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***What's Fat Activism?***

# What's Fat Activism?

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In 21<sup>st</sup> century Western culture, obesity is such a maligned state of being that the notion of fat activism is unthinkable to most people. "Fat" and "activist" are not words that sit together well in the popular imagination. The idea of activism suggests a dynamic engagement with public life that could not be further from couch potato stereotypes associated with fat people, or popular paradigms which typify "the obese" as innately unwholesome, passive recipients of pity and intervention.

This chapter is an attempt to explore what is meant by fat activism, and present it as an alternative obesity discourse. I will discuss some of the reasons why people become fat activists, suggest some possible underlying theories, and I will go on to document a forty-year history of fat activism and fat liberation, the movement within which fat activists operate. In this section I use a broad and eclectic definition of activism, which I take to mean intentional actions that seek to bring about change. I also consider fat activism to be an evolving entity, or rather a series of entities, that are sometimes interwoven and sometimes estranged from each other. Finally, I will consider some possible future trends.

### **The dominant model**

A limited cluster of approaches and theories support the most popular ways of understanding obesity in 21<sup>st</sup> century Western society. These concepts are so ubiquitous that they are seen to be the truth, common sense, the only way of seeing and thinking about fat. Yet they form a model, albeit one with no name. Within this dominant model, fatness is contextualised as pitiful and/or many of the following: lacking in moral fibre, diseased, potentially diseased, greedy and lazy, not just ugly but disgusting, pathetic, underclass, worthless, a repulsive joke, *a problem that needs to be treated and prevented*.

This model has strong roots in medicine, which is why it is sometimes referred to as a bio-medical model of obesity. Yet it is also maintained by other power structures, (Cooper 1998) and classic stakeholders include drugs companies, food producers and retailers, satellite medical and diet industries, government policymakers, advertising and media, and fashion industries. Some theorists, for example Chernin (1983) and Freespirit (1983), suggest that fat hatred is formed or influenced by other forces of oppression, for example, misogyny, ageism or fear of disability, and there is a strong case to be made regarding intersectionality and fatphobia. The dominant model is reinforced from every angle, even from our closest friends, lovers and relatives.

It is the dominant model that fat activists seek to challenge because of the self-hatred and helplessness it engenders in fat people, and the discrimination and stigma against us it promotes. The model provides a basis for inappropriate interventions that do not improve our quality of life and emboldens stakeholders to

prescribe more problematic interventions. It alienates fat people from each other, and from allies in the wider society, and it crushes the possibility of meaningful community or resistance.

### **Other ways of thinking**

If the dominant model is a model, not *the* model, it follows that there must be other ways of considering fat. In this section I would like to outline some other theoretical approaches that may nurture fat activism.

LeBesco (2004) draws comparisons between fat activism and queer theory in her study of fat people's strategic responses to fat hatred. She points out that there are pros and cons of using queer theory as a template for fat activism, that whilst such a stance may provide civil liberties protection, useful coalitions, legitimacy, and the possibility of mobilising allies, it also risks an assimilatory approach and keeps the focus firmly on the stigmatised identity.

LeBesco is not the only one to make comparisons with queer culture, however. Referring to Stonewall, the 1969 community uprising in New York City, fat activist Marilyn Wann has said that the fat liberation movement is currently in a pre-Stonewall state, she says:

"When fat people experience oppression, we experience it alone and our first reaction is not to fight back, our reaction is to give money to fat-hate industries (Weight Watchers, stomach amputation, etc). Instead of demanding self-respect, we seek approval from our oppressors." (Cooke 2006)

Despite the downbeat tone, the implication is that if a group of stigmatised queer people could fight back, claim self-respect on a personal and collective level, and establish a legitimate politicised and highly influential community at Stonewall, perhaps fat people could, one day, do the same.

