

Racism and Fat Hatred

There is no way we can begin to understand and end fat phobia unless we understand how deeply racism and classism work to sustain fat phobia and vice versa. You cannot discuss fat issues without also looking at the class and race dynamics. The following roundtable is an excerpted discussion among fat dykes from the bay area who do not know each other, but came together to share their personal experiences with fat and racism. This is but one conversation. The dynamic of the personal being political shapes this roundtable, which only begins to approach the many serious political aspects to racism and fat hatred. There are far too many more discussions that need to happen, both deeply personal and vibrantly political. Participate in those conversations—write about them, record them, sing about them, illustrate them—and submit them to FaT GiRL.

Barbarism: One issue that I've been thinking and talking about with other people is where fat phobia and racism connect—where they interconnect both as experiences and also how they keep the community apart. In terms of *who* I am—I'm 29, and come from an Irish-Catholic/Protestant/Jewish background. My parents are first-generation middle class. And they have a lot of class conflict that has gone on with their parents being working class and their being middle class—creating a lot of disruption and confusion...

Vicki: I'm 44. What am I talking about, I'm 43! (I'm uh, 29, 29.) I'm 28. And I guess I'm interested in this because I did read the last roundtable and found it provocative—so I want to participate.

Marian: I'm 39 1/2...and I'm multi-ethnic, meaning more than one-race-identified. I identify with more than one culture. As a child, I was not raised in this country. So I had the opportunity to learn about racism for the first time as a child when I came to this country. It hasn't stopped since...I was really glad to speak with a couple of people from FaT GiRL about weight issues and gender issues...and the issues of race

and fat-phobia. Because I had wonderful experiences dating, and want to tell these stories! So look out girls, you know who you are! [laughter]

Wolfie: I'm 28 years old...I'm also bi-racial. I'm Filipino and Romany Gypsy. I really like the way the roundtables have been going, and some of the future ones look to be just as promising, like the one about fat-phobia and disability. And I'm really interested in talking about this, because I was adopted in the '60s, as a small child, by a white couple who

thought they were doing the whole thing about giving a bi-racial child a better chance at life. And I grew up in that context.

Val: Okay, last but not least. My name's Val, and I'm a gender-bending, 36 year-old Cuban dyke. I, too, came from another country and found out what racism was in a big way when I came into this country. The reason I came to the roundtable is I thought it would be interesting, I've never done one before. I love the work that FaT GiRL is doing, and it's long-needed. And I just want to shoot some ideas back and forth, and at least come to some self-understanding, or maybe help some other



Marian

people understand where we're from. And what it does to us when people have fat-phobia, or race-phobia, or whatever-phobia...So, where to start...

I've had situations where I've answered ads and we got along really great and we were having phone sex and then I get to their house and the person can't even deal with me. They just freak out! I always turn the other cheek—that's the way I was raised. "It's OK. That's all right." But it's not. It really hurts. That somebody could actually turn you away because of what your body looks like and, in certain cases, most cases, people can't help what they look like, no matter what—whether you're thin or fat. That's not always your choice. That's just sometimes how it is.

Marian, you've got some dating stories?

Marian: What I saw in this relationship was sort of an interesting mix of fat-phobia and possibly class issues...but also racism. This is a person who I dated and FUCKED, mind you, and we enjoyed the sexual relationship. It was interesting, because she would never introduce me to any of her friends. We'd be in social situations, and she would be an arm's length away from me, she would act like she didn't really have a relationship with me. We would have fucked each other silly the night before! I wondered about this. Certainly, I think at the time I was probably on the rebound from a relationship that had ended. But I called her on a lot of stuff, and there was a lot of denial on her part about what was really up for her. This is a white woman who had weight issues herself who couldn't really deal with the mirroring of weight. It was interesting, too, that she couldn't introduce me to her white friends. Finally, it became clear. I mean, this is a person who is very p.c., very involved with wanting to build alliances and bridges across cultures—and I think that's good. But I felt like when I called her on her stuff, not only fat phobia but clearly the racism, and the exclusion, and the denial of the relationship,



she tried to make it be something else. I just decided, "I'm good enough to fuck but not to have a relationship with? I'm sorry, no more fucking!" We parted company at that point. I wasn't going to be used as an exotic fat sexual plaything that couldn't be acknowledged except in the arena of the bedroom. Excuse me! Later we ran into each other a couple of times...at the gym. While she was on the bicycle, right? I'm on the bicycle next to her, and we're talking. This is really revealing to me, these are the small, little nuances that I think sometimes white people don't get. But we're talking, and we're having this conversation, and this white woman comes up and starts talking to her. She gives up the conversation with me. She begins [engaging] with this woman for half an hour... I'm so unimportant that I've been set aside.

