeanor before, after, and during the interviews. This engagement ranged from asking me if I thought I was fat, to telling me I was not fat. Conversely, I was told I wasn’t that small, that I was curvy, and, on another occasion, a participant told me she wasn’t sure I was myself fat accepting. Rather than being seen as a de facto expert on this topic, perceived differences in experience led my collaborators to question my authority.<sup>50</sup> My role as researcher, and age, were also questioned when I asked about sensitive subjects, including sexuality and politics. When I asked about sex one of my collaborators paused, laughed nervously, and mused out loud, “[H]ow much am I going to tell this young woman?”<sup>51</sup> Others distanced themselves from sexuality as an issue, noting it wasn’t a problem or making vague reference to their own ambivalence about the subject.<sup>52</sup> Asking former LALers about sex proved to be a methodological challenge. My collaborators were reluctant to elaborate on the subject of sex because LAL did not have a firm position on the issue and members did not see it as relevant to their activities.

There are few references to sexuality in *The Bolster*. Sharon Christmas reported that at the 19 September 1983 meeting the group held a “Fun Fashion Nite,” which included three visitors. One speaker talked about hair care, a second showed three of her own fashion designs, and a third, LAL member Barbara Berry, talked about her mail order panty hose and leotard business. Another company, Love Nest Lingerie, had a display table at this meeting

48 Vickers, “The Intellectual Origins of the Women’s Movement in Canada,” 49.

49 Michelle Murphy, “Immodest Witnessing: The Epistemology of Vaginal Self-Examination in the U.S. Feminist Self-Help Movement,” *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 127.

50 Manjit Bola, “Questions of Legitimacy? The Fit Between REsearcher and REsearched,” *Feminism & Psychology* 5, no. 2: 290-303.

51 O’Brien interview.

52 Bell follow-up interview; Partridge interview.

featuring “sheer nighties, gorgeous teddies and other sexy goodies (that delighted the viewer.”<sup>53</sup> Christmas noted that several members had ordered clothing from the fashion designer, but did not report on any sales of leotards or lingerie. Christmas’ account of the fashion “fun night” is revealing in that it shows members finding out more about, and sharing access to, goods and services created by and for fat women. At the same time, Christmas’ report is vague. The items from Love Nest Lingerie are described but not the members’ reaction to them. Did the women present feel that they were sexy? Six months earlier a discussion of “Fat and Sexuality” was described as a “delicate” meeting topic. Details of the “lively discussion” that apparently went on at this talk by Sandy Friedman are not documented. Rather, Janet Walker noted only that members “were encouraged to look at sexuality in connection with our life experiences and conditioning .... The more we own our own feelings and begin to keep fewer secrets from ourselves, the more energy we will have to live more creative and fulfilling lives.”<sup>54</sup> Walker limited her commentary to the self and avoids reference to sexual partners, femininity, and fat itself. This article also reproduced the de-sexualization of fat women that occurred outside of the group. As Marcia Millman observed in her study of the NAAFA in the 1980s, “fat women are viewed as unfeminine, unattractive, masculine, out of the running.”<sup>55</sup> The absence of much discussion about sexuality may reflect LAL members’ own struggles to see themselves as sexual.

Sexual orientation was a less taboo topic for the group. The suggestion box section of the December 1981 issue of *The Bolster* read: “Some of our members may be homosexual: will they be accepted here no matter what sexual preference the rest of us may have? *LARGE AS LIFE* is an organization *without* religious, racial or sexual bias.”<sup>56</sup> When questioned on this issue, *The Bolster* editor Ingrid Laue noted that lesbians “wouldn’t have a sign on their chest saying I’m a lesbian, but we knew, we knew .... It wasn’t anything we objected to or found in any way odd ... this (British Columbia) is lotus land.”<sup>57</sup> This laid back “lotus land” approach to sexual orientation did not translate into much, if any, public discussion of lesbianism by LAL.

Even if most group members took a laid back approach to homosexuality, it may not have been because they thought it sent the wrong signals to the average woman. Partridge herself distinguished between the “radical” and “lesbian” activism of The Fat Underground and the “ordinary, middle of the road women”

53 Sharon Christmas, “Fun Fashion Nite — Sept. 19th Meeting,” *The Bolster* (September 1983): 5-6.

54 Ibid.

55 Millman, *Such a Pretty Face*, 98.

56 Ingrid Laue, “From our Suggestion Box,” *The Bolster* (December 1981): 4.

57 Laue interview.

to whom Large as Life was directed.<sup>58</sup> LAL’s decision to be inclusive but silent on lesbian issues parallels other women’s organizations in this period. Some members of liberal feminist umbrella organizations, such as the National Action Committee of Women and the British Columbia Federation of Women, were concerned that lesbian visibility harmed the credibility of their organizations. Internal divisions over the extent to which lesbians should be visible were based on stereotypes about lesbians being anti-male and anti-child.<sup>59</sup> Despite this parallel, the amount of debate generated around other controversial subjects, combined with the group’s willingness to publicly acknowledge and welcome lesbians, suggests that sexuality was not as divisive a concern for LAL as it was for some women’s organizations in the 1970s and 1980s.

