“Don’t Call Her Mama Anymore”: Cass Elliot and the Intersections of Femininity, Race, and Body Size in Fat Legacies

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Content Warning

This paper will contain themes of anti-fatness, racism, and misogyny. At times it will mention specifics weights, calorie counts, and in-depth detail on dieting and weight loss, including (very limited) use of the terms "obese/obesity" and "overweight." Please take care while reading.

Abstract

Cass Elliot, one of the four singers of the 1960s folk group The Mamas & The Papas, died of a heart attack at age 32. While she likely died from a combination of drug use, exhaustion, and pre-existing health conditions, a myth that she died from choking on a ham sandwich latched on to the social consciousness, since Elliot was one of the only visibly fat women in the music industry. This project will re-examine Elliot's life and legacy with an intersectional lens, focusing on how widespread beliefs about race, gender, body size, and femininity affected her public image. By exploring the ways in which anti-fatness can be understood as a white supremacist, patriarchal project, I argue that the relegation of Elliot's legacy to her body size is part of a pattern of divorcing fat feminine (and often Black) performers from their femininity, as a means of upholding the supposed thin, Anglo-Saxon ideal. By contextualizing the public reception of fat performers, I argue that the public insistence to call Elliot "Mama Cass" is another form of gendered control, one half of a sexual delineation of fat women as either hypersexual or "hyposexual."

Résumé

Cass Elliot, une des quatre chanteurs de The Mamas & The Papas, un groupe folklorique des années 1960, décédé d'une crise cardiaque à l'âge de 32. En dépit du fait qu'elle est décédée probablement d'une combinaison de l'usage récréatif de drogues, d'épuisement, et des problèmes de santé préexistantes, la idée qu'elle est décédée d'étouffement d'un sandwich au jambon est devenue populaire. C'est probablement parce qu'Elliot était la seule femme grosse dans la industrie de la musique en les années 1970. Ce projet va réexaminer la vie et l'héritage d'Elliot avec un angle de l'intersectionnalité, en particulier comment les croyances répandues sur la race, le sexe, la taille, et la féminité affectaient sa réputation. Ce texte débute avec un exploration de la manière dont la grossophobie peut être compris comme un projet suprémaciste blanc et patriarcal, j'affirme que la relégation de l'héritage de Elliot à sa taille est le résultat d'un type à dissocier les chanteuses grosses (et souvent Noirs) de leurs féminités, dans le but de maintenir le présumé idéal mince et Anglo-Saxon. En contextualiser l'accueil public des chanteuses grosses, j'affirme que l'insistance publique à l'appelle "Mama Cass" à Elliot est un autre mode de contrôle genré, moitié d'une définition sexuelle des femmes grosses à hypersexualité ou "hyposexualité."

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Introduction

When Cass Elliot was thirty-one years old, she embarked on a solo cabaret tour entitled *Don't Call Me Mama Anymore*, referencing the infamous nickname, "Mama Cass," she received as part of the 1960s folk group The Mamas & The Papas. Elliot had spent the better part of her five-year solo career trying to distance herself from the title "Mama," despite the public's fondness of referring to her that way. A year after the tour, in the summer of 1974, Elliot was fulfilling a set of performances at the London Palladium. She had always loved London culture, and felt that headlining a solo show at the venue, billed as "Cass Elliot," meant that she had "made it." Elliot died in her sleep early in the morning of July 29, 1974.[1] Elliot's longtime friend and former bandmate Michelle Phillips recalled getting a phone call from Elliot on July 28th:

> She had called me the night before. She'd had a little champagne, and was crying. She told me she had sold out both her shows at the Palladium, and she'd gotten a standing ovation both nights. To her it was the ultimate success, to have done that on her own. I know that when she died she felt that she'd made the jump from Mama Cass to Cass Elliot.[2]

At the time of her tour, Elliot was in her early thirties, was one of the most popular singers in a music industry that was famous for fostering glamourous lifestyles and embraced the nature of "sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll." However, the media refused to see her as anything but a "Mama." While Elliot may have felt she had successfully transitioned from Mama Cass to Cass Elliot, the media was not on the same page. The first word of Elliot's obituary in the *New York Times* on July 30th would be the word "Mama."[3]

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[1] Eddi Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream of Me: The Life of "Mama" Cass Elliot* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2006), xi-xii.
[2] Michelle Phillips, *California Dreamin': The True Story of The Mamas and The Papas* (New York: Warner Books, 1986), 117.
[3] John Rockwell, "Cass Elliot, Pop Singer, Dies; Star of the Mamas and Papas," *New York Times*, July 30, 1974, https://www.nytimes.com/1974/07/30/archives/cass-elliot-pop-singer-dies-star-of-the-mamas-and-papas-a-hearty.html.

In her 1986 autobiography, Michelle Phillips would take solace in the fact that Elliot died after such a peak moment in her career. However, Elliot's legacy continued – and continues – to be affected by the cemented association of her with her weight, as well as by the use of the title "Mama Cass." Immediately after Elliot died, a rumor was circulated that she had choked to death on a ham sandwich, which spurred decades of jokes at her expense, likely because, as Elliot biographer Eddi Fiegel notes, "the notion that Cass Elliot, the star who was as famous for her size as she was for her voice, might have died while eating seems to have been, for many people, too convenient of an explanation."[4] Elliot's music has experienced somewhat of a resurgence in the past few years. In 2022 and 2023, Elliot's song "Make Your Own Kind of Music" gained traction on TikTok as the background music in a widespread meme.[5] Following the renewed surge in the song's and Elliot's popularity, Elliot's team released a sped-up version of the track on Spotify and YouTube (a popular tactic for gaining popularity on TikTok), the cover art being "Mama Cass" in big block letters and the title of the song in smaller font underneath.[6] In 2023, *Saturday Night Live* featured a sketch poking fun at the trend, which originally involved playing the song over an intense sequence of the action film "The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent." The sketch imagined the producers at the original 1969 recording session of "Make Your Own Kind Of Music" predicting that the song would one day be used in such a specific action sequence. However, the crux of the sketch ends up being that the producer repeatedly calls

[4] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, xii.
[5] CT Jones, "How A TikTok Meme Is Inspiring A New Generation To Learn About Cass Elliot," *Rolling Stone*, March 9, 2023, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/cass-elliot-tiktok-make-your-own-kind-of-music-1234693772/.
[6] Cass Elliot, "Make Your Own Kind Of Music (Sped Up)," YouTube Video, 2:06, May 4, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExSJDaVHWLM&list=OLAK5uy_kwAlN4uq_dwv_ve_E7ktx44cCdepLP2Gc.

Elliot "Mama," in a gruff voice, and the entire studio session was actually just the trailer for a new horror movie called "Mama."[7]

The label "Mama" held obvious significance for the band members in The Mamas & The Papas. Once Elliot began singing with Denny Doherty, Michelle Phillips, and John Phillips in 1965, the group had to start considering band names. One day when watching the Les Crane show, Crane brought up an anecdote about the Hell's Angels calling their women "sluts." The Hell's Angel on the show defended the group by saying "Some people call our women cheap. But we just call them our mamas." Michelle Phillips recalls, "It was at that point that Cass jumped up and said, 'Ah! We are Mamas. I don't know who you guys are, but Michelle and I are the Mamas.'"[8] From there, the band decided that Denny and John would be the Papas, thus creating The Mamas & The Papas. In interviews, it was common to see references to Papa John and Papa Denny, as well as Mama Michelle and Mama Cass. However, after the band broke up, Elliot became disillusioned with the "Mama" nickname, requesting, often unsuccessfully, that she just be called "Cass Elliot."

Aside from the fact that Elliot's designation as a "Mama" goes against her direct wishes, the phenomenon represents an othering of fat women that has broader gendered and racial implications, for fat performers and fat women in general. With this thesis, I explore the intersections of gender, race, body size, and sexuality that are brought into question when examining Elliot and other twentieth century fat feminine performers. In the first chapter, I establish the connections between Elliot's career, life and fatness, by exploring representations of Elliot in popular culture, and the conversations recalled by those around her. I also demonstrate

[7] Rachel Leishman, "'SNL': Emma Stone Makes Her Own Kind of Music in Hilarious Mama Cass Sketch," *Collider*, December 3, 2023, https://collider.com/snl-emma-stone-mama-cass-sketch/.
[8] Phillips, *California Dreamin'*, 76.

how the world viewed Elliot and her fatness, via interviews with friends and media descriptions of Elliot. Central to establishing the inextricable links between Elliot's weight and her legacy is exploring how she was often compared to her thinner bandmate, Michelle Phillips, and how those comparisons contributed to the gendered biases against her. I examine the 1967 single "Creeque Alley," and analyze the lyrics and the infamous refrain, "And no one's gettin' fat except Mama Cass!" Finally, I contextualize Elliot's relationship to dieting and weight loss with a 2024 view of fat science, particularly given the myth surrounding her death.

In chapter two, I dive into the racialized history of defining femininity, and explore how, as a result of patriarchal white supremacy, femininity and Blackness have been placed at odds with one another. I also explore how these hierarchal systems of power associatively situate Jewish people as other (in particular, Jewish Americans and Jewish immigrants to the US), and the historical placements of Jews within racial hierarchies. To this end, I discuss the scholarly and media reception of Big Mama Thornton, a fat Black feminine performer of the mid twentieth century – as she was positioned as being opposite to the era's standard of white Western femininity. Sophie Tucker's life and legacy is also a great place for comparison; as a fat white Jewish vaudeville performer, the ways in which she was ostracized from femininity are similar to that of Cass Elliot. Finally, I introduce the concept of opposing sexualities for fat women, the hypersexual, and the "hyposexual."

In chapter three, I synthesize the points of the previous chapters to explore Elliot's relationship to the term "Mama" and her nickname, "Mama Cass." My entry point into this discussion is an analysis of the racialized stereotypes of the "Mammy" and the "Jezebel" and the connections of these types to the hypersexual/hyposexual dichotomy. Crucial to this argument will be the analysis of Sophie Tucker's songs "I'm the Last of the Red Hot Mamas" and "My

Yiddishe Momme." Finally, I explore Elliot's direct reflections on the label "Mama" and analyze how she further felt about her nickname via the lyrics of her 1973 song "Don't Call Me Mama Anymore."

Literature Review

There are only two biographies written specifically about Cass Elliot, *Dream a Little Dream of Me* by Eddi Fiegel, and *My Mama, Cass* by Owen Elliot-Kugell. *Dream a Little Dream* is a relatively traditional biography of Elliot's life, comprised of historical material as well interviews conducted by Fiegel, a British author and journalist. While extremely thoroughly researched and detailed, *Dream a Little Dream* was published in 2005, and therefore represents the era's panic over the American "obesity epidemic." Critical ideologies about the correlation between body size and health were not popular in the mainstream (although they did exist), and the overwhelming sense of fatness at the time was so negative that many of Fiegel's claims about fatness go unchecked. Compared to many other popular accounts of fat celebrities, Fiegel's account of Elliot succeeds in painting a portrait of the singer as a whole person who was more than just her weight, however her writing occasionally demonstrates anti-fat bias and posits unchecked assumptions about the science and psychology of body size, as well as assumptions on behalf of Elliot's relationship to her own fatness. For example, in establishing Elliot's childhood relationship with her fatness, Fiegel writes extensively about Elliot's attempts to attract the attention of boys, and the subsequent low self-esteem when those romantic experiences were unrequited. It is not outlandish to assume that a fat teenage girl might struggle with dating in the 1950s – in fact, it is quite probable – but rather than acknowledge the social norms that would ostracize larger teens, Fiegel seemingly buys into the idea that Elliot was

inherently unattractive or unlovable because of her weight. She states as much at one point, claiming that "by virtue of her unconventional appearance, Cass was way outside what was considered attractive in a date,"[9] and flippantly notes that when she did find a date, "it was hardly surprising that these dates were rarely successful."[10] At various points in the book, Fiegel claims that Elliot dressed "outlandishly" or started using "risqué" language to distract those around her from her size.[11] Once again, this is not an impossible theory, but Fiegel provides no evidence to suggest that was Elliot's motive, rather than Elliot's bold and outgoing behavior just being a facet of her personality. Another significant oversight on Fiegel's behalf is her assertion that "it was obvious to everyone including Cass that her problems stemmed almost entirely from her weight, but she was clearly loath to address the issue too seriously."[12] This claim is simply untrue; Elliot spent most of her life trying to lose weight. Just two pages after this claim, Fiegel notes that as a young teen, Elliot began taking a prescribed amphetamine called Dexedrine for weight loss, even though it impeded her ability to focus at school.[13] Elliot's daughter, Owen Elliot-Kugell, notes that Elliot went on many diets throughout her life, including a particularly intense one after giving birth to Elliot-Kugell, during which she ate under 1,000 calories per day and lost 110 pounds in less than a year.[14]

As the above examples illustrate, one of the most problematic parts of Fiegel's biography is the unevidenced pathologizing of Elliot based on her fatness. Fiegel goes even further and argues throughout the text that much of what Elliot told others about her life is untrustworthy because Elliot was likely lying to herself: "Cass would also use humor and storytelling

[9] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 20.
[10] Ibid, 17.
[11] Ibid, 17, 23.
[12] Ibid, 23.
[13] Ibid, 25.
[14] Owen Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass* (New York: Hachette Books, 2024), 79.

throughout her life to create the world she wanted, and if her version of reality sometimes bore little resemblance to anyone else's, it was because she needed to live, even if only in her own mind, a life that was different and better than her own."[15]

It is true that Elliot relied heavily on humor and charm to deflect the anti-fatness coming her way, and that often her storytelling could change from person to person. Similar to Fiegel's pathologizing of Elliot's personality, it is not impossible to believe this narrative, and it very well *could* have been true. However, it is just as possible that Elliot was naturally bubbly and spacey, or that she did in fact like the attention that her stories brought her, and it could have nothing to do with her body size. Thin people can have all sorts of personalities, can change their stories, can be funny and brash and charming, without it being a factor of their weight. The issue with assuming that all of Elliot's behaviors are some factor of her weight is that that logic does not allow Elliot to be a real figure with interests and a personality. It feeds into the exact issue with much of Elliot's legacy: that she is fat first, and a person second.

Elliot-Kugell's memoir, *My Mama, Cass*, takes a more humanizing approach to Elliot's life. The book is at once an account of Elliot's career, Elliot-Kugell's own recounting of her mother, and Elliot-Kugell's life after her mother's death. Elliot-Kugell is upfront about the fact that she was only seven years old when Elliot died, and that makes her memoir somewhat of an unconventional tale of her mother's life. However, she states that not only does she have specific memories of Elliot, but she was able to use interviews and recordings of Elliot as well as a plethora of stories from family and friends to build a picture of Elliot's life. Elliot-Kugell narrates the events of Elliot's life through the eyes of her friends, rather than establishing herself as an omniscient narrator. Elliot-Kugell notes her mother's discomfort with the label "Mama,"

[15] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 14.

and her choice to name the memoir *My Mama, Cass* demonstrates the tension Elliot-Kugell feels between respecting her mother's wishes and recognizing that "Mama Cass" is how fans know Elliot best. While not as meticulously researched as Fiegel's work, Elliot-Kugell's memoir has the advantage of an additional twenty years of changing social norms about body size and treats Elliot's fatness in a less stigmatizing way than *Dream a Little Dream*. Elliot-Kugell is more critical of negative comments towards Elliot's weight, and provides more details of Elliot's health struggles to contextualize her death.[16] The increased societal acceptance of fat bodies is more palpable in *My Mama, Cass*, particularly in Elliot-Kugell's discussion of Elliot's childhood Dexedrine prescription: "Emotionally, the message I fear my mom may have gotten could have been, *You're overweight, so something must be wrong with you. Take this pill. It will fix the problem.* The thought that something is wrong with you is bad enough, but the idea that a pill or drug might fix you can be even more dangerous."[17] Implicit in this passage is Elliot-Kugell's belief that being "overweight" is not necessarily wrong. Additionally, it demonstrates a concern for weight-loss medications that is often absent from conversations about fat health.

Whereas Fiegel's and Elliot-Kugell's works provided essential context about Elliot's life, Sabrina Strings' *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fatphobia* supplied a detailed account of the connections between anti-fatness and anti-Blackness, relevant for articulating the intersectional nature of this thesis. In this relatively recent work, Strings argues that modern era anti-fatness evolved as a facet of white supremacy, from a desire of white European elites to distance themselves from the Black people they increasingly encountered as the Atlantic slave trade exploded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Strings writes:

> As the slave trade expanded to areas where Africans had been largely absent, the sudden and proliferating presence of black people sparked a simmering and often vocal

[16] Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass*, 136.
[17] Ibid, 18.

> discomfort. The germinating anti-black sentiment had ramifications for the way black people were represented in art and literature. That is, in the seventeenth century, a 'proto-racist' discourse emerged that marked black women and men as unattractive, hypersexual, and diminutive in both size and social status. White women were idealized as pure, chaste, and stately.[18]

This passage also highlights the secondary force Strings argues drove the Western marginalization of Black bodies: Protestantism. Religious ideals about both dietary and sexual indulgence being sinful allowed many white Europeans and Americans to demonize Black people who did not share their beliefs, which subsequently reinforced their idea that they were superior because of their self-restraint.[19] Strings quotes a seventeenth century Englishman who articulated this connection upon traveling to Western Africa, who said, "[t]hey have no knowledge of God…. They are very greedie eaters, and no lesse drinkers, and very lecherous, and thievish, and much addicted to uncleanenesse: one man hath as many wives as hee is able to keepe and maintaine."[20] In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, white Westerners became more interested in "biological theories of racial difference" and ultimately, eugenics – movements that would reinforce the belief that any physical differences between Black and white folks were reflections of their differing moralities (with white Protestant morality being, of course, the only righteous option).[21]

At the same time white Westerners were twisting scientific reason to justify racial hierarchies, Americans in particular were becoming hyper-focused on the idea of "Anglo-Saxon" supremacy, which led to two concurrent outcomes: 1. The segmentation of white races into subgroups, with Anglo-Saxons being higher up in the racial hierarchy, and Italian or Jewish

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[18] Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 42.
[19] Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*, 53.
[20] Ibid, 82.
[21] Ibid, 85.

immigrants being lower and associated with people of color; and 2. Anxieties about race mixing and the protection of white Anglo-Saxon birthrates.[22] Strings argues that Anglo-Saxon reformers "believed that if they could prevent Americans from stuffing themselves to the gills and tippling with abandon, and instead reorient American dietary habits in a way that honored God, it would be the best thing for the white race."[23] Thus, much of the thin aesthetic became focused on white women, as the cultural norm was that women were the arbiters of the family and therefore the aesthetic welfare of the Anglo-Saxon community; if women were thin and "healthy," they would birth healthy Anglo-Saxon babies and protect the future of the race. Women's magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *Harper's Bazaar* arose in the late nineteenth century to illustrate how women should style and care for themselves within the cultural norms of Anglo-Saxon femininity.[24] As these cultural movements emerged that cemented fatness as a moral evil, doctors absorbed this rhetoric and let it influence the growing medical understanding of body size, leading to many of the cultural and medical biases towards fatness experienced today.