The application of queer theory suggests that theory underpinning other civil rights and social justice movements can also offer not just a template for understanding fat oppression, but a way of addressing it. Ideas around civil disobedience and non-violent resistance are certainly key. Some other examples include, Fanon's (1963) exploration of the psychological effects of colonisation is highly relevant to fat people's experience of internalised hatred, as is Goffman's (1963) study of stigma. Cross' (1971) nigrescence model suggests a structure for embracing a marginalised identity. Foucault (1983), too, has particular relevance for activists, fat or otherwise. If power is not a monolithic entity that is owned by institutions, but changeable and dependent on circumstance, institutions and upholders of the dominant model are not the ultimate authority of fat people's lives and activists can also wield power meaningfully. Where power relations are complex, activism offers a means of addressing governing discourses in equally multifarious ways. This also brings to mind DIY and punk activism (Spencer 2005) which seeks to create culture that is

independent from dominant and/or oppressive institutions using whatever resources are to hand.

Perhaps the most directly relevant social justice-related theoretical approach is that offered by The Social Model of Disability (Oliver 1990, Swain, Finkelstein et al 1993). Directly critiquing the medicalisation of disabled people's bodies in a way that is also hugely relevant to fat people, The Social Model reframes the problem of disability away from physical impairment and turns it towards oppressive environments and attitudes. Self-blame is an insidious part of oppression, a central trope of weight loss, and a fundamental experience for fat people. A Social Model considers the wider framework in which oppression is located and has the potential to enable individuals to contextualise their experience more broadly and reject, or question, the extent of their culpability.

The Social Model of Disability considers external cultural factors and I would add that cross-cultural and historical perspectives on fat could be a useful way of questioning the dominant model. Unfortunately a sensitive analysis of cultural and historical perspectives are currently lacking within fat activist discourse. However, the notion that time and place demonstrate that fat has been and is thought about in ways that challenge the dominant 21<sup>st</sup> century Western model indicate that alternatives are possible.

### **A brief and select history**

The following history of fat activism will hopefully demonstrate that, despite the pervasiveness of the dominant model, and the relative paucity of direct fat activist theory, there is a long and rich tradition of resistance to the treatment and prevention of fat bodies that is always growing and refining itself.

There are caveats: firstly, my account is greatly influenced by my own perspective as an activist living in the UK, it draws on some projects with which I have been involved and I acknowledge that other writers might present very different reports. Secondly, there is a heavy bias towards Stateside interventions.

Whilst I encourage readers to seek inspiration from these interventions, I would also like to state that it would be foolish to assume that fat activism is a unified movement. As with many attempts to create social change, the history of fat liberation is peppered with in-fighting and differences of opinion, and these remain a fact of life today. A counter-position would be that dissent is the sign of healthy debate and a pluralistic approach to social change, including an intersectional identity discourse surrounding it, is central to the movement. The sheer number of diverse people involved with and creating venues for fat activism is beginning to make the notion of a single common denominator redundant.

I have divided the history very roughly into three waves as an homage to First, Second and Third-Wave feminism partly because I would like this account to reflect my belief that fat activism and feminism are often closely tied. This is not to say that

these waves correspond chronologically, the fit is not always neat or perfect, although there are ideological crossovers. However, in my experience, fat activism has followed a wave-and-burn-out paradigm similar to the wave and backlash model in feminism suggested by Faludi (1993), and others. In addition, readers should not assume a continuity between the waves since it is common for activists to be ignorant of fat liberation history, itself unsurprising when one considers how little is documented.

### ***The first wave***

This earliest period of fat activism took place between 1967 and 1989. Although some second wave initiatives occurred within this time period, I consider the first wave to be the people and events who laid the groundwork for the movement. Initiatives were almost exclusively located in the US and made clear connections to other movements of social change that were gathering speed in the late 1960s.

### *The Fat-In*

New York radio personality Steve Post convened a Fat-In at Sheep Meadow in Central Park in June 1967. The event is possibly the first ever documented fat activist intervention. Other members of staff at WBAI, Post's station, had already organised various public gatherings (Land 1997), and the Be-In was a popular cultural event, part of the late 1960s hippie zeitgeist. According to Sports Illustrated 500 participants carried:

"banners reading 'Fat Power' and 'Buddha Was Fat.' Some wore buttons with the message 'Take a Fat Girl to Dinner' or 'Help Cure Emaciation.' They burned a pile of diet books and a photograph of Twiggy and offered each other fattening foods brought especially for the occasion." (1967)

Post, described as 210-pound 5'11" told reporters that the Fat-In's purpose "was to protest discrimination against the fat."