Questions that seemed to ignite greater debate amongst members concerned whether or not fat was a feminist issue. In retrospect, some described Large as Life as a feminist organization,<sup>60</sup> while others refused to identify as feminist.<sup>61</sup> Still others referred to it as an organization that promoted “gentle enlightenment” but not the “boot stomping stuff,”<sup>62</sup> because they believed that feminism had a negative connotation for the general membership of LAL. A June 1982 letter to the editor in *The Bolster* suggests this view may be the case. J. Rowntree advised the incoming 1982 Board to stay away from politically oriented activism:

I’m glad to be a member of LAL which I think has the great potential of inspiring positive thinking, greater self-esteem, and an interest in fitness. I feel that by each individual gaining in these areas, others around us will most definitely notice the change over. I do draw the line at our becoming a strident, self-interested *political* pressure group or dabbling into changes in the human rights code .... Please keep things simple — no politics.<sup>63</sup>

Rowntree was responding to a profile of the new LAL board in the May 1982 issue in which Laura Thaw expressed a desire to see changes in the human rights code to protect fat people against discrimination, and Suzanne Bell said she believed “large women have the same rights as anybody else.”<sup>64</sup> In

58 Partridge interview.

59 M. Julia Creet, “A Test of Unity: Lesbian Visibility in the British Columbia Federation of Women,” in *Lesbians in Canada*, ed. Sharon Dale Stone (Toronto: Between The Lines, 1990), 189-92; Carmen Paquette, “Personal Reflections on Lesbian Organizing in Ottawa,” in *ibid.*, 226; Michèle Charland and Louise Turcotte, *entrevue par l’auteur, enregistrement numérique* (Montréal and Québec: 22 octobre 2006); Louise Turcotte, “Une présence lesbienne radicale à la foire du livre féministe,” *Amazones d’hier Lesbiennes d’aujourd’hui* 21 (mars 1990): 91-4.

60 Laura Thaw, interview by author, Surrey, B.C., 6 October 2005; Laue interview.

61 Booth interview; Walker interview.

62 Bell interview; O’Brien interview; Partridge interview.

63 J. Rowntree, “Letter to the Editor,” *The Bolster* (June 1982): 2.

64 Large as Life Action Group Executive, “Ah, there’s nothing like being a winner! Introducing your New Executive,” *The Bolster* (May 1982): 6.

response to the Rowntree letter, Thaw argued that whatever fat women do is political because “the mere fact of our size is a political statement ... as members of what I consider to be an oppressed minority, circumstances have made that choice for us.”<sup>65</sup> Political activism, Thaw maintained, begins “with ourselves. We must create greater self-esteem and self-acceptance within ourselves ... the next level would be to ‘share ourselves’ with other large women, those as yet unable or unwilling to join LAL.”

In my interviews, as in Rowntree’s letter, “politics” were explicitly and implicitly equated with feminism. Rowntree’s use of the term “strident” and her plea for LAL to “keep it simple” seem to be veiled references to feminism.<sup>66</sup> Members’ ambivalence toward feminism in *The Bolster* and their continued rejection of the label in our 2006 interviews are suggestive of some of the boundaries and tensions around the women’s movement in the early 1980s. A rights-based agenda was seen as the purview of feminists, while fashion and fitness were seen as practical matters.<sup>67</sup> Organized feminist groups in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s were focused on issues such as abortion, violence against women, and equality in the workplace.<sup>68</sup> As Elizabeth Wilson has noted, feminist debate on the issue of clothing has tended to focus on its impact on health and women’s oppression, rather than access and affordability of clothing for women.<sup>69</sup> LAL members may not have seen fashion as a legitimate political issue, or they may not have felt that “capital F” feminists would take their issues seriously.