In terms of popular music studies, Alexandra Apolloni's *Freedom Girls: Voicing Femininity in 1960s British Pop* and Laurie Stras' *She's So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music* both provide gendered frameworks in which to view the 1960s music industry. Apolloni's work focuses on the gendered implications of the voice and how some young feminine singers transgressed expected femininity through their vocal performance, whereas Stras' work focuses more on the gendered and racialized expectations of girl singers and girl groups. However, as Stras mentions in her introduction, "Oddly, even a mixed-voice group – such as the Exciters, the Essex, and the Ad Libs – can, to

[22] Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*, 129-130, 147, 151-152, 157.
[23] Ibid, 171.
[24] Ibid, 152-6.

some commentators, qualify as a girl group, as long as the material and approach are right: the lead voice is always a girl, the guy(s) are part of the clique, they assist in the comment and response to the girl's story, and they are never the love interest."[25] The Mamas & The Papas were a mixed-gender vocal group – two men and two women – but lead vocals on each song switched frequently, and their songs rarely featured one lead woman (or man) serenading the opposite sex, as was so popular amongst girl groups. The Mamas & The Papas were one of few mixed gender groups of the era that featured relatively equal musical collaboration, as they typically did not fall into the guidelines Stras articulated. Scholarship on the specificities of mixed-gender musical groups is sparse, making it difficult to have a standard from which to compare The Mamas & The Papas. Additionally, because the main focus of this thesis is Elliot's fatness, and there were no comparable fat women in the music industry at this time, comparisons become difficult there as well. Ironically, the best way to situate The Mamas & The Papas and Elliot's uniqueness is within popular music scholarship about the counterculture – a movement focused on rebelliousness, uniqueness, and standing out.

The 1960s countercultural movement sought to "shape an idealized existence, through their own music and poetry, their communes and collectives, their underground press and alternative institutions, their clothing and dietary habits, their drug and sexual experimentation, and their religiosity and spirituality," and The Mamas & The Papas checked a number of those boxes.[26] They had an unconventional aesthetic, featured two women, which was unusual (even more unusual that one of them was fat), and they embraced the burgeoning folk-electric sound. Furthermore, they actually shaped the growth of the counterculture with their 1965 single

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[25] Laurie Stras, editor, *She's So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence, and Class in 1960s Music* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3.
[26] Robert C. Cottrell, *Sex, Drugs, and Rock "n" Roll: The Rise of America's 1960s Counterculture* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), xi.

"California Dreamin,'" which embodied the idolization and warmth California symbolized to many hippies at the time. Robert C. Cottrell's *Sex, Drugs, and Rock 'n' Roll: The Rise of America's 1960s Counterculture* supplies a basis for the cultural components of the countercultural era, while Michael J. Kramer's *The Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the Sixties Counterculture* provides a more specific musical significance of the counterculture.

The main theoretical framework engaged in this thesis is critical fat studies, a relatively recent field of research that involves rethinking cultural biases about fatness. This next section will provide a basic survey of some of the core tenets of fat studies, as they will be instrumental in understanding this thesis, especially given the cultural focus on Elliot's fatness and health as factors in her sensationalized death.

Essentials of Fat Studies

In this thesis, I will use the word "fat" as a neutral descriptor for people with larger bodies. "Fat" is a preferred term in many fat activist spaces to chubby, curvy, fluffy, big-boned, or any other euphemistic descriptor for fatness because it actually recognizes the reality of fat bodies. Because the word "fat" itself is so stigmatized in an extremely anti-fat society, using descriptors like "chubby" or "curvy" implicitly accept the notion that there is something wrong with being fat, and that use of the word should be avoided.[27] Fat scholars and activists also prefer "fat" to "obese" or "overweight," as those terms hold a lot of medical stigma. "Overweight" inherently accepts that there is one correct weight to be, and "obese" actually comes from the Latin word for "having eaten oneself fat."[28] While the term "fat" has taken on more meaning

[27] Aubrey Gordon, *"You Just Need to Lose Weight" and 19 Other Myths About Fat People* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2023), xviii.
[28] Gordon, *"You Just Need To Lose Weight,"* xix.

because of societal anti-fatness, the word itself, much like short, tall, or thin, is actually the most neutral and direct way of describing larger bodies.

One of the ways in which fat studies legitimizes itself against the entrenched nature of societal anti-fatness is by re-examining the scientific conclusions that have reinforced the cultural notion that fatness is bad or unhealthy. Given the constant rhetoric about the "obesity epidemic" and the near universal poor treatment of fatness by medical professionals, it can be hard to believe that fatness does not necessarily cause poor health. But many scholars have actually found that the causal link between fatness and poor health is flimsy. It would be more accurate to say that there are *connections* between fatness and poor health outcomes, but even this correlation is not statistically significant under a body-mass index (BMI) reading of 40.[29] Oliver notes that the relationship between BMI and mortality is a U-shaped curve, rather than the pervasive narrative that increasing levels of "overweight" fall on a linear trajectory towards death.[30] Researchers at the CDC have even found that life expectancy actually increases for slightly "overweight" individuals, as that added weight can support them through life-threatening illnesses, diseases, or injuries.[31]

How can this be possible, when the universal cultural narrative is that being fat is bad for a person's health? In short, biased research. Much of the research on obesity and fatness makes facile assumptions about fat people's behavior, and about how "excess" fat affects the body. One of the most prominent studies in obesity research was conducted under the assumption "that all excess mortality in obese people is due to obesity."[32] Noting that "even if an obese person died in

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[29] J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23.
[30] Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 21.
[31] Ibid, 25.
[32] David Allison et al, "Annual Deaths Attributable to Obesity in the United States," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 282, no. 16 (1999): 1530-1538, quoted in *Fat Politics*, 24.

a car accident or from a snakebite, the cause of his or her death was attributed to body weight," political scientist and health researcher J. Eric Oliver argues that this logic is "as ludicrous as arguing that the difference in mortality rates between blacks and whites are the result of their skin color."[33] Oliver further notes that many of the conclusions drawn about fatness and poor health misattribute negative health outcomes to fatness itself, rather than the behaviors that may contribute to fatness. These proxy indicators are problematic, as they suggest a false causal relationship between fatness and poor health, when the real causes of the investigated poor health outcomes are "poor diet and inactivity" – things with which any given fat person may or may not struggle.[34] Fatness itself is only reputably known to cause two medical issues: increased pressure on joints that often leads to osteoarthritis, and increased estrogen levels that can lead to uterine cancer. Oliver explains that "all the other [popularly cited] diseases are only linked to obesity through *associations* in large populations. It is not clear why having a lot of fat tissue would make someone more likely to have heart disease, asthma, or many of the other diseases commonly attributed to obesity."[35]

Another issue with popularized "obesity" science comes from the use of the BMI, or body-mass index, when the BMI is an extremely inaccurate way of measuring body fat or poor health. The BMI was invented by a nineteenth-century Belgian astronomer, Adolphe Quetelet, who was aiming to compare physical traits at population levels to find "an idealized average man."[36] Not only was the BMI calibrated mostly on white men, but it was never intended to be used for individual weight or direct diagnoses.[37] In the mid-1940s, the MetLife Insurance

[33] Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 24.
[34] Ibid, 24.
[35] Ibid, 27.
[36] Aubrey Gordon, *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 47.
[37] Gordon, *What We Don't Talk About*, 49.

Company began developing a height/weight ratio to designate some body types as "ideal," to distinguish from other supposedly deviant body types that should be charged more for insurance premiums.[38] In the 1960s and 1970s, a diet and weight researcher named Ancel Keys advocated for the medical community to use the BMI as a standard for "healthy" weight, rather than the MetLife Insurance tables. Keys' push for the BMI was heavily influenced by his own anti-fat bias; in a 1961 interview he acknowledged that although his research had not found a causal link between fatness and health issues like heart disease, he still found "obesity" to be "ugly."[39] Additionally, the categories and cutoffs of the BMI are only relative to whatever the accepted standard of the time is; they actually change quite frequently. In 1998, the US National Institute of Health changed the bounds for what was considered normal weight, overweight, and obese, causing millions of Americans' BMIs to change overnight, even though they had not actually gained any weight.[40] In fact, the main 1995 World Health Organization report that spurred this 1998 NIH decision was written by the International Obesity Task Force, a group largely funded by drug companies who produced the weight loss pills Xenical and Meridia.[41] While these corporations never stated an explicit intent to fund the IOTF as a means of expanding their consumer base, the lowering of BMI cutoffs certainly would have made it easier for previously "normal" weight patients to get insurance coverage for weight loss medication if they now qualified as "overweight." The 1998 shift in BMI cutoffs demonstrates how the guidelines with which the medical community views the relationship between fatness and health are not always rooted in the reality of people's individual health, nor are they motivated by a good-faith desire to provide fat people with proper healthcare.

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[38] Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 19-20.
[39] Strings, *Fearing the Black Body,* 198-9.
[40] Gordon, *What We Don't Talk About,* 50-1.
[41] Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 28-9.

Additionally, one criminally underestimated factor that harms fat peoples' health is anti-fat bias itself. In fact, some scholars and researchers of fatness believe that many of the negative health effects widely associated with fatness may actually be more attributable to the stress of weight bias towards fat people.[42] Fat people are regularly told by society that they are unlovable, unwanted, social pariahs, moral failures, and sometimes even a burden on the healthcare system. Such social ostracization can create the effect of minority stress, which has demonstrable health consequences.[43] And because weight bias is so prevalent in medical spaces, many medical professionals can only see fat people for their size and prescribe them weight loss, leaving many fat patients poorly examined and misdiagnosed.[44] Some doctors even use weight loss as a barrier to future care. For instance, masculinizing chest surgery for transmasculine patients is often weight restricted, meaning many medical providers will not perform the surgery unless the patient loses a certain amount of weight.[45] It is *crucial* to note that 80% to up to 98% of diets fail in the long term, and there is no sustainable way to lose weight for most people.[46] Diets only work as long as a person is on the diet, and as the body loses more fat, it sees continued weight loss as a threat to survival, and adjusts its metabolism and energy expenditures to hold onto more weight.[47] Often, people who diet gain back more weight than they lost, and the body's metabolism is forever affected by that change, making it even harder to lose weight in the future.[48] Even weight loss drugs like Ozempic only work for as long as a person is on the

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[42] Oliver, *Fat Politics,* 23.
[43] Claudia Sikorski et al, "Weight stigma 'gets under the skin' – evidence for an adapted psychological mediation framework – a systematic review," *Obesity: A Research Journal* 23, no. 2 (2015): 266-276.
[44] Gordon, *"You Just Need To Lose Weight,"* 63-4, 67.
[45] H. Conley, "Studies show top surgery is safe for fat patients, but some surgeons still mandate weight loss," *STAT News*, June 2, 2023, https://www.statnews.com/2023/06/02/top-surgery-safe-fat-patients/.
[46] Traci Mann et al, "Medicare's Search for Effective Obesity Treatments: Diets Are Not the Answer," *American Psychologist* 62, no. 3 (2007): 220-233; Gordon, *What We Don't Talk About*, 27-8.
[47] Gordon, *"You Just Need To Lose Weight*," 15-7.
[48] Gordon, *What We Don't Talk About*, 44.

medication.[49] Quite significantly, some people are just naturally fatter, and that occurrence is often the result of genetics.[50] By denying fat people access to certain forms of healthcare or attributing all of their maladies to their larger body sizes, many medical spaces actively harm their fat patients and ignore actually dangerous health issues – all as a result of weight bias. Furthermore, given that most fat people have experienced dismissal of symptoms or medical gaslighting at the hands of medical providers (this author included), many fat people avoid seeking out medical care, putting them at even higher risk.[51]

However, even if all fat people were doomed to shortened lives or did have the power to change their weight, that would not justify the horrific hate aimed towards them. Some fat scholars describe anti-fatness as the "last acceptable form of oppression."[52] I and many fat scholars take issue with this sentiment, given that many forms of oppression are still rife and considered acceptable by large swaths of Western society. However, this sentiment tries to get at the idea that even in leftist circles, anti-fat rhetoric is not considered at the same level as other forms of discriminatory rhetoric. Studies have found that while the rates of unconscious biases about race, gender, and sexuality have decreased in recent years, the prevalence of anti-fatness has only continued to increase. The Harvard Business Review reported findings from Harvard's Implicit Association Test that between 2004 and 2010 alone, the rate of unconscious bias against fat people increased 40%.[53] So, even if all fat people were unhealthy, a central tenet of fat

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[49] Dani Blum, "Ozempic Can Cause Major Weight Loss. What Happens if You Stop Taking It?" *New York Times*, February 3, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/03/well/live/ozempic-wegovy-weight-loss.html.
[50] Gordon, *What We Don't Talk About*, 51-2.
[51] Gordon, "*You Just Need To Lose Weight*," 63-70.
[52] Jennifer-Scott Mobley, *Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter Fat Actress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1.
[53] Tessa E.S. Charlesworth and Mahzarin R. Banaji, "Research: How Americans' Biases Are Changing (or Not) Over Time," *Harvard Business Review*, August 2, 2019, https://hbr.org/2019/08/research-on-many-issues-americans-biases-are-decreasing.

activism and scholarship is that health is not a moral issue. The attitude that fatness (or any health measure) reflects one's morality can be attributed to extra-medical beliefs. As Sabrina Strings argues about the development of medical anti-fatness:

> Even in the medical field, descriptions of the relationship between weight and health were not motivated exclusively by medical findings. The legacy of Protestant moralism and race science as it related to fat and thin persons loomed large. Indeed, many early to mid-twentieth-century physicians relied on moral and racial logics to rail against person deemed too fat or too thin. But over time, a growing number did so specifically, and exclusively, to condemn fatness.[54]

The racial and gendered history of anti-fatness is too significant and all-encompassing to assume that medical theories on fatness evolved in a vacuum. Therefore, we should be critical of any medical standard for a marginalized group that overlaps with a social or cultural belief about said marginalized group – it is just bound to create poor health outcomes for that group.

This background in fat studies is essential to understanding this thesis and Cass Elliot's legacy. Because so much of the discussion around Elliot's life is focused on her health, her body, and her death, understanding the medical realities of fatness is key. Even just the few paragraphs written here, compiling the most basic points of fat/health misunderstandings helps to contextualize Elliot's life. Like many fat people, Elliot experienced horrible discrimination from many of the people in her life, and it affected how she lived, and ultimately, died.

[54] Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*, 165.

Chapter 1: Cass Elliot's Relationship to Her Fatness and Media Representations of Her Size

In 1973, a year before her untimely death, Cass Elliot guest starred on an episode of *The New Scooby-Doo Movies*.[55] This episode of the animated cartoon, entitled *The Haunted Candy Factory*, features the Mystery Gang (Fred, Daphne, Velma, Shaggy, and Scooby) helping Elliot, voicing herself, figure out who is haunting the candy factory she has recently purchased. Elliot plays a central role in the episode, being both the reason for the Mystery Gang's involvement as well as ultimately saving the Mystery Gang from the green candy goblins and uncovering the illegal smuggling operation taking place. But despite her allegiance with the "good guys," the episode is littered with blatant fat jokes that punch down at Elliot and bring her body into question. Shaggy, being the sarcastic character of the group, is usually the one to make little jabs at Elliot. In one scene, Elliot falls through a trap door and Daphne exclaims "Amazing! She just vanished into thin air!" to which Shaggy replies "*Thin* air? Cass Elliot?" to which he and Scooby laugh.[56] Elliot also frequently participates her own anti-fatness via self-deprecating comments, such as "I think we've stumbled upon something bigger than all of us! Well, bigger than you kids, anyway."[57]

However, Elliot's fatness is also built into the episode plot. After Fred, Daphne, and Velma fall through the same trap door as Elliot, Shaggy and Scooby lower a rope to help the others climb up the air vent and back to safety. As thin characters, Fred, Daphne, and Velma make it up without issue, but Elliot is too large to fit through the opening and gets stuck in the vent. Panicking, she says to herself, "If I ever get out of here, it'll be strictly grapefruit –

[55] Joseph Barbera and William Hanna, *The Haunted Candy Factory*, Hanna-Barbera Productions, 1973, https://www.b98.tv/video/the-haunted-candy-factory/.
[56] Barbera and Hanna, *The Haunted Candy Factory*, 4:15.
[57] Ibid, 15:30.

breakfast, lunch, dinner *and* in between snacks."[58] The grapefruit bit pops up throughout the rest of the episode, even impeding the group's getaway when they get stuck in a room full of popcorn and Elliot refuses to help Shaggy and Scooby eat their way out of the trap. Once the culprits have been caught, the Mystery Gang concludes the episode by having a celebratory dinner, hosted by Elliot. Everyone dines on a turkey dinner and helpings of sides, except for Elliot, who proclaims "I must be strong. For me, it's grapefruit. Nothing but grapefruit."[59] She is served her grapefruit, and to the group's surprise, the fruit are covered in chocolate and whipped cream. Velma asks Elliot about this, and to laughter Elliot quips "Not so loud – if you don't tell me, I won't tell my stomach!"[60] Notably, Elliot does not sing or otherwise musically participate in this episode at all. She is portrayed simply as a famous fat lady that owns a candy factory. From some of her first comments through the conclusion, this episode treats Elliot's fatness as an inextricable part – and the most significant part – of her celebrity status.