### *Fat Power*

Llewellyn (Lew) Louderback described himself as a hack writer living in Staten Island whose titles include genre pieces such as *Pretty Boy*, *Baby Face - I Love You* (1969) and *Operation: Moon Rocket* (1968). Five months after the Fat-In he published a piece in *The Saturday Evening Post* entitled "More People Should be FAT" (1967). Louderback recalled:

"My motivation for writing the piece was my outrage at the kind of life my wife [Ann] had been forced to live as a fat woman. (She died four years ago. Of lung cancer, of course, since she was a follower of the 'reach for a smoke instead of a sweet' school of weight control.)" (Louderback 2008a)

The article led to a meeting with William Fabrey, who went on to found NAAFA (The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, formerly The National Association to Aid Fat Americans), and also a book deal, which resulted in *Fat Power* (1970). Louderback remembered that *Fat Power* was written very quickly and drew upon previous clinical work by Bruch (1957) as well as Stunkard's massive volume of obesity research in the 1960s which explored fat people's experiences of self-hatred. Louderback was assisted by Fabrey and his wife, he explained:

"Ann did a lot of the research, incidentally, she was working for an ad agency. Her job was editing, proof-reading and getting everything just right on these ads. Terrible pharmaceutical ads. But she had access through the company to all kinds of magazines that she could get articles from." (Louderback 2008b)

Written in his zingy, pulpy style, Louderback's prose is distinctly pre-feminist, it exhibits a naïve understanding of race and class, and has a heteronormative slant that fixes this work very much within its time and place. However, the book is also astonishingly current, nearly four decades after its publication, and remains a prescient blueprint for fat activism. Louderback makes a compelling demand for civil rights for fat people. He argues that anti-fat prejudice is fostered by the media and indirectly provides healthy profits for medical, fashion and diet industries. He draws upon fat history and culture, considers diet culture, medical discrimination, challenges health truisms and offers practical suggestions for living fat.

According to Louderback, the book was not successful. He explained that he was offered a publicity interview on the Johnny Carson Show but turned it down when he discovered that the producers' intentions were to lampoon him. Fabrey added:

"It was a miracle that [*Fat Power*] was published at all. The original publisher who had the manuscript sold it, with a batch of others, to Hawthorne Press, I believe, and Hawthorne treated it like an orphan. Only one editor, at the original publisher believed in it, and in Lew, and he or she left the company. Hawthorne's attitude, according to Lew, was 'Well, all right, I suppose we have to publish it, but a limited press run, no budget for publicity, and keep the pages to a minimum.' What saddened me most was that [Louderback] didn't save the original manuscript, before all the cuts, and especially the footnotes, and that wasn't the publisher's fault." (Fabrey 2008)

Perhaps it is the lack of reference notes which has caused the book to be little-known today, although it influenced fat activists at the time. Louderback donated unsold copies of the book to NAAFA and effectively left the movement.

NAAFA

Fabrey, like Louderback, had been sickened by the fatphobia directed towards his

first wife Joyce, and wanted to take action. Upon reading Louderback's Saturday Evening Post article Fabrey believed that he had found a kindred spirit and set about seeking reprints to distribute himself. This led to a meeting between William and Joyce Fabrey and the Louderbacks, who resolved to establish an organisation. On 13 June 1969 he signed and ratified the constitution for NAAFA (Fabrey 2001).

NAAFA began with an agenda for social change, Fabrey explained:

"I wanted to make the world a safer and more pleasant place for persons of size, and for them to like themselves better, and lastly, and less important, for nobody to tell me what my taste should be." (2008)

He added that the early days of the organisation were a struggle. He was politically inexperienced, the group was attempting to develop unheard-of new ideas within a fragmented board, amongst a membership who appeared depressed, directionless and without hope. When the board decided to expand its social function and develop a dating service it was not only Louderback who left but also more radical factions who went on to form The Fat Underground in the early 1970s.