Despite her own aversion to a political agenda, Partridge drew on rights-talk to express her hopes for LAL. She wrote in the premiere issue of *The Bolster* that gaining access to fashion and fitness would provide members with “freedom to express and be” themselves and in doing so “change ... the atti-

65 Laura Thaw, “Political?,” *The Bolster* (September 1982): 6.

66 Ibid.

67 Bell interview; Partridge interview; Walker interview.

68 For example, see articles in Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty, eds. *Challenging times: the women’s movement in Canada and the United States* (Montreal and Buffalo: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992). In order to assess the extent to which fat was or was not an issue for women’s health and feminist activists in Canada, I also reviewed documents from the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, the Canadian Advisory Committee on the Status of Women, and others at the Canadian Women’s Movement Archives at the University of Ottawa. I also reviewed documents from the Calgary Status of Women Action Committee, the Vancouver Women’s Health Collective, and the Women’s Movement Archives at the University of Victoria. Within feminist organizations, abortion, health provision, violence, and employment were critical issues in the 1970s and 1980s. Body size did not emerge as an issue until the mid-1980s. After 1985 public health programming directed against crash dieting reflected some of the health messaging Large as Life was using in the early 1980s.

69 Elizabeth Wilson, “Fashion and the Postmodern Body,” in *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Wilson and Juliet Ash (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993), 9.

tudes of our community and society.”<sup>70</sup> Here, and elsewhere, the language of “politics” and “practices” intersected and overlapped. LAL’s practical orientation further echoes feminist self-help and radical feminist approaches of the 1970s, which emphasized that “women’s experiences, not books or other types of expertise, were the best repositories of knowledge about women.” By assigning “epistemic privilege to experience,”<sup>71</sup> LAL saw itself as being neither political nor feminist. Though this practice-politics distinction is a false one, it demonstrates that LAL members did not see their concerns reflected in other social movements of this period. In the remainder of this paper I will explore LAL’s “practical” activities in order to further tease out the tensions and slippages in their approach to fat acceptance. Even when the group approached fat issues in strictly material terms, LAL’s actions were politicized because of members’ sense of exclusion from feminine popular culture. The idea that fat acceptance could be achieved by being attractive, fit, and fashionable, delimited the types of activities the group would undertake.

## Fashion

LAL members responded to the problem of having bodies that were literally and figuratively out of fashion by becoming lay-experts in matters of size, colour, fabric, and fit. This process began in meetings and seminars where members learned about “planning a figure flattering wardrobe,”<sup>72</sup> and continued at fashion shows where Large as Lifers modeled garments from local designers. By the time of Large as Life’s first annual clothing swap, held in March 1982, members were increasingly comfortable and confident in their ability to pick the right garment. Dal Santo recalled the atmosphere of the swaps to me in 2005:

Here was a bunch of women that would go into a regular store and get into the fitting room and not want anybody to see them. And here we were ... there would be four or five of us there just putting things on and off and saying “oh that looks good” or “no, that one doesn’t work.” We were just in various states of undress and very casual and comfortable with each other.<sup>73</sup>

Body size was the baseline from which Dal Santo made her connection with the other women present. Strangers in retail stores were to be avoided, but a community of fat women provided her with the opportunity to experiment with clothing. Dal Santo’s commentary also shows that events, such as the clothing

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70 Partridge, “Dear Friends,” 1.

71 Ibid.

72 Kate Partridge and Lynn Warnock, “Largely Fashion: a fashion survival workshop for large women (pamphlet),” (Vancouver: Large as Life Action Group, 5 May 1984).

73 O’Brien interview.



swap, helped LALers to see themselves, and other fat women, in a different light: competent, beautiful, and successful.

Large as Life's fashion-related activism was not limited to clothing swaps and fashion seminars. These events were part of a broader initiative the group was undertaking to lobby plus-sized clothing manufacturers. LAL's aim was to prove to manufacturers that large women wanted better cuts, colours, and fabrics, and were willing to pay for a better selection of larger-sized clothing. The group received a big boost in this initiative when Partridge was profiled in the August 1982 issue of *Canadian Living*. The profile was printed alongside a contest for readers to win a \$500 gift certificate to a new plus-sized clothing store, Addition-Elle. Readers were asked 21 questions about the difficulties they experienced in finding clothing, which ranged from specific fitting problems with sleeve girth, leg length, waist sizes, fabric, and colour preferences. Readers were also asked if they felt clothes tended to be "not stylish enough" or "too matronly" and whether or not they sewed their own garments. The questionnaire concluded by asking women for their height, weight, dress size, and body shape.<sup>74</sup>

An idea of how women may have responded to this questionnaire can be gleaned from responses to the *Canadian Living* article published in *The Bolster*. Ann Leslie of Riverview, N.B., wrote that she was "most interested in the Large as Life Association and whole-heartedly agree with you that many women promise to look after themselves 'after' they have lost weight .... I like myself as a human being .... I wish there was clothing available that would help me reflect those feelings."<sup>75</sup> Nancy Kaizer of Middleton, N.S., also mused, "perhaps it is time to get on with my life."<sup>76</sup> Kaizer told Large as Lifers, "I consider this the first step, actually admitting to a stranger that I am big."<sup>77</sup> Shannon Andrew of Grand Prairie, Alta., similarly wrote that the article was a "heart-warming experience" for her because she realized "others share my most personal yet most obvious problem."<sup>78</sup> These letters to Large as Life, like the Letters to the Editor described by Korinek in *Roughing It in the Suburbs*, demonstrate women's critical engagement with magazines and popular culture.<sup>79</sup> Through