This episode of *Scooby-Doo* ironically represents the messy juxtaposition between the expectations and the realities of fat women. The show demonstrates all of the stereotypical behaviors expected of Elliot: laughing at jokes at her own expense, making self-deprecating comments, promising to diet, and then reneging on said diet. The implication of Elliot purchasing a candy factory (rather than something related to her musical career, for instance, like a sheet music factory) is another expected behavior of fat women – that she ate herself fat. Ironically, Elliot does not eat anything until the final scene (and even then, the show cuts out before she is actually animated as eating anything). Meanwhile, Shaggy and Scooby's whole act throughout all versions of the Scooby-Doo franchise is that they are motivated primarily by food.

[58] Barbera and Hanna, *The Haunted Candy Factory*, 9:30.
[59] Ibid, 41:05.
[60] Ibid, 42:10.

Velma and Daphne consistently incentivize Scooby to investigate spooky occurrences by feeding him "Scooby Snacks," and often Shaggy finds temporary bravado following a large meal of junk food. However, Shaggy (and Scooby, although he is a dog) remains the same thin size no matter what he eats. In this particular episode, while Elliot spends her screen time promising not to eat anything but grapefruit, Shaggy and Scooby spend theirs eating anything and everything in sight.

Shaggy and Elliot acknowledge this disparity midway through the episode, and in doing so, land on a nugget of truth that I believe is central to understanding Elliot's story. After running away from the green candy goblins, Elliot and Shaggy have the following exchange.

CE: I'm pooped!

S: Hey, you should eat more. Food gives you energy!

CE: I wish that were all it gave me.

S: Is it okay with you if Scooby and I search around for a little snack while we're waiting?

CE: Be my guest. Why wasn't I born a skinny boy? [61]

While the writers likely included this scene for comedic effect, it nevertheless highlights two important realities that diet culture largely ignores. First, that food gives people energy, and eating ~~it~~ is important for sustenance (or in this case, for keeping one strong enough to run away from candy goblins). Secondly, it acknowledges that to some extent, body size is genetic. Elliot's rhetorical "Why wasn't I born a skinny boy?" undermines the notion that fatness is a result of "overeating" – if that were true, Shaggy would not be thin. Moreover, this comment also implicitly recognizes that the life of a "skinny boy" is easier than that of a fat woman – maybe not because of size itself, but how each party is treated as a result of their size.

[61] Barbera and Hanna, *The Haunted Candy Factory*, 24:45.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how Elliot's fatness is inextricably linked to her public persona. I explore other extramusical representations of Elliot in popular culture, as well as her own reflections on her fatness, media and personal comparisons between Elliot and the thinner Michelle Phillips, and associations between her contralto vocal range and her size. As a focal point, I provide a lyrical analysis of the Mamas and the Papas 1967 single "Creeque Alley," which features the infamous refrain "And no one's gettin' fat except Mama Cass!" Finally, I explore her relationship to dieting and weight loss, media reception to her death, and refute the idea that she died "of obesity," instead contextualizing her health in the social and environmental factors of her life.

Cass Elliot Biography

Cass Elliot was born Ellen Naomi Cohen on September 19, 1941. Both of her parents, Bess and Philip, came from Eastern European Jewish backgrounds, and throughout Elliot's childhood, the Cohen family would settle into the local Jewish communities in Baltimore, Washington DC, and Alexandria Virginia.[62] The name "Cass Elliot" would come later, when Elliot was contemplating a theatrical career. Throughout her life, Elliot gave varying accounts on which historical figures inspired the name change, but the C and E were clearly an homage to her birth name, Ellen Cohen. Elliot once told a journalist that her father used to lightly tease her by calling her the "mad Greek Cassandra," a story later corroborated by Elliot's daughter.[63] [64] Elliot-Kugell recalls her mother telling her that the surname "Elliot" was in reference to a close friend who had died while Elliot while she was in high school.[65] There is no evidence to suggest

[62] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 2-6.
[63] Ibid, 36.
[64] Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass*, 12.
[65] Ibid, 17.

that she changed her name to avoid the Jewish associations of her given surname, Cohen, but given the Anti-Semitism of the era, and other musicians who changed their names (ex. Bob Dylan), it is certainly possible.

Elliot grew up a charismatic performer, and as a child was fascinated with Broadway musicals and performers.[66] Once out of high school, she moved to New York City to become a professional singer, and one of her first roles was in *The Music Man*. She moved back to Alexandria when her father died, to help take care of her family, before starting school at American University in Washington, D.C. During her brief time at university, Elliot hosted a regular jazz program for her college radio and demonstrated a specific interest in classic jazz singers like Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday.[67] Fiegel argues that while Elliot was at university and beginning to branch out into professional performance, Elliot recognized that musical popularity lie in the folk scene rather than in Broadway and show tunes.[68] Elliot met guitarist Tim Rose through a mutual university friend, and in early 1963 she, Rose, and another singer named John Brown, formed the folk trio Triumvirate. After only a few months, Rose and Elliot replaced Brown with Jim Hendricks (later to be Elliot's first husband, not to be confused with guitarist Jimi Hendrix), and the group moved from the Chicago scene to New York's Greenwich Village, renaming themselves the Big 3 in the process. It was during her time in the Big 3 that Elliot would meet Denny Doherty, future "Papa" and Elliot's longtime unrequited love. In mid 1964, the Big 3 disbanded, and Elliot and Hendricks joined forces with Doherty and Zal Yanovsky (future Lovin' Spoonful member) to form the Mugwumps. Once the Mugwumps broke up in 1964, Doherty was called to replace a member of the New Journeymen, John

[66] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 29.
[67] Ibid, 41-5.
[68] Ibid, 48.

Phillips's trio with his wife Michelle. The New Journeymen, Elliot, and a few other friends ended up living and working in the Virgin Islands for a few months, honing their various acts at local clubs, and just generally enjoying the communal hippie ethos of the era. This period is when Doherty, both the Phillips', and Elliot considered singing together, and fine-tuned their harmonies. Although it took much convincing of John Phillips, who believed Elliot was too fat to fit the image of the group, Elliot was finally let in the group in 1965, and the four became The Mamas & The Papas.[69]

Photo 1: The Mamas & The Papas and their "unusual" aesthetic, performing on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, June 17, 1967. Left to right: Michelle Phillips, Cass Elliot, Denny Doherty, John Phillips. CBS Television, Public Domain. Accessed August 1, 2024, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Mamas_and_the_Papas_Ed_Sullivan_Show_1968.JPG.

[69] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, Chapters 6-13.

Much of The Mamas & The Papas' popularity came from their unusual aesthetic compared to the mid-60s folk scene. As Michelle Phillips recalled in her 1986 autobiography,

> I think people were ready for something that was modern, hip, an image that was new, animated, and attractive and had women in it, liberated women yet. These were *hippies*… lookit, these guys are bearded and wear funny clothes, one of the girls is barefoot, there's a fat one, they wear beads and bells, and they sing.[70]

The musical appeal of The Mamas & The Papas came from both their four-part, multi-gendered harmony, as well as their embrace of a more electric, folk-rock sound. They had such a tight harmony together that sometimes in the studio they would hear an overtone resembling a fifth voice, which they affectionately named "Harvey."[71] One of the group's engineers, Bones Howe, recalls that they were just as talented live as they were in the studio: "It was a group that was made up of making music *before* they got to the studio, not just in the studio. And they sang well and sang in tune and they were used to singing, hearing each other side by side."[72] While the members of The Mamas & The Papas largely had performance backgrounds in the acoustic folk scene, the popularity of electric folk-rock was growing at the same time as the group was developing their sound. Elliot and Doherty in particular were quite keen to embrace the new rock sounds they heard from British Invasion groups.[73] John Phillips was not interested in the electric sound, but after a number of failed acoustic auditions, Phillips came around to going electric, aligning the group with other popular rock and folk-rock acts like the Beatles and the Byrds.[74]

The group's – and particularly, John Phillips' – lyrical and symbolic role in the 1960s countercultural movement cannot be understated; their 1965 single "California Dreamin'"

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[70] Phillips, *California Dreamin'*, 82.
[71] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 164.
[72] Ibid, 165.
[73] Ibid, 100-2.
[74] Ibid, 146, 176-7.

provided a soundtrack for those hippie dreamers that yearned for a "lush, libidinous California," one that Robert C. Cottrell argues held a "veneer of infinite possibilities… helping to craft the notion that one could be recast in the great American West."[75] John Phillips was also responsible for the "theme song for the 1967 Summer of Love in the Bay Area," a song he wrote for his friend Scott McKenzie, titled "San Francisco (Be Sure To Wear Some Flowers In Your Hair)."[76] Phillips used the song to promote the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival, which he co-planned with producer Lou Adler, and which ended up being a core event of the counterculture.

Elliot herself became a pillar of the counterculture due to her social role in the Laurel Canyon community. In Michael Walker's book about the L.A. Laurel Canyon neighborhood's relevance to the rock music industry, he describes how the communal musical aspects of life there in the late 1960s significantly contributed to musical growth, and Elliot's role in that growth:

> So it was that [Graham] Nash, [Stephen] Stills, and [David] Crosby sat in Mitchell's living room on Lookout Mountain, in the heart of Laurel Canyon, in the epicenter of L.A.'s nascent rock music industry, and for the first time, began to sing together.
>
> It is a measure of Laurel Canyon's mythmaking powers that this particular watershed may have actually occurred not at Mitchell's cottage – though that's the way Nash and plenty of others remember it – but a mile away in the living room of Cass Elliot of the Mamas and the Papas, who along with Mitchell briefly co-reigned as unofficial queen of the canyon, one an inscrutable poet-genius, the other a bosomy, meddling, mother figure. What is certain is that within the year, Nash, Stills, and Crosby apotheosized into Crosby, Stills & Nash, the third group with Laurel Canyon roots within as many years – after the Byrds and Buffalo Springfield – to score a knockout with their first record.[77]

Unnecessary bias aside (why does credit of bringing together Crosby, Stills & Nash make Mitchell an "inscrutable poet-genius" while it makes Elliot "bosomy" and "meddling?"), Walker

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[75] Cottrell, *Sex, Drugs, and Rock "n" Roll,* 138.
[76] Michael J. Kramer, *The Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the Sixties Counterculture* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 18.
[77] Michael Walker, *Laurel Canyon: The Inside Story of Rock-and-Roll's Legendary Neighborhood* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), xii.

demonstrates how the communal aspects of the 1960s counterculture created an environment that stimulated collaborative musical growth, and how Elliot was central to that growth. While Nash recalls the meeting of himself, Crosby, and Stills occurring at Mitchell's home, he credits Elliot with their formation and notes her unique musical intuition: "I think she really *knew* what *I* was capable of doing and knew that Crosby and Stephen were in between bands, as they say, so I think she knew *instinctively* that we would get on as *people*. Also I *think* because of who she is and her sense of harmony and history, she knew that certain voices would be very interesting when put together."[78]

Elliot's social position in the Canyon often is considered by her friends and by scholars as mothering, particularly because of the large parties she hosted at her home. As Fiegel writes, Elliot's house became "a kind of second home for friends like Crosby, Graham Nash, Stills, Mitchell, Gram Parsons, and John Sebastian…[a]lthough Cass may have downplayed her role in creating this environment, the fact was that she was not only warm and welcoming, but she also had a large, comfortable house that was generally full of interesting people, good food, and good drugs."[79] These ongoing parties allowed for the type of collaboration that Crosby, Stills, & Nash experienced; just as often as they were drug fueled benders, they were meeting sites for some of the most prominent people in the music industry. Fiegel argues that Elliot's open-house mentality fostered the counterculture ethos:

> The fluidity of having a permanently open house where most of society's earlier rules did not apply provided the perfect framework for Cass to build her own kind of unofficial family around her. In communes across America, many were doing the same, and in the absence of the romantic love and commitment she craved, this at least provided camaraderie, affection, and companionship. There was also a general sense of excitement at the discovery of this new freer life, both musically and socially.[80]

[78] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 279.
[79] Ibid, 275.
[80] Ibid, 276.

Walker articulates the mothering role more directly, writing, "[i]n a canyon filled with footloose, emotionally dysfunctional young men and women, she had fulfilled, wittingly or not, the role of indulgent matriarch – albeit a hip and acid-tested one."[81]

The Mamas & The Papas were only actually together from 1965 to 1967, even though Dunhill Records continued to release some of their previously recorded music through 1971. Major tension in the group first arose in 1967, due to a number of interpersonal issues (I will refer to the band members by their first names here to avoid confusion between the Phillipses). In 1965, Denny and Michelle had a brief affair, which hurt not only John, Michelle's husband, but also Cass, who had become close friends with Michelle, had romantic feelings for Denny, and felt betrayed by both.[82] In 1966, Michelle went on to have another affair with Gene Clark of the Byrds, which angered John so much he kicked her out of the group for three months.[83] After Michelle returned, her relationship with John deteriorated further, which is often cited as a cause of John's increased drug use during this period. Denny was also struggling with alcohol-dependency at this time because, according to Fiegel, he was trying to soothe unrequited romantic feelings for Michelle. Denny's feelings for Michelle in turn only hurt Cass more, due to her own deep romantic feelings for Denny. All of this interpersonal drama and substance abuse led to an environment where none of the band members were eager to record with one another, and the stability of the group began to fracture.[84] Cass finally hit her limit at a 1967 party in London, attended by many British rockers, including the Rolling Stones. The party took place to celebrate Cass' release from a short stint in British jail, after an incident involving stolen towels from a London hotel (her boyfriend took the towels). Cass was relaying the story of her arrest to

[81] Walker, *Laurel Canyon*, 56.
[82] Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass*, 55-6.
[83] Ibid, 59-60.
[84] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 222-5.

Mick Jagger, when John, who was constantly belittling Cass, interrupted and said Cass had gotten the story entirely wrong. Cass cursed him out and left the party, telling Denny later that night that she was officially quitting the group.[85] Fiegel notes that John was constantly undermining and belittling Cass for small things, Elliot-Kugell describes John being uncomfortable with Cass' size, and Michelle recalls John making persistent digs at Cass' weight during her time in the group.[86] Only Cass herself could ever explain why she decided to quit the group, but the persistent emotional abuse and anti-fatness from John is certainly a persuasive reason.

Elliot was the only member of The Mamas & The Papas to have a significant solo career after the group's breakup. She had always demonstrated a quick wit during audience banter, giving her an alluring stage presence.[87] Additionally, she had arguably the most recognizable and powerful voice in the group, as Fiegel notes that the other members of the group often had to adjust to "keep up" with her.[88] In her solo work she shifted away from the folk-rock of The Mamas & The Papas and embraced show tunes and jazz standards. Her first solo album was titled *Dream a Little Dream*, referencing The Mamas & The Papas popular version of "Dream a Little Dream of Me," on which Elliot sang lead. "Dream a Little Dream of Me" also helped cement Elliot as the breakout star of the band, as the arrangement featured very little background harmonizing from the rest of the group and was marketed distinctly as "Mama Cass with the Mamas and the Papas."[89] The single was released in 1968, after Elliot had quit the group, but while they were still officially saying they were on a "break." The success of "Dream a Little

[85] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 227-233.
[86] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 232; Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass*, 48; Phillips, *California Dreamin'*, 124.
[87] Phillips, *California Dreamin'*, 107.
[88] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 165.
[89] Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass*, 75.

Dream of Me" convinced Dunhill Records that there was success to be found in Elliot's solo work, and thus began her solo career.[90] *Dream a Little Dream* was released in 1968, and was followed by *Bubblegum, Lemonade &… Something For Mama* (1969), *Cass Elliot* (1972), *The Road is No Place For a Lady* (1972), and finally her live album, *Don't Call Me Mama Anymore* (1973).