NAAFA continues today and organises conventions and get-togethers. The organisation has local chapters in the US, and special interest support groups, including those that examine the intersections between fat identity and mental health professionals, the military, parenting and care-giving fat children, sleep apnea and weight loss surgery. The organisation has a large membership when compared to other fat activist groups, and its social function remains popular. Yet it is somewhat beleaguered, uneven, and criticised for its conventional and conservative approach, and for the high level involvement of Fat Admirers. The tension continues between those who seek friends and lovers, and those who want a stronger focus on public life and policy.

Yet NAAFA helped provide a legacy in an ongoing emphasis on language, especially the use of "fat" which was deemed preferable to the medicalised "obese." During the first wave new terms were coined to express fat experience: and supersized, fat admirer, fat acceptance. Fabrey reflected further:

"What I actually helped to achieve was a more responsive fashion industry, and a subculture of people who accept themselves, and those who admire them. My being an FA (a term I helped coin) feels a little more mainstream, sort of, than it ever was, but there are still hateful people who will still put me down because of it, and lots of fatphobia out there, as always. But now there is a whole movement to deal with it. I helped to give it a kick-start, although it took about 30 years longer than expected." (2008)

### *The Fat Underground*

The Fat Underground was part of a radical feminist therapy collective which used a

social model for mental health and provided a space for women to redefine themselves and take personal and political action against their oppression. In 1972 a group, including Freespirit and Fishman, approached the Radical Psychiatry Center in Berkeley to train as radical therapists where they used their work as a platform for fat activism. In 1973 they established a chapter of NAAFA in Los Angeles, however Freespirit remarked:

"It was like the Black Panthers working with the NAACP,' she says of the old factions within NAAFA. 'Their idea of activism was to go to the Cerebral Palsy Foundation and do volunteer work so that people would say that fat people are nice. Ours was to demonstrate – break into a university lecture hall at UCLA during a class on behaviour modification (for weight loss) and take over the classroom.'" (Relly 1998)

Fishman added:

"Our confrontational stance eventually drew the attention of NAAFA's main office. Although some of the leadership privately applauded us, officially we were told to tone down our delivery, and also to be more circumspect about our feminist Ideology, which most NAAFA members were not yet ready for." (Fishman 1998)

The group eventually struck out on their own. They established themselves at The Women's Center and had a mission:

The Fat Underground confronts the double oppression of fat women in society through our nutritional, psychological and politically radical analyses of our condition which dispute all present myths about fat. Through media appearances, consciousness raising and informative written materials we provide a support group for fat women who are not dieting and we provide outreach to those who wish to politically align themselves with their fat sisters. (The Fat Underground 1975)

To achieve this, the group published a manifesto and position papers on the inefficacy of dieting, discrimination at work, eating, health, psychiatry, sexism, eating disorders, public furniture, medical power, stereotypes, and humour. They published some of their work in Spanish as well as English, and made media appearances. The position papers were based on their own research. Lynn Mabel-Lois (now Lynn McAfee) had access to a medical library and shared her research skills with the group. Thus they were able to quote primary sources and establish a scientific rationale for fat liberation. The group continued to hold retreats and to use radical therapy as a means of developing positive fat identities. They established coalitions, for example a relationship with the Women's Studies department at California State University led to members testifying before the California State Board of Medical Quality Assurance about amphetamine prescription for weight loss.

The Fat Underground's most well-known intervention was the eulogy they held for

the fat singer Mama Cass Elliott, in August 1974 at a Women's Equality Day, mere weeks after she died. Media stories circulated that she had choked to death on a ham sandwich but The Fat Underground recognised that Elliott had been dieting at the time of her death and that this could have contributed to her fatal heart attack. The group presented a symbolic funeral procession, McAfee spoke of Elliott's inspiration, and accused the medical establishment of murdering her and of committing genocide against fat women through their promotion of weight loss at any cost.

In November 1983 core member Reanne Fagan died of breast cancer, the group disintegrated and then reformed as The New Haven Fat Liberation Front. This group published the influential anthology *Shadow On a Tightrope* (Schoenfelder and Wieser 1983), inspired other groups to form, and member Karen Scott-Jones (now Stimson) went on to found *Largesse*, an archive of fat activist materials.