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74 *Canadian Living* readers' response to the questionnaire was enthusiastic. By the printing of the September 1982 issue of *The Bolster*, LAL had received 3000 responses. Unfortunately, the success of this initiative came at a time of change for Partridge who was moving to Calgary for her psychology internship. The information was not in a form that she felt was usable and she was focused on her own Ph.D. dissertation. Partridge held onto the questionnaires for many years but eventually threw them away. Anna Hobbs, "Big Can Be Beautiful: Solving fashion problems when you're size 16 and up," *Canadian Living* (August 1982): 90.

75 Anne Leslie, "Letter to the Editor," *The Bolster* (September 1982): 5.

76 Nancy L. Kaizer, "Letter to the Editor," *The Bolster* (October 1982): 4.

77 Ibid.

78 Shannon Andrew, "Letter to the Editor," *The Bolster* (October 1982): 5.

79 Korinek, *Roughing it in the Suburbs*, 12, 366.

*Canadian Living* and *Large as Life*, fat women found a community of fat women they might engage with. Women from other parts of Canada wrote to the group to identify with the “problem” that size presented them and express their pleasure at reading an article that featured a fashionable, plus-sized woman.

For LAL members, day-to-day dress required forethought and creativity. This behaviour is in keeping with the current literature on fashion that understands women’s consumption practices as an active and creative process.<sup>80</sup> Contrary to an earlier literature which feared women were dupes of fashion who over-consumed, this literature sees shopping as a woman-centred and defined activity.<sup>81</sup> They engaged this behaviour through the organization, planning and attendance at fashion shows, seminars, and clothing swaps. Others went further, opening their own plus-sized clothing stores. These activities also show that fashion was integral to the day-to-day politics of living as a fat woman in the 1980s. In the eyes of LAL members, lobbying the fashion industry and organizing fashion shows was a practical issue. Fashion shows for fat women were not seen as “political” and did not ignite the same kind of debate about LAL’s agenda as did the question of feminism. Contrary to some feminist critiques from this era, incorporating fashion and beauty trends into their self-presentation was a part of LAL’s mandate.<sup>82</sup> Members did this in order to distance themselves from negative stereotypes about fat women, that they were unfeminine, sloppy or lazy.<sup>83</sup>

## Aerobics

*Large as Life*’s most popular initiative, aerobics classes for fat women only, offers another example of the lived complexity of femininity and bodily norms in the 1980s. Aerobics videos and classes, also known as dancercise or jazzercise, combined traditional calisthenics exercise with dance moves and set them to music.<sup>84</sup> By 1984 aerobics was one of “the most popular physical activities

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80 Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 131.

81 *Ibid.*, 118-20; Linda M. Scott, *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2005).

82 Freedman, *No turning back*, 223.

83 Gina Cordell and Carol Rambo Ronai, “Identity Management among Overweight Women: Narrative Resistance to Stigma,” in *Interpreting Weight: The Social Management of Fatness and Thinness*, ed. Jeffery Sobal and Donna Maurer (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1999), 38-9.

84 Aerobics, dancercise, and jazzercise varied in format. Dancercise and jazzercise tends to be more dance-based whereas aerobics is more calisthenic. I have chosen the word aerobics as an umbrella term to describe fitness classes set to music. For a more detailed explanation of the differences and evolution of different types of aerobic exercise, see Beth Swanson, “A history of the rise of aerobic dance in the United States through 1980” (M.A. thesis, San Jose State University, 1996).

of North American women.”<sup>85</sup> Though well-known aerobics adherents, such as Jane Fonda, saw fitness as part of a pro-woman agenda that sought to “break the weaker sex mold,”<sup>86</sup> aerobics in general became a site of contestation about beauty and bodily norms in the 1980s. Detractors placed aerobics on an “axis of continuity” with a broader popular culture that negatively influenced women’s self-esteem.<sup>87</sup> Such analyses have tended to portray aerobics as *either* a health promoting activity *or* part of feminine beauty culture. Implicitly, these readings set up a dichotomy between that which was feminine versus that which was feminist. LAL’s approach to aerobics, and members’ experiences of the classes, does not permit such a polarized reading of the practice. LAL saw aerobics as part of a pro-woman agenda and did not see their interest in fitness clothing as separate from or antithetical to their health goals.