Elliot died on July 29, 1974 after finishing up a slate of solo shows at the London Palladium. The exact cause of her death has been widely disputed, but her initial obituaries stated that she died from choking on a ham sandwich. Realistically, Elliot likely died from heart failure. In her memoir, Elliot-Kugell explains that Elliot's manager at the time, Allan Carr, was unsure of Elliot's cause of death, and was afraid of the reputational backlash she might posthumously receive if an autopsy showed signs of drug use.[91] Elliot indeed had a history of drug abuse, and in the late 1960s, she developed a heroin habit and also eventually became addicted to a barbiturate called Nembutal, which she had initially used as a sleeping pill. In 1971, she even overdosed on Nembutal in her sleep and required close care for weeks afterward.[92] Elliot-Kugell explains that once Carr arrived at the scene of Elliot's death, and saw a ham sandwich on her nightstand, he leaked a story to a colleague at the Hollywood Reporter that Elliot died from choking on the sandwich, in an effort to get ahead of information released from the medical examiner.[93] In reality, her friend and dancer Joe Croyle was staying with her at Harry Nilsson's London apartment, and having been told by Elliot that she was hungry after their July 28th performance, kindly made her a ham sandwich while she was in the bath. She died sometime in

[90] Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass*, 76.
[91] Ibid, 246-7.
[92] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 304-5.
[93] Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass*, 246-7.

her sleep and was discovered in the afternoon of July 29th.[94] The ham sandwich had nothing to do with her death; as Elliot-Kugell succinctly puts, "[m]y mom passed away in her sleep – she had a heart attack in her sleep and she died."[95]

The fact that the media ran so quickly with the ham sandwich narrative is no accident; Elliot's celebrity status was always closely aligned with the relative visual anomaly of her weight. Americans' average body sizes have shifted since the mid twentieth century; in 1960 the "average" 5'5'' woman weighed anywhere from 124 to 149lbs depending on her age, whereas the average woman in 2018 weighed 170lbs.[96] Reports on Elliot's weight varied and given that many reports are hyperbolic guesses to make a point about just *how* fat she was, none can be taken as exact. Her initial *New York Times* obituary states she was 250lbs, the correction stated she was around 220lbs, and many of her friends, like Denny Doherty and David Crosby, would throw out estimates in interviews that she was (an unthinkable!) 300lbs.[97] However, her exact weight does not really matter; Elliot *looked* fat. There was no writing her off as slightly "chubby" or "curvy" – she had a round frame, an infamous double chin, and was clearly fat. Such a star would stand out in today's celebrity landscape, but in the 1960s and 1970s, when the American population was overall lighter than it is today, there were very few obviously plus-size

[94] Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass*, 2-3.
[95] Chynna Phillips-Baldwin, "Mama Cass's Daughter Reveals The Truth About Her Life And Death," YouTube Video, November 23, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQdnxmnxeAY, 26:27-26:37.
[96] "Table of Average Weights," *New York Times,* October 20, 1959, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1959/10/20/issue.html; US National Center for Health Statistics, *Anthropometric Reference Data for Children and Adults: United States, 2015-2018,* January 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_03/sr03-046-508.pdf.
[97] Rockwell, "Cass Elliot, Pop Singer, Dies"; Albin Krebs, "Notes On People," August 6, 1974, https://www.nytimes.com/1974/08/06/archives/cass-elliots-death-linked-to-heart-attack-notes-on-people.html; Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 245, 366.

celebrities. And significantly, as Fiegel notes, there had never been "a mainstream white pop star that looked like Cass."[98]

Given the parts of this chapter that re-examine Elliot's life and career through a fat-neutral lens (that is to say – a lens that does not assume being fat is inherently unhealthy or morally negative), it seems prudent to re-examine her death in a similar fashion. In her work on queer history, Heather Love warns academics against using scholarship to go back in time and "rescue" marginalized folks from the past.[99] I write this section with that warning in mind, and do not seek to rescue Elliot from the anti-fat past – I do not think Elliot needed saving, and even if she did, I do not see present day as a safe haven from anti-fatness. Rather, as of 2024, we have more scientific information about health and fatness, more information about social stigma towards fatness, and more theories on how the negative effects of fat stigma are conflated with the negative effects of fatness itself, all of which allows us to see past accounts of fatness in a different light. I merely aim to use Elliot's story as an example of anti-fat phenomenon – if anything, to "rescue" current and future women (performers or not) from the same anti-fat pitfalls. Most importantly, the story of Elliot's death and the subsequent ham sandwich urban legend are inextricable from her legacy, and so understanding the anti-fat fallacies of both are tantamount to understanding how Elliot's legacy has been shaped by anti-fat bias.

As mentioned briefly in my discussion of Fiegel's *Dream a Little Dream*, Elliot was very conscious of the anti-fat attitudes leveled towards her and spent a majority of her life trying to become thin. The initial report of her death was, of course, that she choked to death on a ham sandwich, but she was soon after revealed to have had a heart attack in her sleep. One might

[98] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 2.
[99] Heather Love, "Emotional Rescue: The Demands of Queer History," In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007): 31-52.

argue that this cause of death makes sense, because Elliot was so "overweight" that her heart gave out. In fact, her manager told her physician, Dr. Greenburgh, to dissuade the notion of drug abuse, leading Greenburgh to say to the press, "She was a very big lady and I would not rule out the possibility of a heart attack."[100] The coroner would later go on to officially report that Elliot died of "fatty myocardial degeneration due to obesity." However, as established in the introduction, only two medical conditions can actually be directly caused by a larger body weight: osteoarthritis and uterine cancer. Even Fiegel notes that medical experts at the time disbelieved the report that Elliot died simply due to "excess" weight. She quotes one British heart expert as saying "Many girls who weigh double what they should, live perfectly happy to a much greater age."[101]

Given that this is a fat conscious recontextualization, it is crucial to note the other (more clearly evidenced) behaviors of Elliot's that would cause heart failure. First, Elliot had numerous drug addictions. As established, she was prescribed Dexedrine in her early teens, an event that Fiegel argues probably spurred further drug use in her later years.[102] In the years leading up to her death, she was addicted to the barbiturate Nembutal, and also heavily abused heroin. Elliot's boyfriend George Caldwell removed both Temazepam and liquid cocaine from the apartment where she died at the advice of Elliot's manager Allan Carr, worried that a drug-induced death might tarnish Elliot's reputation.[103] Secondly, Elliot yo-yo dieted, or weight cycled, for most of her adult life.[104] Yo-yo dieting, which is the repeated cycle of weight loss and weight gain, often due to starting and failing diets, has proven to increase a person's risk for heart disease.[105]

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[100] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 364.
[101] Ibid, 365.
[102] Ibid, 26-7.
[103] Ibid, 363-4.
[104] Ibid, 265, 355.
[105] Gordon, *What We Don't Talk About*, 62.

Thirdly, Elliot had not slept in forty-eight hours at the time of her death, and was coming off of a series of twenty-eight performances in two weeks that Elliot-Kugell argued left her physically exhausted.[106] Finally, Elliot had been hospitalized numerous times in the year preceding her death.[107] She collapsed on the set of the Johnny Carson show, and when asked about it in later interviews, she brushed off the incident as having had "the vapors," continuing that "I hadn't been able to eat anything all day… my blood sugar level dropped or something and I just sort of tipped over."[108] Elliot-Kugell argues that these hospitalizations, the exact nature of which are unclear, were a significant factor in Elliot's health of the time, and very well could be related to her death.

Short of a time machine and a renewed autopsy, we cannot know for certain *exactly* how Elliot died. But actually examining Elliot's drug use, heavy dieting, physical exhaustion, and prior hospitalizations paints a more contextualized picture of Elliot's health at the time of her death, and sheds doubt on the idea that her heart failure was just because she was fat. Recontextualizing fat health in a modern lens provides some certainty that Elliot did not die because, as her obituary put it, "part of the heart muscle had turned to fat 'due to obesity.'"[109]

Interpersonal Accounts of her Fatness

Elliot was fat for almost her entire life. Elliot herself said as much in an early 1970s interview: "I've been fat since I was seven."[110] Fiegel argues that Elliot's fatness was a result of overeating for attention, an argument bolstered by Elliot's own statements about her childhood.

[106] Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass*, 1-2.
[107] Ibid, 135-140.
[108] Ibid, 139.
[109] Krebs, "Notes on People."
[110] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 1.

> I was a thin child and a poor eater until my sister Leah was born when I was almost seven years old. I imagine that aroused some insecurities within me. At least so I've discovered through psychoanalysis. After Leah came along, I did the thing that was most acceptable to me – and what I thought would please my parents: eat. By the time I dropped out of high school, two weeks before graduation, I weighed 180 pounds.[111]

In this thesis, I do not seek to discount Elliot's accounts of her own life nor the way she identified with her own body. However, given the advances in fat studies since Elliot's time, I believe some contextualization is necessary. It may be true that Elliot's body changed as a result of her eating habits after her sister was born. But given that Elliot's mother, Bess, was also a "robust" woman, and the role that genetics plays in body size, it is just as possible that Elliot would have always been a fat woman, regardless of her relationship to food.[112] A 2016 *New York Times* article indicates that popular cultural beliefs about fatness and willpower are actually incongruent with the scientific evidence: "Researchers say obesity, which affects one-third of Americans, is caused by interactions between the environment and genetics and has little to do with sloth or gluttony. There are hundreds of genes that can predispose to obesity in an environment where food is cheap and portions are abundant."[113] So while it is *possible* that Elliot's youthful tendency to "overeat" caused her to become fat, the above passage indicates that another child who was not genetically predisposed to "obesity" but had the same eating habits as Elliot may not have become fat. Elliot's size very likely could have been the result of genetic predisposition to a larger frame, rather than a moral failure of "overeating." If Elliot were thin, ate more after the arrival of her younger sister, and had remained thin, the story of her

[111] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 8.
[112] Ibid, 3.
[113] Gina Kolata, "Americans Blame Obesity on Willpower, Despite Evidence It's Genetic," *New York Times,* November 1, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/01/health/americans-obesity-willpower-genetics-study.html.

"overeating" would likely not be pathologized in the same way; many explanations of eating behaviors in fat children and adults are often self-fulfilling in this way.

Whatever the reason for Elliot's body size, Fiegel notes how being so different from her peers – fat, Jewish, child of Socialist parents – was difficult for a teenage Elliot growing up in a postwar conformist society.[114] She argues that Elliot developed her charisma, humor, and quick wit as ways of defending herself from bullying, something that Elliot herself would often echo in interviews. Triumvirate bandmate Tim Rose recalls Elliot as "the wittiest woman I had ever met."[115] Fiegel argues that Elliot "had a natural talent for impromptu repartee" that she would often employ during and in between songs in her set.[116] Rose confirms this, recalling "Just watching her timing, it was like line, bing, *bang!* She knew exactly what most comedians never get… She knew *how* to be funny… She knew how to work an audience."[117] In her autobiography, Michelle Phillips remembers one The Mamas & The Papas concert where someone in the crowd shouted out that they loved Elliot: "She shouted back, 'Dynamite. Where ya' staying?' She chuckled with them, made jokes with them, talked to them as friends, old friends, long-lost friends. She was mercilessly flirtatious, entertaining, and funny."[118] Elliot also had an enormous amount of projected confidence; Elliot's first husband, Jim Hendricks (whom she married to help him obtain a green card), remembers thinking that her confidence was unusual for her size, recalling, "Here's this girl with this huge body and she's acting like she's Miss America! It was such a strange thing, but it was really amazing!"[119]

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[114] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 16-7.
[115] Ibid, 50.
[116] Ibid, 76.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Phillips, *California Dreamin'*, 107.
[119] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 64.

Elliot's natural charm attracted many male musicians in her orbit, but nearly all of them only saw her as a close friend, despite her romantic feelings for them. This pattern of meeting a male collaborator, becoming inseparable friends, and having to deal with unrequited romantic feelings would reoccur many times over Elliot's lifetime. Most significantly, Elliot had a longtime romantic attraction to fellow Papa Denny Doherty, who always rebuffed her advances. Michelle Phillips remembers that Doherty and Elliot's dynamic was very intense, even after Phillips had an affair with Doherty in 1965. In one part of her autobiography, she describes the relationship between Doherty and Elliot as having a "sexual element," saying Elliot "allowed it to go on, and he perpetuated it, always just that incredible titillation going on and on and around and around."[120] In another section, Phillips remembers Doherty and Elliot's relationship as "close and warm and tense but not sexual."[121] On a Canadian interview show in the late 1990s, Doherty reflected on his relationship to Elliot, saying "I was vain and I was fickle and I was stupid and she weighed 300 pounds and I never got past it."[122] At the same time as they denied any romantic feelings towards Elliot, close friends like Doherty and David Crosby reacted negatively to Elliot's romantic partners, such as her 1967 boyfriend Lee Kiefer. Elliot's sister, Leah, remembered Kiefer, although potentially an "opportunist," dating a rich woman, as genuinely loving and appreciative towards Elliot. On the other hand, Crosby referred to Kiefer as a "parasite," and Doherty reviled Kiefer's devotion to Elliot – an attitude Fiegel argues combined "the protectiveness of a brother with the disdain, resentment, and envy of a jealous lover."[123] The overwhelming sense, both from Fiegel as well as the people in Elliot's life, is that this inconsistency with romantic prospects led to a lack of self-esteem that plagued Elliot for her

[120] Phillips, *California Dreamin'*, 58.
[121] Ibid, 80.
[122] "Denny Doherty," *Dialogue*, TVOntario, November 15, 1998, 12:11-12:16.
[123] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream,* 221-5.

entire life. She had this extraordinary wit, charm, and confidence, but when she developed intensely close emotional relationships with many men in her life, nearly all of them rejected any romantic advances because of her size. Such intense and repeated rejection would leave anyone feeling unloved. Elliot-Kugell believes that loneliness is why Elliot decided to have a child; that Elliot "wanted to have someone in her life who was always going to be there and never leave her."[124] When Elliot gave birth in April of 1967, she named her daughter "Owen, her very own."[125]

However, even though Elliot's pregnancy was her one way of taking back control from the assumptions about her body and the emotional rejection she faced, reactions to her pregnancy were still steeped in gendered anti-fatness. Michelle Phillips remembers that "[h]er gynecologist had said it was pretty unusual for anyone of her weight to get pregnant. According to Cass he had said, 'You may never get pregnant again,'" and due to Elliot's stubbornness and independence, "on that basis she was going to go ahead."[126] Upon hearing that she was pregnant, John Phillips' first reaction was to ask when Elliot was going to get an abortion. He was genuinely shocked to hear that she was keeping the baby, Fiegel argues, because "the idea never occurred to him that a woman in the middle of a flourishing pop career and who, furthermore, was not in a regular relationship might even consider having a baby."[127] Elliot was married at the time, to Jim Hendricks, but they were never romantically involved. Ironically, this probably gave her some freedom to have a baby, for single women in 1966 were not expected or encouraged to start families on their own.[128]

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[124] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream,* 60.
[125] Ibid, 68.
[126] Phillips, *California Dreamin'*, 119.
[127] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream,* 206.
[128] Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass*, 63.

It is also not a stretch to assume that some of John Phillips' shock to the news of Elliot's pregnancy was due to his overwhelming distaste for her fat body. While most of the people in Elliot's life would make little anti-fat comments here and there (including Doherty and Michelle Phillips), John Phillips was direct and cruel. In 1965, when the group was living in the Virgin Islands, it became clear to Doherty, Elliot, and Michelle Phillips that Elliot was the missing key to an incredible sounding harmony. However, John Phillips was quite reluctant to let Elliot join the group. Doherty recalls Phillips making up thinly veiled excuses for why he did not want Elliot in the group, including that "[h]er eyes are too close together and she smells," or that her vocal range was too low – but his dislike of Elliot ultimately came down to her body size.[129] Despite the folk and counterculture ethos that there was no one way to look, that misfits were welcome, and the fact that Elliot had had plenty of success in the folk scene in the past, Phillips was willing to sacrifice improved harmony because he did not want a fat woman in his group.[130]

When Phillips finally acquiesced to Elliot's involvement, he said it was because her vocal range had expanded up a few notes after she was hit on the head with a pipe. Elliot did in fact get hit on the head with a pipe during their time in St. Thomas, and Elliot would corroborate this story in interviews later in her life. However, Elliot-Kugell argues a Phillips had an ulterior motive behind making up the pipe story. Of the incident, she scathingly writes:

> Really? That's a fun story, but it's not usually how concussions work. Hitting someone on the noggin doesn't make them sing higher; it gives them a brain injury. The real story is that John didn't like my mother's look. She wasn't skinny and pretty like Michelle. But the girl could sing: that much was undeniable. So, he made up the story about a fake increase in vocal range to justify his choice to finally add my mom to the band months later. [131]

[129] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 146-7.
[130] Ibid, 80.
[131] Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass*, 48.

Once Elliot was finally a part of The Mamas & The Papas, Phillips would still constantly make anti-fat jokes, directly to her face, as Michelle Phillips recalled, "John used to tease her without mercy. When she went on diets, he'd say, 'Don't lose any more weight.' Why not? 'Because your eyes are getting too close together.' Or, 'You should have your own label, Cass. Fat Records. Then the record label's ads could read 'Another Obese Release from Fat.'"[132] Once again, given John Phillips' propensity to undermine and belittle Elliot, the addition of a constant barrage of anti-fat jokes could certainly explain why Elliot eventually became fed up with the group and quit.

Professional/Media Receptions of Elliot's Fatness

Understanding how fatness was an inescapable part of Elliot's personal life, it comes as no surprise that fatness would be a core tenet of her professional life as well. Media discussions of Elliot typically mentioned or focused on her body size. As previously discussed, there were fewer fat women in America in the 1960s and 1970s than there are today. Since the discussion of fatness and in particular, fat women, can be so tenuous, I want to be careful when discussing the country's shifting body demographics. Although many publications attribute the upward shift in the average size American to the "obesity epidemic," considering the increase in fatness over the past half-century as an "epidemic" is reductive and dangerous (especially considering "obesity" does not meet the definition markers for a disease).[133] In writing that there were fewer fat people in the US in the mid-twentieth century, I am not doing so with a biased, moralistic value judgement on what bodies "should" look like, nor ascribing any health markers to one era or the other. Simply put: data shows that fatness was not as common at the time of Elliot's career as it

[132] Phillips, *California Dreamin'*, 124.
[133] Oliver, *Fat Politics*, Chapter 2.

is now. Additionally, there was no semblance of a body positivity movement at the time; while modern society is still rife with anti-fatness, there is now a covert "love yourself" element that makes outward displays of anti-fatness generally perceived as unkind. In Elliot's time, fat was bad, and it was accepted to say as such.