Barbarism: Like you can wait?!

Val: "The fat girl can wait." Or she WILL wait, let's put it that way.

Marian: Then I called her on it. Actually, at the time, I got mad and just left her, and decided, Hey, I've got to go. But I did call her back, and said, "I've got to tell you something about this." She denied what was going on, and said that this was a person she didn't want me to meet. Which was that much more of an insult. She just didn't get it. When I look at that dating relationship, it made me really want to think about being in one...and then I had this dating relationship with this other white woman before. It was so strange. I had been involved with a woman of color—for three years! I think I took certain things for granted. So when I started dating, I didn't get any women of color to ask me out. Certainly, I feel that in my experience with white women, there's a lot of fat-phobia that's not acknowledged, that they're not being honest about.

Val: Especially within the fat community.

Marian: I think that among white women it's more prevalent than with women of color. I have to say, this is going to be somewhat modified by class. But with women of color, I think that generally, there's a better acceptance.

Val: I kind of disagree with that, because I think it depends on where you live, more than what race you are.

Marian: Well, there's class.

Val: There's class, also, but I've walked down the street and had black children call me Fat Bitch, and I said, "Excuse me, don't tell me your mama, your grandma, your aunt is not big! There's got to be someone in your family who's big."

Marian: Yeah, but you are not black.

Val: But they don't know that I'm [Cuban]. I'm still a person of color. But they don't know this. But they're insulting me because they have their racist

issues, or whatever. They're not realizing, "Hey, my mom at home is big. Or my grandma. And I love her." What's the problem here?

Wolfie: One of the things about what you're saying about acceptance or non-acceptance by white women...in my experience, having been basically a hippie for a long time, is that I found that it's more acceptable for women of color to be fat because we're the "Earth Mothers," we're more in touch with our "naturalistic feelings..."

Marian: Or Mammies!

Wolfie: And it's like, No, you do not get to automatically take comfort from my tits!

Marian: Yeah...

Val: But I've also had experiences...I've had an indigenous lover, and she was pretty much full-blooded Indian. And she had a REAL fat-phobia. She was the same size as me, and she would say that I was fat and disgusting, and that she couldn't understand why she was with me! I took that for 5 years. And then I had another relationship. A denial situation because she had her issues about being fat. She wasn't obese, she was chubby...she had problems with this, and I noticed this in the beginning of the relationship, and I was with this person off and on through relationships and affairs for 11 years. And she was in total denial over our relationship. And I used to say to her, You're ashamed of me. "Oh, I'm not ashamed of you." But now that she's got a thin lover, she shows her off to everybody, and I was just a friend. For 11 years, I was just a friend. And that's when, after all that time, I finally said, "I can't trust you. If you can't be honest with yourself, how can you be honest to me?"

And it's really sad to me when you go into a place, and there are other fat people—they turn away from you like you have a disease! And I'm like, "Yo, sistah, hey bro!" And they're [horrorified]. I mean, come on, be real.

Marian: That's not to say that we don't have our own internalized fat-phobia.

Val: I've lived with myself.

Wolfie: Whenever that happens to me, I keep trying to figure out, is it because of my hair...or is it because I'm a freak?

Val: Yeah, same here. They don't know Wolfie: boy, or girl, or what?

Wolfie: I used to have a haircut a lot like yours, and I used to do the jeans, and the white muscle shirt, and the serious butch thing. And I've noticed a big difference both in how I'm treated as a fat woman when I was being butch and not-butch (or femme, or whatever, I don't tend to define myself as far as butch-femme goes.) But also, as far as being a woman of color goes, it's different—how people have responded to me as a "butch" woman of color as opposed to a "femme" woman of color. People are more afraid of me when I'm doing the short hair, and the biceps are out, and I'm wearing jack-boots. And really, I'm much more dangerous when I'm in a skirt, I have more range of motion!