Large as Life Vancouver started the first fitness class for large women in Canada when they hired a “fitness instructor from the YMCA, a little skinny thing,” who taught a class of eight women at the Canadian Memorial Community Centre in the fall of 1981.<sup>88</sup> Classes lasted for one-hour and were offered Tuesday and Thursday mornings, or Monday and Thursday evenings, at a cost of \$48.00 for 12 classes, \$20.00 for five classes, or \$6.00 for one class.<sup>89</sup> New classes were formed as demands in particular areas of the city warranted. LAL members were also encouraged to write to local community centres and request a class for fat women only.<sup>90</sup> The idea of creating spaces exclusively for fat women caught on and by the end of 1984 Large as Life was operating fitness classes from ten different community centres across the Lower Mainland.<sup>91</sup> While aerobics classes, like fashion and beauty, have tended to be

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85 Helen Lenskyj, *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality* (Toronto: The Women’s Press, 1986), 129.

86 Jane Fonda, *Jane Fonda’s Workout Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), 45.

87 Susan Bordo, “Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture,” in *Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* ed. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 87-117; Mona Lloyd, “Feminism, Aerobics and the Politics of the Body,” *Body & Society* 2, no. 2 (June 1996): 79-98.

88 Partridge interview.

89 Kate Partridge, “Current Large as Life Projects,” *Large as Life (Newsletter)* (August 1981): 2.

90 Suzanne Bell, “Winter Shape-Up,” *The Bolster* (November 1982): 6-7.

91 Between May and September 1982 LAL’s fitness classes expanded to three more Vancouver-area fitness centres. A combined fitness and swimming class was offered at Winskill Aquatic Centre. In April 1983 classes were added at the Burnaby YMCA and at the Whalley Community Recreation Centre in Surrey in September 1983. Classes began at the Marpole, Douglas, and Riley Park Community Centres in Vancouver, as well as Garden City and Kingsway Schools in Richmond as of January 1984. Large as Life Action Group (Vancouver), “LaL in Motion,” *The Bolster* (September 1982): 10; Suzanne Bell, “Watch this! an inside view,” *The Bolster* (June 1982): 7; Sal Thomson, “Fitness Circuit,” *The Bolster* (March 1983): 15; Large as Life Action Group (Vancouver), “New Classes to Start: Generous Jiggles,” *The Bolster* (January 1984): 15.

feminized spaces,<sup>92</sup> LAL classes were unique because they further distinguished between fat and thin women. The fat women only distinction drew on the idea of aerobics as a feminized space, but was based on the assumption that fat women were allies of each other: LAL participants did not want to see any Jane Fonda’s in their classes.

Partridge was keenly aware of LAL aerobics participants’ desire to exercise amongst fat women only. Some time during the first few months of aerobics classes Partridge hit upon the idea of getting LAL members themselves to teach. Partridge and Dal Santo joined the YMCA fitness leadership course in January 1982. Both women saw themselves as outsiders amongst the “30 fitness Nazis with hard bodies” they encountered every week in the course. The women may have had some reason to be skeptical. The five “Ss” of physical fitness taught by the YWCA at the time were “STAMINA — STRENGTH — SUPPLENESS — SLENDERNESS and SPIRIT.” A hand-out given, shown on power point, detailed these principles. Slenderness was the only one of these five categories which was defined by specific measurements. No doubt Dal Santo and Partridge’s enthusiasm was tempered somewhat after being given a hand-out on day one informing them that their own levels of body fat were “unacceptable.” Nonetheless, they, along with six other women, went on to complete the YWCA leadership program for Large as Life.

Once large instructors began to teach fitness classes, LAL’s aerobics program grew considerably. Bell was aware of a growth in numbers after she began teaching. Initially, she commented, “there weren’t a lot of people there. But my goodness the word spread. ‘You should see this big woman in hot pink tights’.”<sup>93</sup> Although Bell joked about her self-presentation, she knew that her fat and fit body was a draw for participants who saw her as a role model. The impact of the aerobics instructor’s body on the experience of the class has been a subject for debate amongst feminist historians of sport. Some have argued that the instructor’s ideal body was an “oppressive and intimidating presence” for aerobics participants.<sup>94</sup> Others suggest that comments from instructors, such as “work harder so you’re ready for bathing suit season,” which were intended to be encouraging, also served as ominous warnings to women about the consequences of not working out.<sup>95</sup> More recently, Hilary Radner has suggested the appeal of an instructor such as Jane Fonda is that she acts as an example to her students rather than as an authority. If anything, Radner argues, the instruc-

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92 Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of American Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 82.

93 Bell interview.

94 Leslea Haravon Collins, “Working out the contradictions: feminism and aerobics,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 26, no. 1 (February 2002): 93.