Given the societal context of anti-fatness and Elliot's unique position as a fat *white* woman in the public eye, media and popular culture were merciless in their attack on Elliot. The Scooby-Doo episode she starred in is just one such example. A 1966 article recounting Elliot's experience meeting John Lennon wrote "the Large Bird from America has finally made contact with the Chief Beatle of Blightyland" in the byline.[134] Another article from 1968 about The Mamas & The Papas breakup describes Elliot as "mammoth Mama Cass."[135] On a 1972 episode of the Mike Douglas talk show, Douglas introduces Elliot by saying "I'm gonna feel very slender on the show today."[136] Even her obituary is filled with little remarks about her body, although (ironically) summing up the obsession simultaneously: "She was still best known to the general public as the largest, most visible member of the Mamas and the Papas."[137]

Aside from general quips about her weight, the media had more indirect ways of obsessing over her body. One such way was by comparing her to bandmate Michelle Phillips. Very thin, with blonde hair and blue eyes, Phillips was the epitome of white feminine beauty in the 1960s. One of the reasons The Mamas & The Papas were always billed as an unusual looking group was because there were two women who looked so different. Doherty described the band

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[134] James McCluskey III, "Cass Meets John," *KRLA Beat* (California), September 10, 1966, Rock's Backpages.
[135] Alan Walsh, "How Mama Cass won The Will-They-Won't-They Split Saga To Emerge With A Monster Hit," *Melody Maker* (London), August 17, 1968, Rock's Backpages.
[136] Reese Scott, "Cass Elliot on The Mike Douglas Show, 1972," YouTube Video, 19:02, November 20, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYDx4HPO9TM.
[137] Rockwell, "Cass Elliot, Pop Singer, Dies."

in a 1985 interview, saying "there's John, who's 6 foot 5 and gaunt, there's Michelle, looking like the angel floating around, there's this crazy Canadian [referring to himself], and this 300 pound person all singing and making this incredible sound."[138] Even Doherty, who was one of Elliot's closest friends, could not help but remark on Michelle Phillips' conventional beauty in relation to the group dynamic. Phillips herself also recalled in her autobiography that the difference in her and Elliot's appearance was significant in their interpersonal dynamic:

> She used to like to think of us as the Body and the Brain… We were so close, maybe because there was competition between us. I think she resented her weight and my slimness. So much was made of her size and figure. It didn't seem to her to be fair. She knew she was brighter than I; she knew she was funnier. She knew she sang better, and yet there was always going to be that fact that she was not pretty or alluring or any of those things I had down pat… I think I was envious of the way she sang just as she envied me my appearance. But I also knew how lucky I was to be singing with her. She made me sing better than I would ever have sung... There was, in an unequal way, in an unbalanced way, a good evening-out of our relationship. It's difficult to explain except that, unlikely though it all was, we were very close. I knew that Cass saw me as vapid blonde, but I was also competition for her that she never had wanted. But there it was, right there, and it was something she had to face and deal with, and so we were good friends. Besides, we had to band together often against John and Denny! It was complicated enough, but it did work.[139]

The world (and even the women themselves) saw Phillips as the "vapid blonde" and Elliot as the witty fat one. However, Phillips interestingly notes that this precise dynamic is what made their friendship click, this "good evening-out" of characteristics. Significantly, the women were able to put their differences aside and support one another against the men in the band and the music industry as a whole.

While Elliot and Phillips may have forged a close friendship despite their differences, media depictions of the pair largely focused on their aesthetic differences. A 1973 retrospective of the band describes how "Mountainous Cass hated Michelle because she was slim and

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[138] Dan Kirouac, "Denny Doherty – The Fifth Estate (CBC, 1985)," YouTube Video, 22:17, June 3, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpwkKyVE7rs.
[139] Phillips, *California Dreamin'*, 109.

beautiful."[140] A 1970 *Melody Maker* interview described the group as "Two girls and two guys, Michele, the pretty one… and Cass Elliott was the fat one."[141] Notably, this *Melody Maker* interview also refers to John Phillips as the main songwriter, and Doherty as the one who "never said anything," demonstrating how the men were judged by their actions while the women were judged by their appearances. Additionally, some articles just described Michelle Phillips as "beautiful" without any mention of Elliot's appearance – the omission of which is a comparison in itself.[142]

Many comparisons of Elliot and Phillips include juxtapositions of their singing voices that reinforce the thin/fat binary. As Phillips herself notes, Elliot was a much more confident and skilled singer, while Phillips tended to be musically (and personally) meeker.[143] This difference in projection between Elliot and Phillips, coupled with the difference in their vocal ranges – contralto and soprano, respectively – were significant to the band's image. However, reporting on this difference usually attributed aesthetics of femininity to their respective vocal types. Elliot's *New York Times* obituary compares the two: "Miss Elliot sang contralto with the group and served as the large, homey foil to the ethereal beauty and the soprano of Michelle Phillips."[144] Another interview describes Phillips as having a "summery little soprano."[145] A LIFE magazine article, in one such comparison, actually attributes Elliot's vocal projection to her weight: "Cass's forceful contralto, charged by her near 200 lb. bulk, was added to Michelle's

[140] Lillian Roxon, "Recalling the '60s With Mama Michelle," *New York Sunday News*, July 8, 1973, Rock's Backpages.
[141] Vicki Wickham, "John Phillips: At The Bitter End," *Melody Maker* (London), September 12, 1970, Rock's Backpages.
[142] Keith Altham, "The Mama and The Papas: The Morning after the Beatles' Night Before," *New Musical Express* (London), June 24, 1966, Rock's Backpages.
[143] Phillips, *California Dreamin'*, 54, 108-9.
[144] Rockwell, "Cass Elliot, Pop Singer, Dies."
[145] Roxon, "Recalling the '60s With Mama Michelle."

delicate lyric soprano."[146] In these examples, Elliot's and Phillips' vocal ranges are inextricable from their physical appearances and aesthetics, and ultimately their femininity or perceived lack thereof.

"Creeque Alley" Lyric Analysis

Perhaps the clearest example of Elliot's cemented association with her fatness is found in The Mamas & The Papas' 1966 single "Creeque Alley." This lyrical analysis will demonstrate how cemented Elliot's fatness was to the idea of her persona, and her role within the band. Despite this being a music studies thesis, I do not analyze the song's sound, in part because the more interesting and relevant pieces of engagement with fatness occur in the lyrics. Additionally, as Allan Moore argues, while strict engagement with a piece of music's sound is relevant to many forms of Western art music, in popular music studies, meaning and lyricism are just as important.[147] Perhaps a further area of study in fat musicology could connect particular sonic properties to lyricism, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

"Creeque Alley," named after the street in the Virgin Islands that held the club where the group first started performing, recounts the story of how The Mamas & The Papas came together as a band. As well as documenting the story of The Mamas & The Papas, "Creeque Alley" features many other Laurel Canyon cameos, including that of Zal Yanovsky and John Sebastian of the Lovin' Spoonful, Roger McGuinn of the Byrds, and songwriter Barry McGuire. The inclusion of other Laurel Canyon figures in their song demonstrates the communal ethos of the neighborhood, and how involved each of these musicians was in each other's lives and careers.

[146] Phillips, *California Dreamin'*, 60.
[147] Allan F Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company), 1-7.

Each verse details some part of the band's and the community's stories and ends with the refrain "And no one's gettin' fat except Mama Cass."

Verse 1:

John and Mitchy were gettin' kind of itchy
Just to leave the folk music behind
Zal and Denny workin' for a penny
Tryin' to get a fish on the line
In a coffee house Sebastian sat
And after every number they'd pass the hat
McGuinn and McGuire just a gettin' higher
In L.A., you know where that's at
And no one's gettin' fat except Mama Cass

This first verse describes Michelle and John Phillips's, Doherty's, Yanovsky's, McGuinn's, and McGuire's attempts to find a big break on the folk scene, as they "pass the hat" around local clubs. The second verse notes Doherty and Yanovsky's decision to leave Canada for the New York folk scene. The third verse finally talks about Elliot, noting her decision to leave university (not actually at Swarthmore, which was used solely for rhyming purposes) and pursue performance opportunities in New York City. It also alludes to Elliot's romantic feelings for Doherty ("When Denny met Cass he gave her love bumps") as well as the formation of the Mugwumps. In all three of these verses, the refrain "And no one's gettin' fat except Mama Cass" presumably refers to Elliot's professional success and opportunities while the others struggled to find work.

Verse 4:

Mugwumps, high jumps, low slumps, big bumps
Don't you work as hard as you play
Make up, break up, everything is shake up
Guess it had to be that way
Sebastian and Zal formed the Spoonful
Michelle, John, and Denny gettin' very tuneful
McGuinn and McGuire just a catchin' fire
In L.A., you know where that's at
And everybody's gettin' fat except Mama Cass

The above fourth verse describes the breakup of the Mugwumps, the formation of the Lovin' Spoonful, the success of the Byrds as well as Barry McGuire's career, and the penultimate formation of The Mamas & The Papas, before Elliot joined. Because Elliot is the only one at this time who is not in a group (as she was repeatedly denied entry into The Mamas & The Papas), the refrain is changed to "And *everyone's* gettin' fat except Mama Cass."

Verse 5:

Broke, busted, disgusted, agents can't be trusted
And Mitchy wants to go to the sea
Cass can't make it, she says we'll have to fake it
We knew she'd come eventually
Greasin' on American Express cards
A tent's low rent, but keeping out the heat's hard
Duffy's good vibrations and our imaginations
Can't go on indefinitely
And California Dreamin' is becomin' a reality! [148]

This fifth and final verse depicts the time spent in the Virgin Islands on Creeque Alley. The Phillips couple, Doherty, and a handful of other friends used the last of their savings to travel one-way to the Caribbean and spent months living in tents on the beach, singing in local clubs, and generally embracing the era's carefree hippie ethos (communal living, using lots of drugs, etc). Initially, Elliot could not join them, but was eventually able to buy a ticket down ("we knew she'd come eventually"). Here the Phillipses and Doherty honed their harmonies, Elliot angled to be a part of their group, and they used drugs like there was no tomorrow until they all ran through their savings. The final refrain – "And California Dreamin' is becomin' a reality" – refers to their most popular song that was soon to become a hit, as well as refers to how the group grew tired of being broke and living in tents, and longed to return to California.

[148] The Mamas & The Papas, "Creeque Alley," By John Phillips and Michelle Phillips, Recorded 1966, Track 3 on *Deliver*, Dunhill, Spotify. Lyrics transcribed with reference to The Mamas & The Papas official Spotify account.

For all of the twists and turns the characters take in "Creeque Alley," the one constant is the refrain that plays on Elliot's fatness. The usage of the word "fat" in this song is as a double entendre for money and success, but it nevertheless still singles out Elliot and reinforces the shock value of her size. Michelle Phillips recalls being shocked when John Phillips wrote the line:

> The line "No one's getting fat except Mama Cass" was a shock when John first sang it to me. Very funny, I told him, but what were we really going to say? "We're going to say that, Michelle. This is Art, and we can get away with anything. Particularly the truth." Okay. I remember clearly singing the song for Cass, and she loved it from the first moment. I think that was the first time the dreaded word actually came out. *Fat*. …She'd had a lot of time to get used to being chubby, and she had a marvelous capacity for self-mockery. You can hear Cass singing her heart out on that lyric from "Creeque Alley."[149]

Elliot does indeed sing her heart out in the recording, and during a 1967 performance on the Ed Sullivan Show, Elliot sings that line while triumphantly pointing her thumb at herself.[150]

Elliot constantly made self-deprecating jokes about her weight, from her first entrances into the performance world up until her death. Making fun of one's own weight is often a defense mechanism when dealing with anti-fatness. When given few options to defend oneself from anti-fatness, self-deprecating jokes are a way of lessening the harm; they allow one to hurt oneself before someone else can hurt them. The jokes signal that the fat person recognizes and will put themself in their own place; they are a way of demonstrating that one is a "good" fat person.[151] Elliot was incredibly skilled at this level of social performance. She made unprompted jokes about her weight in interviews, to friends, and even participated in pre-written jokes on television, like in the Scooby-Doo episode. In 1971, Elliot guest starred on an episode of the

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[149] Phillips, *California Dreamin'*, 124.
[150] The Ed Sullivan Show, "The Mamas & The Papas 'Creeque Alley' on The Ed Sullivan Show," *YouTube Video*, 3:09, September 4, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USibFMyk3Rw.
[151] Stacy Bias, "12 Good Fatty Archetypes," *Stacy Bias*, June 4, 2014, https://stacybias.net/2014/06/12-good-fatty-archetypes/.

Carol Burnett Show and appeared in a sketch in which the two women are perusing a bookstore. Elliot's character recommends a book she had previously read to Burnett's character, titled *Eat and Lose Weight.* Burnett's character picks up the book, takes a look at Elliot's character, and asks, "What happened?" to which Elliot's character responds, "Well, I got as far as the 'Eat,' and then I didn't understand the rest."[152] Many of Elliot's self-deprecating jokes work to confirm other's assumptions about her (and fat people in general). This joke implies that she is either too ignorant or oblivious to understand the popular narrative that eating causes weight gain. In a realistic examination of Elliot's life, one understands that this is not the case. She was not oblivious to weight stigma or the popular health narratives of fatness and poor health; she was always consciously working to become less fat. The self-deprecating jokes therefore, are a subversion of her actual reality as a fat person – they are a social performance meant to shield Elliot.

"Creeque Alley" is therefore quite significant, as it is a direct statement of the truth, and one that Elliot wholeheartedly embraced. Regardless of the financial entendre of the line, the idea that "No one's gettin' fat except Mama Cass" was the truth. As I will explore later, Elliot objected to the label "Mama," in part because it implied certain social assumptions about fatness and gender. But this song (and her other direct usages of the word "fat") indicates that Elliot perhaps had less of an issue with the idea of being fat, but rather took issue with the societal and industry expectations of fat female performers.

[152] Reese Scott, "Book Store Sketch – Cass Elliot on The Carol Burnett Show," YouTube Video, 5:30, May 7, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjHSXVKk_kg.

Chapter 2: Historical Patterns of the Racial and Sexual Bounds of Femininity

The goal of chapter one was to establish the entrenched associations between Cass Elliot's fatness and her career. However, one could argue that the presentation of a feminine celebrity's appearance as part of her legacy occurs regardless of body size; in the juxtapositions between Elliot and Michelle Phillips, Phillips' beauty and thinness was commented on as well. One could argue that maybe this is just a problem of misogyny, in that there is a double standard between media representations of men and women, and unfortunately due to societal stereotypes about fatness, fat women just get negative rather than positive attention. However, while there definitely is a double standard between men and women, there is also a double standard within women – between fat and thin. The history of anti-fatness in Western culture is deeply rooted in patriarchy and white supremacy, and therefore anti-fat representations of fat women divorce those women from social norms of femininity. Thin women are misogynistically targeted by media representations and discussions, but (so long as they are thin and white) they still retain their right to femininity. And while this was, and continues to be, harmful for the performers themselves, it is also harmful more broadly, as it sends the message to female audiences that their femininity is subject to strict guidelines as well.

Therefore, the persistent comments about Cass Elliot cannot be read in a vacuum; they are part of a deeply racialized pattern of stripping fat feminine performers of their femininity. This chapter will explore how femininity and traditional beauty norms are defined in terms of whiteness and thinness, and therefore are also inherently anti-Black and anti-fat. I will continue the dive into the racial history of anti-fatness and explore how these guidelines of femininity or lack thereof show up in the lives and legacies of other fat performers such as Big Mama Thornton and Sophie Tucker. Finally, this chapter will establish the double-sided expectations of

fat women as hypersexual and hyposexual, and how that dichotomy is also rooted in the racialized and gendered norms of traditional feminine behavior.

Defining Femininity

Because Western society operates under patriarchy and white supremacy, ideals of Western femininity largely adhere to parameters set by the white male gaze. Therefore, there are power dynamics inherent to expressions of femininity. While ideal feminine beauty standards have oscillated over the past century, a few key characteristics have remained consistent: Western femininity is white and (relatively) thin. I say "relatively" to acknowledge that beauty standards have shifted over the second half of the twentieth century: in the 1950s, a fuller, yet still thin, Marilyn Monroe type figure was desirable, while the 1960s-1990s featured varying forms of thinness ("naturally" thin, athletic and toned, "heroin chic"), whereas the late aughts and 2010s have shown an increase in idolization of curves.[153] However, even the idealized full-figured woman is never actually fat. In an essay about considering the fat body within feminist scholarship, Cecilia Hartley notes the overt power dynamics in expectations of beauty and physical space:

> Modern American standards require that the ideal feminine body be small. A woman is taught early to contain herself, to keep arms and legs close to her body and take up as little space as possible. This model of femininity suggests that real women are thin, nearly invisible… Not surprisingly, those women who claim more than their share of territory [i.e. fat women] are regarded with suspicion.[154]

[153] Jacqueline Howard, "The history of the 'ideal' woman and where that has left us," *CNN*, March 9, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/07/health/body-image-history-of-beauty-explainer-intl/index.html.
[154] Cecilia Hartley, "Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship," In *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 61.

In this way, the social dynamics of femininity are disguised as much more innocuous "beauty standards," something that is societally taken much less seriously. Hartley's interpretation also demonstrates how the ideal femininity results from patriarchal power dynamics.

Sabrina Strings' *Fearing the Black Body* connects popularly held links between gender and power to race as well, arguing that Western ideals of thinness developed as a method of perpetuating white supremacy and subjugating other races. Therefore, if femininity is taken to be defined as "thin and white," and hierarchal systems of power are accepted to be at play in feminine expression, then it must also be assumed that these guidelines of femininity are anti-fat and anti-Black. In her book, Strings also explored the racialized nature of femininity, and how femininity is designed to be at odds with Blackness. Strings first observes "the linking of black femininity and the grotesque" in Elizabethan era culture, including long exalted works such as Shakespeare's plays.[155] Some European philosophers and writers recognized the difference in sizes between white and African women (even if these differences were largely anecdotal), and when they were not busy analyzing these differences via theories of bodily humors or phrenology, recognized the beauty found in larger African women. However, their appraisal of Black femininity was still quite problematic, as exemplified by Sara Baartman, otherwise known as the Hottentot Venus. Baartman was a Black South African woman who was enslaved in the early 1800s and paraded around London as an exhibit of the exotic Black body. White Europeans were fascinated with her, a phenomenon that Strings reasons was because to them, she was "simultaneously grotesque and exotic: a sexual specimen with a peculiar racial identity. For these reasons exhibitgoers came both to gawk at her proportions, especially her posterior, and to experience the sensory pleasure of touching her."[156] Baartman would come to represent the

[155] Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*, 54-5.
[156] Ibid, 92-3.