[laughter]
You don't know what kind of knives I may have strapped onto my legs under this skirt.

Barbara: My previous lover, who was my first fat lover, is a Chicana. When she and I were harassed, we weren't really harassed about fat stuff as much as we were harassed about racist things, and people ignoring her. And when I'm with my current, white lover, who is fat, we get harassed all the time for being fat. Now, my current lover is fatter than she, but I'm about the same size. And I think when people would see me and my former lover, they wouldn't look at her; they would ignore her. They wouldn't even look at us and see us as fat, or see us as together...and I'm talking about within the queer community, and about women in the queer community!

Val: One time I was walking down 18th and Castro with my sister and my nieces. We had just gone to Marcello's, and we had pigged out, and I was holding the leftovers. Some little queen comes walking down the street and says, "You really

don't need that, do you?" My sister turned around and chased his ass down the street! He didn't even know it was 5 people eating this, you know, it was just me having a snack in the middle of the afternoon, me and this big, gigantic extra-large pizza. And I'm just looking at him, like "What business is this of yours? Do you pay my bills, do you have to live with my weight and buy my clothes? You don't have to struggle with all my struggles? Go on and do your little white laundry and go away!" But I just can't believe...I mean, I've had people kick me, hit me. Literally. I had a guy just come up to me and actually hit me in the face, calling me a fat dyke. Actually. I had one guy come over and call me a faggot. I said, "You bend over, and I sure can be one."

Wolfie: But the whole point with that, is it's a symptom of the culture. That anything that is different, is obviously lesser.

Val: There's only one culture that I have seen accept me completely. Samoans. They absolutely adore me. They look at me, and go, FAMILY! They look at me, and go, Wow! She's big! And they're great. I'm ready to move to the South Pacific.

Marian: That's interesting, because my current lover isn't Samoan, but she's from the Fiji. And she's very athletic—she absolutely adores me—adores every inch, every pound, everything in abundance. It's a very clear difference, very different from anything I've ever experienced before!

Val: People who embrace it.

Marian: Absolutely. Incredible.

Vicki: Well, I'm just sitting here listening to you all's experiences; I have not had those experiences since...when I was in the heterosexual world, where there was a lot more fat-phobia. You know, again that societal "what's supposed to be considered acceptable" in terms of size. And I also experienced it from my family; more than I have from fellow lesbians. Most people that I wind up being lovers with like my size. My size has never been an issue in relationships. But the family's really interesting, because I feel empowered—especially when I spend a day with Fat Lip Theater, or seeing something really affirming. And then I go to my family's house for dinner, or a get-together like Kwanzaa at Christmas time. I mean, there is NO affirmation there, everyone is thin, they are all going to the gym and working out and concerned about the 5 pounds they've gained. No one has anything positive to say to me, and so mostly, they just don't say anything. And I just feel like the way that I dress and present myself is certainly worthy of a comment! Like, I had a green outfit on at one particular occasion, and no one said a word. And they were just oohing and ahing over this one particular member of the family...They don't just come out and say, "When are you gonna lose some weight?"

Val: My family does [bitter chuckle].

Vicki: ...but it's really implied. And I eat what I want, I go for second helpings. I think my father one time said, "Should you...?" when I went back for more apple cobbler. And I said, "I certainly shall!"

Val: "If THAT skinny little wimp can have a second helping, so can I!"

Vicki: For me, the dilemma is trying to assess where this...is coming from, is it because of color or because of size? Just like you were talking about walking into an arena, there's fat people there, there's other people there, and [both] are



Vicki

shunning you. Are they shunning you because you're fat, or are they shunning you because of the color [of your skin]?

Val: When it's other fat people, I feel it's because you're fat, it has nothing to do with color. It's their own problems with dealing with their bodies. For whatever reasons...For a while, the lesbian community would turn their heads. When I drive down the street and have my leather flag? The p.c. dykes turn their heads: "Oh my God, leatherdykes! Those are those perverts." People unfortunately turn their heads from what they fear, even if they have it in them. And that's what they fear the most. I might be that fat person. I might be a little sexually...perverted. Their fears are from within.

Wolfie: Perverts!