95 Audrey MacNevin, “Exercising Options: Holistic Health and Technical Beauty in Gendered Accounts of Bodywork,” *Sociological Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2002): 277.

tor's "authority is generated by her membership within the group to whom she speaks."<sup>96</sup> This assessment is most appropriate to LAL's aerobics program instructor whose fatness was so central to the success of the classes. Commentary from Large as Life newsletters, as well as my interviews, confirms that the presence of a large instructor was critical. Large instructors were described as "role models" who, unlike "skinny" instructors, would not "talk down" to a larger woman.<sup>97</sup> The leader's fat body and presence acted as an indicator to participants that they could achieve success in these classes.

One of the perceptions that LAL sought to challenge with its aerobics class was that fat people could not be fit and healthy. The group's first line of attack was to challenge the logic of weight loss itself. As Partridge explained to CBC Radio Noon (Vancouver) in 1981:

[T]he statistics on all weight loss programs for substantially overweight people show that for all kinds of programs the success rate — and success means taking off weight to your ideal and keeping it off for two years — success rate is about 5 percent on average .... That means 95 percent of people out there with extra weight aren't going to lose it permanently.<sup>98</sup>

The statistical evidence on the failure rates of dieting was part of the justification of LAL. Since most diets fail, the goal became first, to find ways to accept and live in one's fat body, and second, to maximize the physical health of that body. With these goals in mind, Partridge began to investigate further the relationship between fat and metabolism. By January 1982 she had prepared a booklet and an academic paper on this research that tied weight loss and physiology to the psychology of fat women. "Obesity Facts and Fiction" was published by Large as Life in 1982. Partridge argued that a fat woman's experience with social stigma, combined with her fear of potential "social rejection and humiliation," led her to reject both her body and herself.<sup>99</sup> Social stigma, rather than over eating, led to an exercise deficit and obesity.

The idea that 95 percent of diets failed resonated strongly with the women of LAL whose critiques of dieting and diet pills were a common feature in *The Bolster* in 1982 and 1983. LAL's responses ranged from reprinting articles

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96 Hilary Radner, "Producing the Body: Jane Fonda and the New Public Feminine," in *Constructing the New Consumer Society*, ed. Hilary Radner, et al. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 116.

97 Thomson, "Fitness Circuit"; Laue interview.

98 "Interview of Kate Partridge and Joan Dal Santo by Stan Peters and Ann Mitchell," The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, CBC Radio Noon, Vancouver, B.C. This statistic reappears elsewhere in Large as Life literature. For example, see Laurie Kahn, "Food for Thought," *The Bolster* (January 1982): 4.

99 Kate Partridge and Large as Life, *Obesity: facts & fiction* (Vancouver: Large as Life Association, 1982), 4.

about the dangers of dieting<sup>100</sup> to a “Ruffled Feathers” column that took explicit aim at diet programs. Here, the editor reprinted advertisements for weight management clinics, underlining or scribbling notes into the image to dispute some of its claims. The April 1983 “Ruffled Feathers” from editor Ingrid Laue takes aim at the “Weight Loss Clinic” chain which encouraged clients to “join the thinner circle.” Laue underlined particularly egregious passages in the advertisement, including a testimonial reading, “I never knew that living could be so enjoyable and exciting until I discovered the Weight Loss Clinic. By the way, this thank you is seconded by my husband.”(Laure’s emphasis)<sup>101</sup> Laue’s successor, Sal Thompson, printed a similar feature in September 1983. Her “Ruffled Feathers” pillories another diet clinic, “Figuremaker.” The advertisement in question features a picture of a fat woman in a bikini with the headline “Flab, Sag, Droop and Bulge.” Thomson typed below that the Figuremaker advertisement made her “mad as hell.” She further notes that their offer of a free trial is not to be believed, as such freebies usually result in a much higher cost.<sup>102</sup> Such a warning about and critiques of dieting culture were accompanied by LAL-penned articles on health, wellness, and self-care. This dialogue complimented practices like aerobics and provided alternative messages about fat and health that members began to apply to the way they thought about themselves.

Group members’ commitment to their personal health did not prevent them from enjoying the more aesthetic pleasures of fitness. When the first aerobics classes for fat women were introduced in the 1980s, participants found it difficult to find exercise clothing in large sizes. This lack of access to consumables was a conundrum to participants for both practical and aesthetic reasons. On a practical level these women needed clothing to exercise in, and on an aesthetic level they wanted to look good while doing so. For the first few years *The Bolster* was a sounding board as women sought out and tested aerobics leotards and tights. Entire articles comparing different types of tights, their fit, and where to buy them were published. Fitness coordinator Suzanne Bell advised that “Danskin Outsize” tights were best, whereas “Phantom Queen” were unreliable. She listed three sources for the tights in Vancouver, “not much, but it’s a start,” and noted that neither *Eaton’s* nor *The Bay* had any in stock. She further advised that her preference, Danskin style #85, was readily available in the United States in a wider variety of colours.<sup>103</sup>

Bell seemed to find pleasure in displaying and flaunting her big, beautiful body, and this enthusiasm drove her search for fashionable aerobics clothing.