Black feminine in the Western eye: at once both exciting to experience, while also foreign and repulsive; she was "beyond the pale of fair-skinned, European norms of beauty."[157]

As discussed in the literature review, white standards of feminine beauty would become widespread via the introduction of women's magazines in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the express aim of protecting the white, Anglo-Saxon race. Strings argues that "the belief that the bodies of elite women needed to be regulated by medicine" was a phenomenon that persisted throughout and ultimately encouraged the development of medical guidelines for weight management.[158] In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, research on fatness showed that while Black women have higher BMIs on average, their mortality rates for higher BMIs were lower. Strings sums up the anxieties about the size of Black women and the particular moment with the following passage:

> Nevertheless, the findings about black women's obesity rates had touched a nerve. Since the height of the slave trade and the growth of Protestantism, black women had been the symbols of 'savage' aesthetic inclinations and amoral appetites. Now that researchers found that black women had among the highest BMIs in the country; their size was also evidence of disease. The association between fatness and black femininity – which had been transmuted during the height of fat-baiting against 'hybrid' immigrant populations in the nineteenth century – reemerged. Yet again, black women were to become the focus of fear, anxiety, and degradation over the size of their bodies.[159]

While the societal focus of bodily anxiety and anti-fatness falls most on the shoulders of Black women, the hierarchal notions of white supremacy ensured that non-Black people of color as well as some white immigrant populations were associated as bodily monstrous by subjugated association. In the early twentieth century, Jewish immigrants were othered by racial association with Black people, a racial classification that still perpetuates Jewish stereotypes to this day.

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[157] Strings, *Fearing the Black Body,* 98.
[158] Ibid, 194.
[159] Ibid, 202-3.

Eastern European immigrants in the early twentieth century, many of whom were Jewish, were considered by many race scientists as a type of lesser or "hybrid" white person, inferior and considered to potentially have some Black heritage.[160] Due to the popular fear that the influx of Jewish immigrants to the United States at this time would lead to a racial replacement and dilute the supposed purity of the Anglo-Saxon race, the most direct solution to some politicians was anti-immigration laws. But a more indirect solution was to perpetuate anti-Semitic stereotypes and employ racial hierarchies to justify discrimination against and socially ostracize Jews living in America.[161] These stereotypes still affect Jewish self-identities to this day; in a 2022 autoethnography of her experience as a fat white Jewish woman, Abby Gondek writes "[h]istorically, Jewish women were depicted as fat, immoral, lustful, dirty, vulgar, and disgusting, characteristics that link them with a supposed lack of femininity and also with blackness," a pattern that led her to feel her own "female body was marked as other, even if it was a white-appearing Jewish body."[162]

Therefore, while the constant association of Cass Elliot and her fatness might have felt unique because she was one of the only high-profile fat women from the 1960s folk scene, it is part of a much larger pattern of corporeal discrimination, in which femininity and fatness are racially coded concepts, placed squarely at odds with one another. Significantly, because anti-fat rhetoric is largely rooted in anti-Blackness, many female performers whose public image were inseparable from their fatness were Black women, as is seen in the case of Big Mama Thornton.

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[160] Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*, 151-2.
[161] Ibid, 157-9.
[162] Abby Gondek, "Un-Dainty Fat Jewish Daughter: Jewish Mothers' Racialized Disgust, and Embodied Recognition across Racial Difference," *Fat Studies* 11, no. 2 (2022): 175.

Establishing a Pattern

"Big Mama" Thornton is one such example of a fat Black woman whose physical appearance was often conflated with her career. Born Willie Mae Thornton in 1926, Thornton was a pioneer of rock n' roll; her single "Hound Dog" directly and indirectly inspired early rock acts like Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin. She was a physically large woman, both tall and fat, and with her powerful voice and personality, she was given the nickname "Big Mama" by a club promoter.[163] Her nickname is significant, as any mention of her inherently brings up her size; the fact that Thornton is "big" is the first interaction any new fan has with her public persona. Putting aside the use of the term "Mama" (which will be discussed at length in the next chapter), one could argue that describing Thornton as "big" is simply accurate. She was a big lady, and her voice was indeed quite loud and expressive. Maureen Mahon argues that Thornton's powerful vocals were a way of "claim[ing] sonic space," and an "upending of gender roles that encapsulates the disruptive form of femininity that Thornton sound[ed]."[164] "Big" in Thornton's case is certainly a nod to her bold presence, as well as to her body.

However, despite the obvious double standard that Thornton's thinner and meeker contemporaries were not regularly christened as "small" anything, the "Big Mama" nickname indicates an othering response to what Mahon described as Thornton's "disruptive form of femininity." In addition to being physically different from mainstream Anglo-Saxon femininity (i.e. being Black and fat), Thornton did not act like a woman would be expected to in the mid twentieth century. Thornton regularly dressed in masculine clothing, such as "slacks, plaid work shirts, cowboy boots, a stingy brim hat, and, in a spectacular move, a men's suit."[165] Her choice

[163] Maureen Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 32.
[164] Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens*, 38.
[165] Ibid, 44.

to dress this way fostered persistent rumors that Thornton was a lesbian (the truth of which we do not actually know). Thornton also did not tolerate any disrespect from audience members, and did not hesitate to defend herself, physically or verbally.[166] Most significantly, Thornton recognized her contributions to the rock genre and advocated for herself financially. Elvis Presley famously found wild success with a cover of Thornton's "Hound Dog," but Thornton was never paid royalties for the cover. In 1972, Thornton commented, "I've been singing way before Elvis Presley was born and he jumps up and becomes a millionaire before me . . . off of something that I made popular. They gave him the right . . . now, why do they do that? He makes a million and all this jive because his face is different from mine."[167]

While Thornton's aesthetic and behavioral choices certainly challenged the notion of traditional femininity, her self-advocacy is the most direct and arguably most threatening aspect of her social defiance. Clothing and public behavior can be construed as somewhat aesthetic choices, but Thornton stating that she had been unfairly compensated for "Hound Dog," – and acknowledging that it was largely because of race and gender disparities – is a blatant challenge of power dynamics. Whether conscious or not, society and media often does not know how to categorize women such as Thornton, who was, as Mahon puts it, "a transgressor par excellence."[168] Thornton's nickname and her untraditional femininity demonstrate how anti-fatness is often only about actual fatness at the surface level. Upon closer examination, Thornton's transgressions clearly have much more to do with gendered power dynamics, and the deeming of her as a "Big Mama" indicates a societal othering in reaction to her choices to take up space, sonically or otherwise.

[166] Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens*, 32-3.
[167] Ibid, 38.
[168] Ibid, 30.

Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon as it relates to Cass Elliot comes from the life and reception of early twentieth century vaudeville performer Sophie Tucker. Like Elliot, Tucker was the child of Eastern European Jewish immigrants and lived most of her life as a fat white woman. Tucker began performing in her family's restaurant in the late 1890s and early 1900s, but when she tried to land bigger roles, club owners and promoters told her she was too fat and ugly to perform. Chris Brown, the manager of the 125th Street Theatre in New York, presented the obvious solution: "This one's so big and ugly the crowd out front will razz her. Better get some cork and black her up. She'll kill 'em."[169] If she was too big and ugly to be the proper feminine white woman, their solution was to put Tucker in blackface and have her do minstrelsy instead. Tucker performed primarily in blackface for the first few years of her career until one performance where she lost the luggage containing her blackface materials and was forced to go on as a white woman. Tucker had already been subverting blackface expectations by cheekily raising her glove at the end of a performance to reveal her white skin, and just as audiences had loved that trick, they loved Tucker performing without blackface at all. Tucker reportedly was uncomfortable doing blackface, but she nevertheless benefitted from it; once she "came out" as a white woman, she already had a sizeable audience from the blackface performances on which to reinvent her image. As Tucker scholar Lauren Sklaroff notes, even after Tucker left blackface behind, "'coon songs' such as 'That Lovin' Rag,' one of Tucker's first hits, and 'My Southern Rose' were still crowd pleasers."[170]

[169] Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Red Hot Mama: The Life of Sophie Tucker* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 39.
[170] Sklaroff, *Red Hot Mama*, 62.

There is a lot to unpack in the early music industry's relegation of Tucker to blackface. There is the obvious anti-Black implication that an "ugly" white woman was equivalent to any Black woman, and therefore that Black women could not be physically or aesthetically beautiful. And since the white feminine ideal of beauty is tied to body size, the other obvious implication of Tucker's inability to get work as a white performer is that fatness was a trait belonging exclusively to supposed monstrous Black women. The subtler racial dynamic at play here is that this happened to Tucker as a Jewish woman. The boundaries of whiteness are largely contingent on who is figured as "the other" at any given historical moment; and throughout the twentieth century, the boundaries of white/not white shifted. As previously discussed, many European immigrants were not considered white in the early 1900s. Although Tucker's Eastern European Jewish heritage means she might not have been considered fully "white" at the beginning of her career, I will refer to her as white here to emphasize the differences faced between her and the aforementioned Black performers. At the point that Tucker died in 1966, popular Jewish musicians (like Elliot or Bob Dylan) were still touched by antisemitism, as demonstrated by their adopting of non-Jewish surnames, but they would have been popularly viewed as white people by the media. Additionally, Tucker's whiteness is called into question by her participation in blackface minstrelsy. Blackface was of course, the act of painting one's face dark with burnt cork, as well as painting on exaggerated lips and other facial features, but it was also a type of performance. Fat white women who performed blackface, like Tucker, were at a crossroads of oppression and great privilege. The societal reception of their bodies demonstrates that they were affected by an associative anti-Blackness, but they still had the privilege of doing blackface and therefore being distanced from Blackness. Sklaroff argues that distancing oneself from Blackness was a draw of blackface for some Jewish performers: "Second-generation Jewish immigrants

were determined to shed their ethnic traits, and by putting on burnt cork they could assume a racial stereotype that native-born Americans had donned for decades. Once they became black, they could become less Jewish, less different."[171] Of course, the complicated part of Tucker's story as a fat Jewish woman is that one could argue that blackface performance was the only possible career path available to her – that is, because of her apparent unattractiveness and fatness, her choices were extremely limited.

Once Tucker stopped performing in blackface, she transitioned to vaudeville performance and reinvented her image as a white woman who was witty, confident, dramatic, and bold. She had a very powerful singing voice, and she talked and sang openly on stage about relationships and sex. Sklaroff notes that as a fat woman in the vaudeville space, Tucker "was not a conventionally sexy starlet," so "with time she learned to straddle the very fine line between comedy and crassness."[172] Tucker did not have the sort of access to traditional femininity that her thinner contemporaries had, so she leaned into being bold and outspoken. Sklaroff argues that "having left one husband and living on her own for years, Tucker was anything but a conformist."[173] Like Cass Elliot would do fifty years later, Tucker embraced her humor as a means of self-defense and personal autonomy. For the early twentieth century, this set her even further apart from her contemporary feminine performers:

> It was also publicly recognized that Tucker was one of only a few celebrity women who dared to be funny. As one article proclaimed, women were "desperately concerned about beauty and poise" and therefore could not risk poking fun at themselves or positioning themselves in an awkward manner…Tucker had "no beauty or sex attraction," there was nothing at stake, and she could sacrifice her dignity.[174]

[171] Sklaroff, *Red Hot Mama*, 40.
[172] Ibid, 64.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Ibid, 109.

Tucker was particularly non-conformist when it came to her relationship with her fatness. As she became a more popular celebrity, she started to speak up about body image and the struggles of being a fat woman. According to the documentary, *The Outrageous Sophie Tucker,* she sponsored a line of blouses for "full-size women," and bemoaned limited clothing sizes, saying to her audience "[n]obody takes care of people my size, and there's a lot of us."[175] She would crack some self-deprecating jokes, but would also regularly talk during her shows about her fatness and often connect her larger size to her sexuality, bragging that she had more sex because she was fat.[176] Tucker at one point pledged to form a "'Fat Women's Club,' to help others stop 'being forever in misery and dodging food.'" Sklaroff writes that the Fat Women's Club "would promote self-acceptance and solidarity among those who took an oath 'only to see the beauty of the double chin.'"[177] Significantly, Tucker sang songs about being a fat woman, the notable two being "Nobody Loves a Fat Girl," and "I Don't Want To Get Thin." "Nobody Loves a Fat Girl" is a mere fifty second number, but it outlines a common tension fat women found (and continue to find) in heterosexual romantic relationships.

Nobody loves a fat girl,
But oh, how a fat girl can love
Nobody seems to want me
I'm just a truck upon the highway of love
The only game that I can get the men to play,
Is to sit around and try to guess what I weigh
Nobody loves a fat girl,
But oh, how a fat girl can love![178]

[175] *The Outrageous Sophie Tucker*, directed by William Gazecki (2015; Santa Monica, CA: Menemsha Films), Kanopy, 40:59-41:11
[176] Ibid, 45:00-45:30.
[177] Sklaroff, *Red Hot Mama,* 108.
[178] Sophie Tucker, "Nobody Loves A Fat Girl (Live On The Ed Sullivan Show, October 12, 1952)," YouTube Video, 0:54, August 4, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOzqmjhE8GM (lyrical transcription my own).

"I Don't Want To Get Thin," on the other hand, is much more defiant. Tucker outlines the number of issues she faces as a fat woman, but between jibes with her pianist, Teddy Shapiro, who plays the devil's advocate, she always comes back to the refrain "I don't want to get thin, you can laugh and you can grin, but I'm doing very well just the way I am."

Almost everyday, I hear some kind friend say
"Sophie, dear, I think you're much too stout,"
Right away they suggest, the diet they think best,
They make me sick I wish they'd cut it out!

I don't want to get thin, I don't want to get thin!
Why should I? When I'm alright as I am
Those slender waisted mamas, they make me laugh
My goodness, men like to see a little [unintelligible]

I don't want to reduce, furthermore, what's the use?
When men follow me around like Mary's lamb?
The girls who talk of dieting, gee they get on my nerves
If you want to keep your husband straight, show him a lot of curves

I don't want to get thin, you can laugh and you can grin
But I'm doing very well the way I am![179]

While the above lyrics are just from the first few verses, they demonstrate how much of "I Don't Want To Get Thin" still buys into anti-fat and heteronormative rhetoric. For instance, the reasons Tucker cites for staying fat is for the aesthetic and sexual pleasure of her male partners. Additionally, she references a love for eating and a lack of dieting as the reason she is fat, seeming to play into that line of self-deprecating humor. But the declaration that she does not want to get thin was still revolutionary for 1929, particularly during the waifish flapper girl era.[180] Between her general embrace of her fatness, her outspoken sexuality, and her humor,

[179] Tucker, Sophie. "I Don't Want To Get Thin." Recorded 1929. Victor Talking Machine Company, Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/78_i-dont-want-to-get-thin_sophie-tucker-ted-shapiro-jack-yellen-milton-ager_gbia0543736a, (lyrical transcription my own).
[180] Sklaroff, *Red Hot Mama*, 108.

Sophie Tucker fits the mold for untraditional femininity of this era and demonstrates another woman whose gendered and racialized physical appearance became central to her image and legacy.

This pattern of socially ostracizing and putting fat women in specific boxes would eventually affect Cass Elliot. Sophie Tucker was not ostracized in the same way as Big Mama Thornton because she still retained her white privilege. However, she was, and Cass Elliot would eventually be, racially and bodily othered, albeit to a different and less life-threatening extent. Both of these women, and Elliot, looked and behaved in ways that were considered unfeminine, and as a result, the societal reaction was to other them. In other words: "Because they do not construct bodies that conform to the feminine ideal, fat women are perceived as violating socially prescribed sexual roles, and that violation is a threat to existing power structures."[181]

Hyper/Hypo-Sexuality Dichotomy

As established, Big Mama Thornton and Sophie Tucker have much in common with each other, as well as Cass Elliot – the most notable difference being that the former was Black, and the two latter were white and Jewish. Another difference concurrent to those racial lines is the way their lives were sexualized or desexualized. The main way Thornton was divorced from traditional femininity was via mainstream white rhetoric that sensationalized her sexual, physical, and emotional "appetite," and often painted her as brash and wild, regardless of how she actually felt about their own sexuality. However, Tucker had much more flexibility and choice when it came to how she expressed her sexuality, and there was more diversity in how it was perceived. As previously discussed, Tucker played into stereotypes of Black sexuality while

[181] Hartley, "Letting Ourselves Go," 64-5.

she performed in blackface. Once Tucker stopped doing blackface, she was freer to lean into the (at the time) sensationalized narrative of the sexually confident white woman. However, she also was able to market herself as a maternal figure, particularly as she got older. During her shows during World War II, Tucker encouraged young soldiers to write her letters, and they did in droves, because as Lloyd Ecker puts it, "they wanted [Tucker] for their pinup girl… this woman, despite the fact she was certainly old enough to be their mother, was the girl that they wanted in their writing box."[182]

This pattern exemplifies the hypersexual/hyposexual dichotomy that scholars such as Kathleen LeBesco, Jana Evans Braziel, and Cecelia Hartley have observed in representations of fat women. Hartley (as well as other scholars) describe this dichotomy as a "state of simultaneous asexuality and hypersexuality."[183] In place of their use of "asexuality," I choose to use the term "*hypo*sexuality" as not to invalidate the reality of asexuality as a sexual orientation, which is different from the phenomenon these scholars are describing. Jana Evans Braziel expands on this hypersexual/hyposexual phenomenon:

> [F]irst, the fat female body is defined by a benign asexuality that is marked by a paucity of representation and exists as the unrepresentable, or near-representable (that which is located on the margins of representability), because of an exclusion that I term the *corporeal mark of absence*; second, the fat female body is defined as a site of sexual masquerade—conveying both an excessive salaciousness and a hyperbolic derision of that prurience.[184]

At once, the fat feminine body is both completely excluded from sexual behavior *and* exhibiting an "excessive salaciousness" and desire for sexual behavior. No cultural stereotypes represent this better than the Black feminine figures of the "Mammy" and the "Jezebel." The "Mammy,"

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[182] *The Outrageous Sophie Tucker*, dir. Gazecki, 57:00-58:45.
[183] Hartley, "Letting Ourselves Go," 68.
[184] Jana Evans Braziel, "Sex and Fat Chics: Deterritorializing the Fat Female Body," In *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, edited by Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 232-3.

as will be explored more next chapter, was a figure that evolved from American slavery, an exaggerated and falsified version of an enslaved Black woman that worked in a white enslaver's house. Completely devoid of sexuality, large, jolly, always grateful, and persistently doting on the household's white children, Micki McElya argues that the Mammy, or the faithful slave narrative, "lingers because so many white Americans have wished to live in a world in which African Americans are not angry over past and present injustices," and that the narrative was "designed to provide reassurance that their authors' patriarchal benevolence was real, and was recognized and appreciated by those they enslaved."[185] McElya describes the "Jezebel" by contrasting it with the "Mammy":

> The supposedly sexually undesirable mammy figure formed one side of a white-authored, mutually reinforcing dual image of black women's nature. On the other side was the voraciously sexual 'jezebel.' Whereas the mammy was promoted in popular white representations as embodying maternal affective relationships, the 'jezebel' explained the undeniable fact that sex had indeed occurred across the color line between black women and white men and continued to do so. The stereotypical 'jezebel' lusted after, lured, and cajoled white men, and thus bore the responsibility for interracial sexual encounters. Deborah Gray White argues that 'Southerners were able to embrace both images of black women simultaneously and to switch from one to the other depending on the context of their thought.' These were not two separate women. The characterizations were read onto a single black female body within the shifting contexts and needs of white supremacy.[186]

Just as the idea of the "Mammy" and the "Jezebel" are inseparable, two different sides of the same stereotypical idea of the Black feminine, the hyposexual and hypersexual are two sides of the same white supremacist, patriarchal threat: the fat woman. Not only are these two concepts similar, but given the development of anti-fatness out of the white hetero-patriarchy, these two ideas are inextricably linked, meaning that any woman who is not cisgender, straight, thin, and white is held to a different standard of sexuality than the supposed Anglo-Saxon ideal.