Marian: I guess for me, my experience with race and size is that it's a degree. It's a degree of difference. In other words, the amount of reaction is equal to the amount of difference. So in terms of race, the darker you are—truly, the darker you are—and the more features you have that distinguish you as being African-American...AND if I can throw in class there, of non-working class...and the fatter you are...those are the things people respond to if you're fat, you're poor and you're black. People want to run the other way. You can modify those adjectives with "oh, not so fat, not so dark, mixed-heritage, and money/class." That's just what I see.

Wolfie: Well, I think there's also an age thing to that. Because I've been this fat since I was about 10. And I've found that—both with white women and women of color and other gypsy women—the younger [fat woman] is more unacceptable, but occasionally the older we get, the more acceptable it is, because you're a matron then, and it's okay to fill out a little bit. It's really twisted.

The family that I grew up with was very very white, and they were very very thin. And basically, my being fat was explicable because I wasn't "like them," I was genetically different. And I wasn't grateful enough, a lot of the time. The context that I was raised in was that I should be grateful for having the opportunity to live with a nice white family that was upper-class, and have all these privileges that I wouldn't otherwise have had.

Val: And why couldn't you conform?

Wolfie: Except that it was a dualistic thing, of "Why couldn't I try more to be like them," except that I was constantly reminded that I WASN'T. That I wasn't as good as them. And we'd have these huge family reunions. And this one dynamic happened between me and one of my cousins, who was this thin little blonde girl who had the metabolism of a rabid shrew. So she could eat as much as she wanted and still be this thin little frail thing. And we'd go up and get food together, and she'd eat twice as much as I would. But I'd be the one called the pig by all the boys in the family. And it keeps going on. My daughter is 9 years old, and I've done everything I could to make sure she's aware that her body is fine the way that it is, and that she's really beautiful. And she's 9 years old, and she's talking about going on a diet because she's too fat. Because the other kids in school are

telling her that she's fat, and that she's never going to have a boyfriend when she gets older.

Barbarism: With my mom's side of the family, her father was Jewish. And no one talked about it, they were very anti-Semitic, and he even complied with it. And I didn't find out about it until I was 21! I'm one of the few children from my generation who isn't blonde and blue-eyed, and I have curly hair...and everyone used to make jokes, "Oh where'd you come from?" And it was about my size, too. People would ask me when I was growing up, "Are you Jewish?" and I'd say, "No, I'm Irish-Catholic." And I didn't find out until later. I think part of why they're really against me and put me on a diet so early was because of not wanting to show my difference.

Every time I speak to my mother, it's the first thing out of her mouth: "Have you lost weight yet?"...It always comes back to that. And [about] my cousins (new generation), who are bi-racial—my uncle is black and my aunt is Colombian—the rest of my family couldn't deal with them, wouldn't go to the weddings, wouldn't go to the birthing...My uncle is a very fat man, and they were always talking about 'Oh he's too fat, he's going to die, he's not going to be able to take care of his family.' But I think a lot of what they won't come out and be explicit about—but really

what they want to say is—he's black and we're racist and we don't want him in the family. [giggles in the background] But they go on and on about how fat he is. And with my aunt [who is fat, too], it's how dirty she is, and how stupid and crazy she is! And on and on and on. I really think a lot of the fat-phobia out there is really tied into classism, it's tied into racist stereotypes, and people's fear of other people's bodies being different...

Wolfie: Well, if you're fat, then it implies that you have no self-control, and "only lower-class people have no self-control." Or only indigenous people, or people of color have no self-control.

Val: And no intelligence, either.

Marian: Control equals power. "You can never be [too rich or too thin]."

Val: I'd like to show them power.

Wolfie: I usually do.

Val: I bet you do!

Marian: Fat people, if they're repentant, and if they're working on it, and if they're attempting to change for the better, "we" can put up with "them" for right now. It's interesting to be talking about this, because I used to work for the Dept. of Social Services doing MediCal disability analysis for the state. There was this one woman doctor who thought it was very important for me to join Weight Watchers, and she had no qualms about coming up to my desk every week with her Weight Watchers literature! It's so interesting, because I got written up for talking loud at this job. I was the first black person that they had hired in 8 years. I got written up for talking loud on the telephone...and disturbing other people in the unit. [laughter] I certainly did disturb them, because I then went to everybody to survey who was being disturbed.