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100 Consumer Reports, “No diet pill works harder to help you lose weight...” *The Bolster* (June 1982): 15.

101 “Ruffled Feathers,” *The Bolster* (April 1983).

102 Sal Thomson, “Ruffled Feathers,” *The Bolster* (September 1983).

103 Suzanne Bell, “Clothesline,” *The Bolster* (February 1983), 6.

As she told one interviewer, “people notice me when I walk into a room. They can feel it: I really like me.”<sup>104</sup> Bell’s confidence level was undoubtedly critical to the success and appeal of her fitness classes for Large as Life. Her level of confidence meant that she had a sense of entitlement to fashion and beauty culture that some others may have, initially, lacked. Bell was more experimental with her fitness clothing from the beginning. She laughed while remembering an early ensemble, “I had a purple leotard that I bought in the States and this wild top that was cut through with silver ... I mean, I was just a sight!”<sup>105</sup> Bell’s fashion savvy also received notice in *The Bolster*, where Ingrid Laue described her as “very trendy in peach tights, black leotards, and colour-coordinated head-band.”<sup>106</sup> Bell went on to produce her own line of aerobics wear called the Suzanne Bell Collection.

Participants likewise began to value their fitness clothing. Dal Santo remembers “getting into” leotards “in a big way. I started getting leotards that were coloured instead of getting leotards that were all black. I’d start getting coloured leotards with black tights, and I’d get some coloured tights with other coloured leotards. And, it was fun, it got to be fun.”<sup>107</sup> In our 2005 interview, Janet Walker recalled a particularly treasured pink leotard set. “I had gotten to a stage where I was exploring my body and being bolder. I loved to wear it under a black coat .... It was fun to begin to play.”<sup>108</sup> This treasured pink leotard was from the early Suzanne Bell collection. Walker displayed the outfit to me during our interview. Some 23 years after its purchase the leotard remained in superb condition and was part of Walker’s regular wardrobe. Fitness classes also facilitated other pleasures and forms of self-expression for participants. They were fun and provided the safe environment that allowed the women to try on different forms of expression. As the “Ruffled Feathers” columns show, it was not the case that LALers did not get feminist critiques of femininity or aerobics culture. Instead, social sites such as aerobics classes and fashion shows “blurred” the lines between feminine/feminist and the production/consumption of popular culture. Not unlike the female entrepreneurs described in Kathy Peiss’ *Hope in a Jar*, LAL members used the “shared experience” of “bodily trials and tribulations” to carve out new spaces for the production and consumption of femininity by fat women.<sup>109</sup> Drawing on the experience of fat women, aerobics classes, like fashion shows, became sites for LAL members to participate in feminine culture.

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104 Caffyn Kelley, “Talent + Skill x Action = Suzanne Bell,” *Radiance* (Winter 1992): 6.

105 Bell interview.

106 Thomson, “Fitness Circuit,” 16.

107 O’Brien interview.

108 Walker interview.

109 Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 78.

## Conclusion

May 1983 marked the final issue of Large as Life’s *The Bolster*, produced by Ingrid Laue. Around this time an evolution in the leadership of Large as Life began. Suzanne Bell and Joan Dal Santo remained until the spring of 1984. Both women felt burdened by the leadership and the challenges of motivating other women to continue LAL’s activism.<sup>110</sup> In May of that year Claudia Savage assumed the presidency of LAL. Philosophically, Savage did not believe in depending on a group to “direct your life” and saw LAL as more of a social outlet than an activist one.<sup>111</sup> This approach did not sit well with some older members, such as Janet Walker, who bowed out of LAL around this time. By the fall of 1984 *The Bolster* folded and membership was waning. Savage noted in her newsletters between September and November 1984 that only 12 or 15 women were attending meetings.<sup>112</sup> Meetings of the group continued until sometime in early 1985. Savage carried on after LAL ended and acted as coordinator for Mrs. O’s, a swimming group consisting of self-identified large women who continue to swim and socialize every Saturday morning at 9:30 a.m. Other former Large as Life members have continued to work on fat issues in different ways. Bell opened her own fitness centre and clothing store in Vancouver in 1985, and Booth operated Models Rubenesque, a modeling school and agency for fat women, until 1989.<sup>113</sup>