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[185] Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.
[186] McElya, *Clinging To Mammy,* 45-6.

Chapter 3: Defining and Analyzing Various "Mamas"

Having established that Cass Elliot being seen first for her fatness is the result of a pattern of othering fat women, generally because they represent a threat to traditional femininity, it is now important to examine how the "Mama" label comes into play. Big Mama Thornton and Sophie Tucker demonstrated unconventional femininity in different ways: they represented a threat to the gender roles of their respective times, and they had professional associations with motherly terms. Moreover, their mothering labels and behaviors demonstrate the hypersexual/hyposexual dichotomy of fat women, in how it is at once both a separate and completely inextricable set of roles. In this chapter I focus on Elliot's relationship with the label "Mama," and investigate how that label is connected to the ways in which society views fat women in the public eye. I return to the examples of Thornton and Tucker to explore their relationships as mother figures. I also explore the development of the "Mammy" and "Jezebel" stereotypes of Black women. Finally, I provide a lyrical analysis of Elliot's 1973 song "Don't Call Me Mama Anymore" to tie together the ideas presented in the chapter.

History of Mamas and the "Mammy Stereotype"

There is not a clear origin of the term "Mama," nor is there even a clear singular idea of what a "Mama" is. Much of the cultural connotations of "Mamas" in modern Western musical culture come from Black cultural usage and have a variety of meanings depending on the context. White society views cultural ideas of motherhood and of Black women contentiously and stereotypically. Perhaps the most notable example of stereotypical Black motherhood comes from the "Mammy" stereotype, as mentioned previously. Popularized by figures like Aunt Jemima, or Hattie McDaniel's character from 1939's *Gone With the Wind*, the "Mammy" is the

hyposexual, fat, often middle-aged, ever doting, ever grateful, simple-minded stereotype of the enslaved Black woman.[187] Micki McElya notes that the term itself, "Mammy," was used for white and Black women prior to 1830, "whether as a maternal endearment or an indication of enslavement, but in the context of spreading abolitionist sentiment, countered by increasingly detailed visions of planter paternalism and refinement, the name and descriptor took on a very specific meaning."[188] However, for as maternal as their stereotype is portrayed, Mammies were not considered to be actual mothers – only nannies for white children. In the early twentieth century, local governments in many US states removed white children who had been placed in the care of Black mothers – despite the fact both parties viewed their dynamic as that of mother and child – because although society felt Black women could care for white children in the context of white-controlled enslavement spaces, Black women were still considered dangerous enough to white children outside of the "Mammy" dynamic.[189]

Obviously, Black cultural ideas of motherhood are quite different from the white-invented stereotype of the Black nanny. Scholars have noted that Black family dynamics often hold different importance or function differently than Western white family dynamics. The family holds an important place in Black communities and motherhood is often revered more strongly than in white culture.[190] A study of the ways in which Black motherhood is represented in Black hip hop and R&B songs demonstrates this phenomenon. Researchers Cassandra Chaney and Arielle Brown identified popular themes of Black motherhood in their survey of songs. One such theme is the idea that Black mothers are capable of inhuman strength, that they replace

[187] McElya, *Clinging to Mammy,* 3, 8.
[188] Ibid, 7.
[189] Ibid*,* Chapter 3.
[190] Cassandra Chaney and Arielle Brown, "Is Black Motherhood A Marker of Oppression or Empowerment? Hip-Hop and R&B Lessons about 'Mama,'" *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 2, no. 1 (2015): 11.

absent father figures (another negative stereotype of Black families, that the father is always absent), and that they self-sacrifice for their children under even the worst circumstances.[191] However, this theme leans into the "Strong Black Woman" trope – that Black women are resilient and capable of taking on pain because they have to deal with the compounded effects of racism and misogyny. No doubt the compounded effects of oppression have made Black women quite resilient, but the expectation that they have to be strong all the time limits their humanity. Drawing on the work of bell hooks, researchers studying connections between the SBW label, stress, and eating disorders argue that "The SBW label is offered as a compliment but enacted so as to mask the unfair burden placed on Black women," and that "The application of the SBW stereotype tends to ignore humanistic characteristics, leaving African American women to be viewed as super beings rather than human."[192] This view of Black women still exalts them for their service to others, and furthermore, it prevents these women from actually being real people with needs.

It is important here to note my own positional bias; as a non-Black woman of color, I understand that there are some cultural aspects of Blackness that I cannot understand – not for lack of learning but lack of experience. There are intangible aspects of Indian culture that I only understand having grown up in them, so I recognize that as much as I can academically wax poetic about the positionality and treatment of Black women, my thoughts may still lack some relevant cultural perspective. For instance, Kayla T. Johnson writes the following about the term "mama" in her Black community growing up:

> The use of the suffix "-mama" within Black and Brown communities is often regarded as an affectionate diminutive or term of endearment. It is not innately sexual, unless married with suggestive undertones, but is almost always meant to convey a preference or

[191] Chaney and Brown, "Hip-Hop and R&B Lessons About 'Mama,'" 22.
[192] Dawn Godbolt et al, "Strong Black Women: Linking Stereotypes, Stress, and Overeating Among a Sample of Black Female College Students," *Journal of Black Studies* 53, no. 6 (2022): 610-1.

> deference towards the recipient… As opposed to the mammy stereotype, wherein Black women were seen as dimwitted, asexual beings expected to care for the progeny of their oppressors, these Black communities put their trust and respect in their multifaceted matriarchs. These older generations of Black women, these "mamas" represent a level of love, wisdom, and devotion balanced against tiring labors, measured leadership, and advocation for their family.[193]

And in the documentary *Wild Women Don't Have the Blues,* jazz musician Danny Barker provides his perspective of the term "mama":

> Ma Rainey was Ma Rainey. When you say 'ma' that means 'mother.' 'Ma' – that means the tops. That's the boss, the shag bully of the house. Ma Rainey – she's take-charge. Ma – Ma Rainey's coming to town – the boss blues singer. And you respect Ma. Grandma, my ma, and mama – that's ma. That's something you respect. When they say 'mother,' that's the boss of the shack, eh? Not papa – mama.[194]

While it is important to consider the Black cultural uses of the term "Mama," as they may have influenced how Elliot personally felt about the term, Elliot was active largely in extremely white musical contexts, such as the Laurel Canyon folk rock scene – therefore changing the cultural connotation of her own "Mama" label. The vast majority of people calling Elliot "Mama Cass" were white journalists and even in academia, white scholars. "Mama" in the Western white media and musical landscape retains some of the gendered and corporeal associations, but even if Elliot's "Mama" label originally came from a Black cultural context, by the time it got picked up by mainstream Western media and people called her Mama Cass, the "Mama" lost that specific Black cultural context. Rather, "Mama" in Elliot's case very prominently represents the gendered and racialized biases Elliot experienced as a fat white Jewish woman in the public eye. She was not a Black "Mama," nor were most of the people referring to her as "Mama Cass."

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[193] Kayla T. Jackson, "From Mammy to Big Mama: Caring for Collections on Our Own Terms," *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals* 20, no. 2 (2024): 12.
[194] *Wild Women Don't Have the Blues*, directed by Christine Dall (1989; San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel) Kanopy.

The more significant "Mama" stereotype as it pertains to Elliot is that of the "Red Hot Mama," popularized by early vaudeville performers such as Sophie Tucker. Tucker was actually known as the "Last of the Red Hot Mamas," while 1870s performer May Irwin (also a fat white woman) was one of the first. The period of the "Red Hot Mamas" seems to bracket the popularity of the blackface performance technique known as "coon shouting." "Coon shouters" were largely white women, who sometimes sang in blackface, sometimes not, but sang blackface songs which were predicated on stereotypical foundations. Scholar Matthew Morrison has coined the term "Blacksound" to encompass not only the visual aspects of blackface (the makeup, dancing, stage presence), but also the aural aspects of blackface, including the actual music, sounds made by performers, and the general foundation provided by blackface to the burgeoning music industry of the time.[195] Given the framework of "Blacksound," "coon shouters," despite their seeming place of marginalization as white women at the time, were definitely participating in blackface, and used it to bolster their performance careers (as already explained in the case of Sophie Tucker). Tucker biographer Rebecca Sklaroff argues that in Tucker's case, "'Mama' was a woman with irresistible sex appeal whose feistiness manifested in a hot, sometimes uncontrollable temper."[196] Jewish performance scholar Pamela Brown Lavitt argues that the idea of the "Red Hot Mama" was directly tied to "coon shouting," and the way that Sophie Tucker evolved her vocal style so that "coon shouting" went out of style is why she is the "Last of the Red Hot Mamas."[197] Given the intertwined nature of "coon shouters" and the term, and that blackface was extremely popular amongst Jewish performers in the late nineteenth and early

[195] Matthew D Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): 781-823.
[196] Sklaroff, *Red Hot Mama*, 116.
[197] Pamela Brown Lavitt, "First of the Red Hot Mamas: 'Coon Shouting' and the Jewish Ziegfeld Girl," *American Jewish History* 87, no. 4 (1999): 259.

twentieth centuries, "Red Hot Mama" certainly is built on sexualized and racialized notions of Black women. The idea of a sexual, "feisty" spitfire is certainly close enough to the eventual public view of Big Mama Thornton later on. The idea of the "Red Hot Mama" is a sort of combination of the "Mammy" and the "Jezebel," culturally twisted and translated through enough decades of blackface performance to be specifically applicable to a set of white feminine performers between 1870 and 1920.

Mas, Mamas, and Yiddishe Mommes

Elliot is far from the only fat woman in the public eye to deal with being relegated to the role of mother. Early twentieth century blueswoman Ma Rainey was famously referred to more as "Ma" than her actual first name, Gertrude. Historian Rebecca Bush describes the origins of the title: "Rainey used the nickname Pa professionally, and his new wife adopted the matching moniker of Ma, making the couple an early 'Ma and Pa' vaudeville act, mining comedic and musical entertainment from two performers' real-life marriage."[198] William "Pa" Rainey died in 1919, but Ma Rainey still used the title "Ma" for the rest of her career. Because Ma Rainey chose to be called "Ma," and the name largely existed in the context of the early twentieth century Black blues community, it is more likely that this motherly connotation matches Kayla T. Jackson's positive definition of a "Mama." In comparison, the christening of Willie Mae Thornton as Big Mama Thornton seems to have different connotations. Whereas Ma Rainey chose to be called "Ma" in the context of her husband's career and seemingly did so unrelated to her untraditional femininity, Thornton was deemed a "Big Mama" precisely because of her size and "un-feminine" behavior. As previously mentioned, Thornton earned her nickname from a

[198] Rebecca Bush, "Woman, Southern, Bisexual: Interpreting Ma Rainey and Carson McCullers in Columbus, Georgia," *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (2019): 96.

combination of her powerful voice, fierce behavior, and large body. Maureen Mahon writes that Thornton, at "nearly six feet tall and, at two hundred or so pounds, [was] literally a 'big mama.'"[199] The notion that Thornton was a "big *mama*" is accepted so tacitly here that it ignores the gendered and racialized implications of the term. To say that Thornton was literally "big" is accurate, but to say that she was literally a "big mama" is a different assumption altogether. Given that the term "mama" at once seems to embrace the maternal and the overtly sexual, one can infer that assumptions are being made about Thornton based on her patterns of un-feminine behavior.

Sophie Tucker's relationship to motherly terms is two-fold – her relationship with the term "Red Hot Mama" as a sexual and racial entity is opposite her other persona of the "Yiddishe Momme." The juxtaposition between the two versions of Tucker's motherly labels are represented by the songs she sang about each: "I'm The Last Of The Red Hot Mamas" and "My Yiddishe Momme." The lyrics to "I'm The Last Of The Red Hot Mamas," recorded in 1929, are listed below.

Verse 1:

Sheiks, neckers, and jelly beans
Lend me your ears
So, you think you've been petted
Don't be silly, forget it!
Debs, flappers, and baby vamps
Bore me to tears
What do they know concerning love?
Come to me for your burning love!

Chorus 1:

'Cause I'm the last of the red hot mamas
They've all cooled down but me!
Flapper vamps, say, what do they know?
Come get your hot stuff from this volcano
I'm an overheated, try and beat it
Hotsy-totsy Hottentot
Now, it may be snowing

[199] Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens*, 44.

But when I get going
Oh, baby, I'm hot!

Filled with numerous obviously sexual innuendos, "Red Hot Mama" was perfect for the sexually confident image Tucker projected. Interestingly, it still references and plays on racial stereotypes that indicate sexuality. "I'm an overheated, try and beat it / Hotsy-totsy Hottentot" is seemingly a bit of playing with alliteration, however the use of "Hottentot" has direct racial connotations – to Sara Baartman, or the Hottentot Venus. The term "Hottentot" Europeans used to describe people indigenous to South Africa, and Baartman was trotted around London so Europeans could ogle at her seemingly oversexualized figure. Whether Tucker knew this or not, the use of "Hottentot" is still quite significant in the context of projecting the figure of an oversexualized "Mama." Interestingly, Tucker mostly sings about her own sexuality, and only references two specific partners.

Verses 2&3:

You can keep your collegiate charmers
Their lovin' isn't worth a dime
Away up in Alaska
Where the natives freeze
An Eskimo left my hut in his BVD's
'Cause I'm the last of the red hot mamas
I'm gettin' hotter all the time!

I don't wanna brag but in my hotel suite
A dozen firemen were overcome by heat
A Scotsman wants to marry me the dear sweet soul
He thinks with me around he'll save a lot of coal, [200]

[200] Sophie Tucker, "The Last of the Red Hot Mamas," By Jack Yellen and Milton Ager, Recorded 1929. Bluebird, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/78_im-the-last-of-the-red-hot-mammas_sophie-tucker-ted-shapiros-orchestra-jack-yelle_gbia0393609b; Magicmenagerie, "The Last of the Red Hot Mammas," *Genius* lyrical transcription, 2021, https://genius.com/Sophie-tucker-im-the-last-of-the-red-hot-mammas-lyrics. Because these lyrics involve early twentieth century cultural references, I referenced them against another person's transcribed version on genius.com.

The first, described as an Indigenous Alaskan Inuit person (an "Eskimo" as she puts it), is described in stereotypical terms as fleeing her lodgings in his "BVDs," an era-specific term for men's underwear. However, when she then speaks about the (presumably white) Scotsman she beds, she writes that he "wants to marry me, the dear sweet soul," and only sexualizes the situation in terms of herself.

By contrast, "My Yiddishe Momme" is much tamer. Tucker sings it from the perspective of singing about her own mother, but given her attachment to the tune, scholars tend to agree that she embodied the character in her performances.[201]

Verse:
Of things I should be thankful for I've had a goodly share
And as I sit in the comfort of a cozy chair
My fancy takes me to a humble eastside tenement
Three flights in the rear to where my childhood days were spent
It wasn't much like paradise but amid the dirt and all
There sat the sweetest angel, one that I fondly call

Chorus:
My yiddishe momme, I need her more than ever now
My yiddishe momme, I'd love to kiss that wrinkled brow
I long to hold her hands once more as in days gone by
And ask her to forgive me for things I did that made her cry
How few were her pleasures, she never cared for fashion styles
Her jewels and treasures, she found them in her baby's smiles
Oh, I know that I owe what I am today
To that dear little lady so old and gray
To that wonderful yiddishe momme of mine [202]

The song speaks to a gentle mother-daughter relationship and focuses on nostalgia for what has passed. There are no sexual innuendos, and while the key phrase of the Yiddishe Momme is racial, as it pertains to Tucker's Jewish heritage, the other comments in the song are not. The narrator may have grown up poor, but their "tenement" is remembered fondly despite the "dirt

[201] Brown Lavitt, "First of the Red Hot Mamas," 260.
[202] Sophie Tucker, "My Yiddishe Momme," Written by Jack Yellen, Recorded 1928, Columbia Records, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4LPnphEY00 (lyrical transcription my own).

and all." The Yiddishe Momme herself is described as fragile, petite, wrinkled, emotional, caring, and self-sacrificing – all traits that are opposite the idea of Tucker's "Red Hot Mama" persona, which is large, rough, unsensitive to other's emotions, sexual, and greedy.