Barbarism

The only people who were being disturbed were people who were friends with each other. The people who [timeshared] desks and had split jobs didn't have a problem. It's interesting because this place had lots of women who worked there who were always dieting. And I was fat and juicy. I would have my ice cream...and I was happy! Hey, I was getting fucked every morning, I was a happy woman. I didn't really trip when these women were so fucking uptight. It seems to me, as I attempted to break into the professional world, or the semi-professional world, that there was more and more fat-phobia. Also more racism, because it became lighter and lighter. When I went to paralegal training and tried to break in as a paralegal, I found that I had difficulty. I found that the people of color who were accepted there were light-skinned and very thin, and presented a particular image that a law firm wanted to convey. Never mind my skills or my abilities, I didn't have the look.

Wolfie: Yeah, there's the assumption that if you're fat, you're sloppy or have poor hygiene, or whatever.

Marian: And so the closer you are to the corporate "norm," that's being fair and being thin.

Val: And you get pushed out...

Marian:...for the way that you are.

It's just incredible. But it doesn't seem to apply so much with white men. They can look like Rush Limbaugh, and be on t.v. and radio. It's a really interesting thing, fat white men don't seem to carry the baggage that we do if they're in positions of power.

Val: But even young, teenage boys. You see these boys, whether they're black or white—but especially white—or any other color, and if they're big, it's okay, it's acceptable. It's okay for boys to be big.

Wolfie: It's okay for them to be big as long as they're still moderately athletic. If they're not moderately athletic, they catch a whole bunch of shit.

Val: As long as they're "cool," is actually it. Because if he's a computer nerd and is big, no one will like him. But if he's got a nice carving on his head and good tattoo and weighs 500 pounds...

Barbarism: And if he's got a skinny girlfriend...

Val: And a skinny girlfriend, you've got it...then he's OKAY. It goes in so many different directions, how do you get to the heart of it all? Where does this animal get stabbed so that it can slowly start dying? Because it is, it's like a vicious animal. And I think it's good that Wolfie's teaching her daughter at a very young age and all her life, your body's fine and you're beautiful. And I always had that from my family, but they always added to it: "...and if you lose weight, you'll

have more..."

Marian: "You have such a beautiful face. IF ONLY..."

Wolfie: Yeah, the "if-only" thing. It was very weird. I was at a women's gathering and the topic came up of our nicknames when we were kids...and it hit me with this physical impact, that the only nickname that I had from my parents was "tub-o-lard." That was my official family nickname that I grew up with. That was how my father used to address my birthday cards.

...One of the dynamics that I've experienced with various lovers is that a lot of times there will be women who will be really happy to touch my tits, and they'll be really happy to touch my cunt, but they won't touch my belly, and they won't touch my thighs...and they'll avoid all those areas that aren't "supposed" to be soft.



Val: If they only had a friend like this one thin woman who made me feel so good about my body... she made me feel like it was a comfort to her. She would come and sit next to me on the couch, and she would fluff me like a pillow. And then she would squeeze into me, and sigh. Or when your little niece at 5 years old, goes, "Can your pillows be mine forever? You have big pillows." Those are the times that you rejoice and say, "Yes, I'm a big

Wolfie

woman and I love it!" And it's such an empowering feeling, that you have wonderful parts to you just because you're fat.

For a long time, I used to hide my butchness, or whatever parts of my personality, because I thought I might offend people, because I'm FAT. And you know, after a while, you just go out there and say, "Let me scare a few people." I love scaring men. That's my favorite hobby now. A man gets insulting with me, and I'm right in his face. And I love seeing him cringe. It's just a charge, a woman in control and scaring a man...

Wolfie: I've done that just being out in the world in my wheelchair and not even getting in anyone's face. I've had people pull their children away from me! It's more because of the freak thing than anything else. But there's a dynamic that I've especially found having a child in school. She's been in several schools since we've been in the Bay Area, and she was in one Berkeley school which was in the hills, so it was mostly white kids. And their mothers got very weirded out by me. And this was when I just had dreds, I didn't even have green hair then, and I only had one nose ring. But they were still really weirded out by me, and Chandra was very noticeably darker than any of the other kids. So being both darker and bigger, she got flak from a lot of different sides on it. And then when we were living on the other side of the lake, she

went to a primarily Asian school. So the shade of her skin wasn't so much of an issue, but the fact that she was identifying herself as Filipino which is Asian...