The LAL organized activities described in this paper took for granted that participants knew who and what a fat person was, that fat was a women’s issue, and that fat women were allies to each other. Size, and related issues, including health and fashion, became the common ground from which Large as Life members identified themselves as fat women. When asked to articulate *why* they delimited their activities the way they did or to explain how they related to other social movements such as feminism, LAL members struggled. Members also seemed uncomfortable when questioned about the ethnic make-up of the group and were hard pressed to think of more than one person who was not white. Although most of the women in LAL can be described as white, (sometimes) well educated and (sometimes) heterosexual, they identified themselves with members of other marginalized groups, notably, African Americans and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. This perceived connection with the Civil Rights movement is another example of some members’ tendency to overlook possible parallels to the women’s liberation movement. Such silences further illustrate the taken for granted assumptions of Large as Life. By relying

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110 Bell interview; O’Brien interview.

111 Claudia Savage, interview by author, Burnaby, B.C., 17 August 2006.

112 Claudia Savage, “To the Membership,” *Large as Life (Newsletter)* (October 1984); Claudia Savage, “Dear LAL Members,” *Large as Life (Newsletter)* (November 1984).

113 Booth interview.



on fat women to just “get” where they were going politically, without articulating how or why they related to other social movements, Large as Life may have discouraged those who did not identify fat oppression in the same terms from contributing to their events.

Rather than a straightforward critique of normative femininity, LAL’s actions were inspired by a critique of *and* a desire to take part in a feminized popular culture. Following Foucault’s writing on resistance, Large as Life shows us that norms and ideals are not necessarily something that one labours under or against. The oft-cited maxim from *The History of Sexuality*, “where there is power there is resistance,”<sup>114</sup> is sometimes used to account for behavior that appears to run counter to social norms.<sup>115</sup> This quotation is also used as evidence that resistance to social norms is possible and that discipline does not dictate all human action. What seems to be overlooked in such observations about discipline is the second half of this quote, that “resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”<sup>116</sup> Resistances are plural, “each of them a special case” and not necessarily “a reaction or rebound.”<sup>117</sup> Resistance, when it does emerge, is shaped as much by norms as against them. Large as Life’s activism suggests that women in the 1980s were not burdened by the “beauty myth” in the way that has been described in the literature. Rather than focusing on the power of media imagery, LAL allows us to see how women saw themselves in relation to norms, ideals, advertisements, and fashion. LAL members found their distance from the ideal woman to be troubling, but this difference became the basis for discussion and action.

A question that remains is why Large as Life members continued, in 2006, to avoid labels such as political and feminist, even as they labelled their activism pro-woman? The influence of the feminist movement on LAL can be seen in terms of the tactics they employed, including consciousness-raising discussions at meetings, critiques of advertising and dieting, and the creation of women-centred social spaces. My interviews with former members in 2006 reflected an ongoing ambivalence about feminism. A number of explanations come to mind: that fat acceptance activities were seen as incompatible with the women’s movement, that LAL members did not believe fat was a political issue, or that LALers did not see this as an issue that affected *all* women, only fat women. While fat was not an issue addressed by the women’s movement in the early 1980s, by the mid-1980s a feminist critique which identified the body as a site of gender inequality had emerged. This analysis suggested that women

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114 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1990 [1978]), 95.

115 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995 [1977]), 181-2.

116 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 95.

117 *Ibid.*, 96.

“STOP POSTPONING YOUR LIFE UNTIL YOU LOSE WEIGHT AND START LIVING NOW”: VANCOUVER’S LARGE AS LIFE ACTION GROUP, 1979–1985

overemphasized their physicality in response to economic and political restraints.<sup>118</sup> Body weight also became the basis for public health initiatives in Canada in the mid-1980s. Crash diets, where a person lost large amounts of weight in a short period of time, and yo-yo dieting, characterized by a cycle of weight loss and gain, were such pervasive phenomena that the Canadian federal government formed an expert group in 1985 to help develop a new “national strategy to promote healthy weights and prevent weight problems.”<sup>119</sup> Even if LAL did not think that body size was an issue that affected all women, feminists and public health activists did see weight oppression as a problem by the mid-1980s. Twenty-five years after the fact, the tension between increasingly rigid standards of physical beauty and a discourse of liberation and woman-power remains. Critiques of beauty culture, such as the Dove “Real Beauty” campaign, exist alongside news stories about dieting and the dangers of obesity.

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118 Freedman, *No turning back*, 208-9.

119 Health Services and Promotion Branch, “Promoting Healthy Weights: A Discussion Paper,” (Ottawa: Health and Welfare Canada, 1988), i. Another member of this panel, Dr. John Hunt, hired Kate Partridge to run a weight preoccupation group at Lions Gate Hospital in North Vancouver in 1981.