Sklaroff argues that the juxtaposition between Tucker's two personas was intentional; "Trying to embody two types of mama figures – the sexpot and the keeper of the home – Tucker moved back and forth between these identities and often aligned them in her routines."[203] At once, Tucker could be the hypersexual and the hyposexual – a feat that demonstrated her relative white privilege, as that social flexibility was largely inaccessible to her Black fat feminine contemporaries. Sklaroff argues that Tucker's transition from "Red Hot Mama" to "Yiddishe Momme" "presented the 'Yiddishe Momme' type of ballad as a solution to the problem that, in her opinion, the more racy 'red hot papa and mama stuff' was becoming tired."[204] However, despite this privilege, the juxtaposition is still indicative of her limitations as a fat woman – she is relegated to one of two sexual roles, both of which are based in racialized and gendered stereotypes. And as Brown Lavitt notes, the transition from "Red Hot Mama" to "Yiddishe Momme" was "a sobriquet that testifies to Tucker's successful transition from coon to swoon songs but retains the inherent minstrel mammy connection."[205]

Elliot's own version of "Mama," as I will continue to discuss, seems to be some amalgamation of a number of different stereotypes presented above, and as such, holds a different meaning for her than it would in these specific cultural contexts. Significantly, the examples discussed all engage with an early twentieth century racial landscape, versus Elliot's reality in the late 1960s and early 1970s. "Mama" for Elliot, would come to represent: 1. an

[203] Sklaroff, *Red Hot Mama,* 118.
[204] Ibid, 118.
[205] Brown Lavitt, "First of the Red Hot Mamas," 260.

inability to escape her role as part of The Mamas & The Papas, but also 2. a symbol of society's rejection of her position as a sexy starlet in the Hollywood eye. Elliot's "Mama" was at once both a sexually voracious woman, and also a doting motherly caretaker – neither of which she wanted to be.

Cass Elliot's Relationship to the Label "Mama"

The significance of the Mama label within The Mamas & The Papas was brought into question in 1966, when Michelle was briefly kicked out of the band for having an affair with Gene Clark. John decided to fire Michelle, a motion Cass was happy to sign onto given her feelings of betrayal towards Michelle for sleeping with Denny, and one that Denny also agreed to, mostly for peacekeeping reasons. Shortly after being verbally fired, Michelle received a letter signed by the other three band members, officially firing her from the group. Within the letter was the stipulation that Michelle was no longer allowed to call herself a "Mama."[206] In Michelle's place, Jill Gibson was hired and thus referred to as "Mama Jill." However, this was short-lived, as fans were not happy to lose Michelle, and she was rehired within a few months.[207] Michelle's firing reveals more than just messy band dynamics; the idea that being a "Mama" was an integral part of being in The Mamas & The Papas, and that revoking that label was a way to punish Michelle. The marketing of and reporting on Elliot as "Mama Cass" after the band split up is therefore significant, as the band had already established that the "Mama" and "Papa" labels were relevant mostly in the context of a stable group. And although Elliot was clearly the breakout performer of the group, coverage of her post-breakup largely referred to her as "Mama

[206] Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass*, 87.
[207] Ibid, 60-2.

Cass," regardless of the group's togetherness. For Elliot, her identity as "Mama Cass" was accepted as an inherent part of her stage presence and career.

Indeed, the idea of Elliot has a bona fide "Mama" seems to have been reinforced by her maternal role in the Laurel Canyon community. Graham Nash recalled Elliot's relationship to the Canyon as maternal and protective: "She was this incredible mother figure. I keep imagining this huge beautiful chicken gathering all her little chicks under her wings and making sure that they're all cool, that this one is talking to that one, and this one knows what that one's doing."[208] As seemingly nostalgic and complimentary as this quote is, Nash is still portraying a view of Elliot in gendered and bodily terms. Michael Walker presents an even more gendered, corporeal, and racialized view of Elliot's maternal role, a view that demonstrates precisely how loaded many descriptors of fat women can be and why examining the intersections of identity are important:

> She had a nurturing personality as expansive as her girth, plus a quick mind and highly evolved sense of humor… Elliot projected the nonthreatening, nonsexual vibe of an earth mother even as she fell deeply in unrequited love with Doherty. Still, her 'Mama' stage name wasn't entirely an act; she had a Jewish mother's compulsion for good-naturedly meddling in the lives of awkward boys who turned up on her doorstep, and she often really did know what was best for them.[209]

In less than one hundred words, Walker manages to 1. Implicitly accept the notion that Elliot's weight made her nonsexual and therefore nonthreatening, 2. Ascribe a calming "earth mother" persona, when in reality, she was quite material, dramatic, and bold, 3. Draw a causal link between her behavior and both her body size and Jewishness, reducing her Laurel Canyon role to stereotypes. I criticize Walker's characterization of Elliot to demonstrate a problem with characterizations of Elliot writ large; the essentialization of her maternal behavior to her physical

[208] Walker, *Laurel Canyon,* 50.
[209] Ibid, 49.

characteristics – female, Jewish, fat – is reductive. In some ways, even describing her behavior as "maternal" is reductive. Portraying her behavior as caregiving for her community (rather than attracting friends for attention and companionship, purportedly leaving her home open to whoever wanted to join her, and getting involved in other's careers because of her musical intuition) assumes a lot on behalf of her intentions, and buys into the idea that women are first and foremost, natural caregivers. For instance, while Elliot-Kugell largely writes positively about Elliot, she does note that during many of these Laurel Canyon parties, her mother left her with a nanny and neglected her childhood safety in a chaotic, open house environment with plenty of free-floating drugs.[210]

Nevertheless, for the first two years of Elliot's solo career, Elliot seemed to lean into the "Mama Cass" marketing, understandably trying to launch her solo work by capitalizing on her existing image. Her first solo album, *Dream a Little Dream*, was released in 1968, and "Mama Cass" is emblazoned boldly on the cover art. *Dream a Little Dream* is a reference to the hit cover of "Dream a Little Dream of Me" released by The Mamas & The Papas in 1967, featuring Elliot on lead vocals. Although not recorded live, the track begins with an announcer mimicking an introduction of a live performance: "Ladies and gentlemen, Mama Cass." Elliot's second album, released in 1969, is called *Bubblegum, Lemonade, &… Something For Mama*, also featuring a large "Mama Cass" title on the album art. In 1970, a compilation of Elliot's hits was released, entitled *Mama's Big Ones*. But by 1971, Elliot began to market herself as "Cass Elliot." She collaborated with singer-songwriter Dave Mason on an album of duets, which was credited to Mason and "Cass Elliot." By 1972, Elliot was increasingly leaning into the Hollywood starlet image, particularly with the release of *Cass Elliot*. The album is not only Elliot's first non-

[210] Elliot-Kugell, *My Mama, Cass*, 85-6.

collaborative solo work to feature the billing of "Cass Elliot," but the album art features Elliot posed like a 1940s Hollywood diva, complete with contrasted black and white lighting, expensive looking feathers and jewelry. Later in 1972, Elliot would release another album billed without any mention of Mama Cass, *The Road is No Place For a Lady*.

Photo 2: Photo from cover art for *Cass Elliot* (1972). February 19, 1972. RCA Records, Public Domain. Accessed August 12, 2024. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cass_Elliot_(1972).png.

But the culmination of Elliot distancing herself from the Mama label would be her 1973 live album, *Don't Call Me Mama Anymore*. The album was recorded on a nationwide tour of the same name, in which Elliot hoped to emphasize the point that she was no longer "Mama Cass." This sentiment had been building for years, and the marketing trajectory of her albums is also evidenced by her personal conversations. Quoted in Fiegel, Elliot said, "I'm not that brash image I associate with Mama. I get all dressed up to go to dinner with a fella and as I get out of the car some idiot comes up and says, 'Hi, Mama.' You must admit it's a bit undignified. In my mind it's like a combination of being bawdy, vulgar, and unladylike. To me it sounds like, 'Hi, Mama,

what's your price?'"[211] That Elliot interpreted "Mama" to mean "bawdy, vulgar, and unladylike" demonstrates both the pervasiveness of anti-Black associations with the term, as well as, perhaps, Elliot's own anxieties about being perceived as associated with Blackness (despite the fact that this form of Blackness was stereotypical and unrealistic).

However, Elliot also disliked the connotations of "Mama" as a self-sacrificing, hyposexual caretaker, as evidenced by her 1973 song, "Don't Call Me Mama Anymore." The song was written for Elliot by Walter Earl Brown, but given that Elliot and Brown were friends, the song is specific to Elliot, and she sang it every night and named her tour after it, I feel comfortable assuming it reflects how she felt.

First AABA:

You can call me honey, you can call me pal
I'll be your buddy buddy, maybe even be your gal
But don't call me mama anymore

Oh, you can call me fancy, you can call me plain
If I should call ya Tarzan, then you can call me Jane
But don't, don't call me mama anymore

Lord knows I know some folks refer to me
As good old Mama Cass
Ah, but that was then, and now is now
And I'd like to give that handle a Pasadena

Call me Julie Andrews, Peggy Lee or Lucy Ball
Baby darlin's, you can call me anything at all
But don't, don't call me mama anymore

The first AABA section demonstrates the tongue-in-cheek way Elliot uses this songs do describe her distaste for being called "Mama." In fact, it seems like she would rather be called literally anything other than "Mama"; at the climax of the first AABA section, Elliot proclaims "Baby darlin's, you can call me anything at all." Each A section lists things that Elliot would rather be

[211] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 264.

called, ranging from pet names like "honey" or "pal" to celebrities, like Julie Andrews or Lucille Ball, followed by the refrain, that whatever Elliot is called, "don't call [her] mama anymore." The celebrities are particularly interesting, as all of them are the type of classy, modest yet sexy, and charming figures that Elliot seemed to be trying to establish herself as – but they were all thin.

Beginning of Second AABA:

You can call me partner, you can call me Ma'am
If your wife don't understand you, and you're smashed - my name is Sam
But don't, don't call me mama anymore

In the first A section of the second AABA, Elliot includes other feminine terms and prefixes, such as Mrs, Miss, Ma'am, and Madam. Both Madam and Ma'am are terms for women that typically evoke a position of power or reverence and are commonly used for women of all body types. The inclusion of Mrs. and Miss demonstrate that although Elliot dislikes "Mama," she still is comfortable with femininity – even if it indicates she does not care whether she is married or single.

Each B section (italicized) provides Elliot's context and perspective for distancing herself from the "Mama Cass" title. In the first B section, she acknowledges that she is widely known as Mama Cass but notes that "that was then and now is now," suggesting that the title should be left in the past, with The Mamas & The Papas. The way she conveys this message is subtle in quite a savvy way; she is being direct enough in the lyrics to say that "Mama Cass" should be left in the past and that she would like to give the "handle" a "Pasadena," but because of the tongue-in-cheek tone and the upbeat instrumentation, the message is softened. In this way, Elliot is putting on a gendered performance of, essentially, boundary setting. She is acknowledging why people

call her Mama, and politely asking that they stop. As a woman in the public eye, she might have been seen as a diva, or perhaps inauthentic, for trying to rebrand herself. Putting the boundary in the music at the same time as she is joking about being the Jane to someone's Tarzan softens the blow and potentially avoids any gendered accusations of being high maintenance.

The second B section gets to the core of Elliot's issue with "Mama," as well as my own argument about why labeling women as "Mamas" limits them.

Second B:

Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh if you come down with a fever, I'll be glad to hold your hand
I make chicken soup that's really like no other
Well I'm fond of you and hope that we'll be life-long friends
But precious I don't wanna be your mother
['Cause I've done that before and was really rather good at it]

Elliot begins the section by describing how she is willing to be there for someone if they were sick, and even make them chicken soup. As she puts it, "I'm fond of you and hope that we'll be life-long friends." However, in the final line of the section, she is blunt that she does not want to be anyone's mother, before ad-lib joking that being an actual mother (and being good at it) is enough for her. Elliot is describing two different caretaking roles and drawing a distinction between them. Whereas friendship can involve caretaking, the dynamic is reciprocal, and predicated on protecting someone because one cares about them. Cultural ideas of parenthood are based on non-reciprocal self-sacrifice, and because of the feminine expectations of caring for children, this dynamic is heightened for women in mothering roles. Much like fat people, as Elliot's life has demonstrated, mothers are often considered as mothers first, and people second. So, Elliot's declaration that she would rather be a friend (and only a mother to her own actual child) speaks to a potential desire to be seen as a person first, rather than just someone fulfilling a gender role.

Reprise: I'll be your pet, your poopsie, your poochie, your peach
Your partner in crime
But in case you just forgot, let me tell you one more time
Don't, don't you dare call me mama anymore

You can call me Cass [212]

Elliot reiterates this point in the reprise, by listing many roles she would take on for a friend, including an equal position of "partner in crime," but finally ends with what she would most like to be called: Cass.

Elliot's discomfort with the term "Mama" demonstrates her discomfort with the hypersexual and hyposexual model of fat feminine sexuality. Elliot's close friend Tim Rose recalls many conversations in which Elliot bemoaned her lack of romantic connection, including one where she said, "I want people to love me because they love me and not because I look good."[213] This quote indicates that Elliot wanted to be seen for herself, not for the role of the fat "Mama" or the thin beauty queen. Seemingly, her relationship with the title "Mama Cass" is the same: it defined her and boxed her into certain gender expectations that she did not like. She did not want to be "brash" or "bawdy," and she also did not want to be a doting mother, she just wanted to be "Cass Elliot." Ultimately, the most important factor in Elliot's relationship with the term "Mama" is that *it was not a term she wanted to be called*. She explicitly said many times during her solo career that she did not want to be called "Mama," and was continued to be called "Mama" largely because of the sexualized and gendered expectations society holds for fat women.

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[212] Cass Elliot, "Don't Call Me Mama Anymore," By Walter Earl Brown, Recorded 1973, Track 4 on *Don't Call Me Mama Anymore*, RCA Victor, Spotify. Lyrics transcribed with reference to Elliot's official Spotify account.
[213] Fiegel, *Dream a Little Dream*, 128.

Conclusions

Cass Elliot's life and legacy have been and continue to be marred by anti-fat expectations of her sexuality and gendered expectations of her behavior. Media discussions and depictions of Elliot, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, often featured comments about Elliot's weight before anything else. Elliot was regularly compared to Michelle Phillips, in an effort to distinguish the weights between the two and perpetuate a misogynist narrative that the two women were not friends. Even one of The Mamas & The Papas biggest hits, "Creeque Alley," calls repeated attention to Elliot's fatness. But the constant attention called to Elliot's fatness is part of a larger pattern of corporeal othering, a reaction to the threat that fat women and women with untraditional femininities pose to patriarchal white supremacy. The lives of Big Mama Thornton and Sophie Tucker demonstrate this pattern, as both of these women were unabashedly bold and fat and were othered as a result. Furthermore, these women were relegated into specific racialized gender roles, based on hypersexual and hyposexual expectations of fat women. Thornton being a "Big Mama," Tucker being a "Red Hot Mama" and Elliot being "Mama Cass" demonstrates the societal discomfort in viewing fat women as anything other than either hypersexual or hyposexual mother figures. Elliot's distaste for being called "Mama Cass" and the gendered roles expected of her are articulated clearly in her song "Don't Call Me Mama Anymore." Her distaste represents her desire to be treated like a real person instead of a gender role and demonstrates how such gender roles limit fat feminine performers.

In this thesis, I have outlined why the anti-fat expectations of and rhetoric about Elliot were harmful to her, and how that pattern has been historically harmful to other performers – but why does this matter otherwise? To answer this question, I want to examine part of one of the last songs Elliot ever released, "I'm Coming to The Best Part of My Life." Elliot sang this in her

lineup on her "Don't Call Me Mama Anymore" tour, and it was subsequently released on the album of the same name in 1973. As the previous song ends, Elliot introduces "I'm Coming to the Best Part of My Life" by saying, "I'm gonna sing a song for you that was written for me by some friends of mine – it really expresses the way I feel and I hope you like it."

Verse 1: I'm coming to the best part of my life
Catching fire, climbing higher
There's nothing I can see to hold me down
I'll keep tryin' till I'm flyin'

Chorus 1: And I'm feeling no pain
There's a song that's hung in my brain
I wanna sing
I'm going out of control
To the music that's in my soul
I wanna sing

Coda: Cause I'm coming to the best part
Yes, I'm coming to the best part
Now, I'm coming to the best part of my life [214]

Clearly, Elliot felt that better things were coming her way, professionally and personally. As she puts it, she was "feeling no pain," and "climbing higher" every day. It is sadly ironic how positive even just the first verse and chorus of this song are, and how triumphant the coda is, given that Elliot would die less than a year after this song was released. Although the exact reason for Elliot's heart failure is still unclear, clearly anti-fat bias played its part. Anti-fat bias caused her to be put on dangerous medications as an adolescent, which Fiegel acknowledges likely led to future drug abuse. Anti-fat bias made Elliot personally unhappy, as all she ever wanted was close connection, and many of her male friends who obviously loved her rejected her

[214] Cass Elliot, "I'm Coming to the Best Part of My Life," By John Bettis and Roger Nichols, Recorded 1973, Track 6 on *Don't Call Me Mama Anymore*, RCA Victor, Spotify. Lyrics transcribed with reference to Elliot's official Spotify account.

because of her fatness, no doubt influencing her decisions to self-medicate with drugs. Anti-fat bias led Elliot to try many dangerous crash diets and live a life of weight cycling which studies have shown actually increase a person's risk for heart failure. Despite the fact that Elliot was hospitalized five times in the year preceding her death, she was reportedly never treated for anything specific, according to personal accounts from her family and her daughter – and studies also show that anti-fat bias decreases proper medical care for fat patients.

Very plainly – anti-fatness kills. We do not need Elliot's story to demonstrate this fact – it is well evidenced elsewhere. However, Elliot's story does demonstrate how swiftly and easily society fails fat people, because of long-standing racialized, gendered, and sexualized biases and anxieties about bodies. Elliot died with quite *literally* one wish – that she not be called "Mama" anymore – and we have failed her time and time again. Elliot's story matters because fat people deserve to come to the best parts of their lives, to be seen as whole people, and to live and die with dignity.

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