Val: Well, I have Chinese blood, also. And when I tell Asian people that I'm part Chinese, they go, 'No way!'

Wolfie: I had a woman in the Mission tell me that I wasn't Filipino.

Marian: Yeah, that's interesting that you should bring that up, because my mother's Japanese. In fact, I was born there. Yeah, interesting to look at your family stuff. Like Barb, you were talking about your own family. Certainly, I would say that my mother learned racism very well from white men who came to her country. She was a woman who started smoking again because she gained 10 pounds. And she died of cancer. Colon cancer. But she felt that it was more important to not have those 20 extra pounds than to stop smoking. So all these stories we tell...As I grow older, and as I've had relationships with other fat women, I'm not the same person that I once was. I think going back to the woman who I dated, for instance. One of the reasons that I'm where I'm at in terms of my own fat politics, my own fat acceptance—and this is certainly a work in progress—is because of the relationship that I had with another fat woman. Loving another fat woman when you couldn't love yourself!... somehow, there's a lesson in that that comes back to you, in accepting yourself. It's really valuable, and it applies to people who go outside of their own race, and then come home one day. I think there's a bit of a lesson in that.

Wolfie: One of the things that I've noticed in reading a lot of fat liberation history, is that the beginnings of it was very clearly white-washed. And I think that had to do with white women's perceptions that it's more acceptable for women of color to be fat. But in looking at the early history of fat liberation in the '70s...

Marian: Well, it is more acceptable, I think, in our own communities.

Vicki: Or in Africa. It's more acceptable over in Africa. I have a lot of African men who see me and their faces just light up! And I've had other friends say that it's just more acceptable in some of the societies up there.

Marian: In some societies, fat is a wonderful bonus.

Wolfie: It's like, that's the desirable quality. Like in Hawaii. When I did my studies of the South Pacific Islands, and the Hawaiian Islands, the bigger the girl was, the more there were going after her. That was the prize.

Val: Because of the mixture of my cultures of African, and all sorts of cultures in Cuba, I've never heard one guy in my family say they wanted a skinny girlfriend. Never. They always say she's got to have some meat on her bones. Because they don't want her to be what they consider "unhealthy."

Wolfie: The only other thing that I wanted to bring up is that I think the combination of color and fat in the lesbian community is another...not so much form of invisibility...but it's like we're all the same. Like, specifically in the leather community, I am always mistaken for Deva! Because we're both fat, we're both s/m dykes, and we both have medium-brown skin. Except that she's 6 feet tall, and has long black and purple hair, and we look nothing like each other!

Val: No, you don't.

Wolfie: And I've seen that happen. I know Elizabeth and

Max talked about it in their first issue, but I think even more so in the lesbian community, because women of color tend to get lumped together anyway, that if we're fat, then there's obviously very few of us. So Deva and I must obviously be the same person. Or I've heard people mix up Crystal [Mason] and Dawn [??] before. Or Crystal and Cougar before. And that's just another of the many issues, that we all get blended together.

Vicki: That happened with me at the second Fat Lip writing workshop that I went to. A woman turned to me and said, "Hi," and called me the name of another person that wasn't there. And when that person came in, I was appalled. Because there was no way that we looked alike. It was just that we're both big and have the same color skin. Different height, different hairstyle...And I called her on it, too. During the break,



The gorgeous women shown above are (left to right, back to front): **Marian, Wolfie, Vicki, Val, and Barbarism.**

I turned around and said, "Now, do I look anything like that woman?" I just wanted to point it out to her that that's totally unacceptable, that because I was the only black woman there, and the time before she had been the only black woman there...so she just assumed we were the same person.

Marian: It's interesting, because we're talking about invisibility, in terms of being known for who we are, and at the same time, what's making us stand out is being the visible fat woman of color, or ethnicity, that we are. It's really a strange juxtaposition and irony, that we would be so visible and invisible at the same time. It's incredible..★

If you are interested in participating in upcoming roundtables or facilitating one in your area please contact Barbarism at 415-550-7202. Future roundtable topics will include fat and disability, fat and class, fat and [your bone to pick here!]

All Roundtable photos by Selena