### *The London Fat Women's Group*

Perhaps influenced by The Fat Underground and its associated groups in the US, The London Fat Women's Group was the first fat activist group in the UK. Between approximately 1985 and 1989 The London Fat Women's Group was active in the UK. Explicitly feminist, members Tina Jenkins and Heather Smith alongside writer and oral historian Margot Farnham published articles about fat in *Spare Rib* (1987) and *Trouble & Strife* (1988, 1989). They distributed *Shadow on a Tightrope* in the UK, and later went on to make a BBC Open Space documentary, *Fat Women Here To Stay* (1989), in which they challenge the media and diet industry, and talk about fat oppression. In 1989 they hosted The London Fat Women's Conference, which attracted much prurient press attention and possibly heralded the end of the group.

### ***Tangent - Fat Is A Feminist Issue***

Orbach (1978) could be seen to be an important early proponent of fat activism yet, although her title remains an enduring slogan, I have pointed out elsewhere that her analysis of fat is problematic in that work (Cooper 1998). However it seems churlish not to include her here, and mention its context and influence in relation to fat activism.

*Fat Is A Feminist Issue* was first marketed as a book that would enable readers to lose weight, though it is now subtitled as an anti-diet guide. It stemmed from Orbach's work as a feminist psychodynamic counsellor at The Women's Therapy Centre in North London and popularised ideas that dieting and body hatred are oppressive and that body dysmorphia and eating disorders are rooted in misogyny. The book was a massive bestseller, spawned a sequel, and influenced popular feminist and academic work around eating disorders, body image and cultural studies during the second wave, for example Wolf (1991) and Bordo (1993).

The book's non-diet approach to healthy living was further developed by Polivy and Herman (1983), Roth (1983), Ogden (1992) and, later in the UK, Mary Evans Young,

a management trainer and counsellor, under the name Dietbreakers. Her many achievements in the early 1990s included getting an Early Day Motion read in Parliament condemning dieting, establishing International No Diet Day, presenting a BBC Open Space documentary (1992) and publishing a self-help book (Evans Young 1995). She also attempted to introduce The HUGS Programme, an early Health At Every Size eating plan from Canada, as a franchise, with limited success.

### ***The second wave***

Where the first wave was characterised by a small number of isolated elements, a scarcity of literature, and a largely indifferent reception, the second wave, which took place in the 1990s, was marked by a massive proliferation of ideas, events, groups and approaches.

Perhaps the greatest shift was the appearance of fat liberation ideas in mainstream culture through discourses around fashion and beauty. Although it meant greater exposure for fat activist ideas, a result of this change was that it produced a more tentative approach to fat. Some anti-diet advocates were wary of allying themselves with fat people, and euphemistic terms such as "large" or "big" were commonly used to describe fat. The movement itself was described as Size Acceptance, which had a individualistic and resigned feel to it. One of its key protagonists in the UK during this period was Bovey, whose *Being Fat Is Not A Sin* (1989) was later renamed *The Forbidden Body*. The author struggled with her fatness, she attended Slimming World incognito and published a diet book (2001). A year later she spoke about "an encroaching neo-fascism" within the size acceptance movement "that said you must be proud to be fat" (Brooks 2002), and maintained that weight loss is an acceptable choice for some fat people.

### ***Building on the first wave***

Some of the themes initiated by the first wave of fat liberation activists were developed in the second wave.

#### **Health**

Earlier activists had been obliged to undertake creative research in order to uncover scientific and medical evidence about the health risks of fat, and of problems regarding weight loss. By the second wave, more research had been undertaken that had direct relevance to fat liberation and may have been informed or inspired by it. At the very least it is probable that researchers producing relevant empirical evidence, and activists wanting to apply it, recognised the existence of each other. Work by Wooley and Wooley (1979), Schwarz (1986), Ernsberger and Haskew (1987), and Brown and Rothblum (1989), for example, were used by second wave activists to develop the canon of available literature upon which they were building a case.

Activists established practical grassroots community health projects designed to make wellness accessible to people of all sizes. In the UK, television presenter

Roberts (1985), for example, was heavily influenced by Orbach and harboured underlying unhelpful assumptions about normative weight stabilisation for fat bodies when treated with optimum nutrition and exercise. Elsewhere, the comedy dance troupe The Roly Polies published their own humorous fat fitness book (1986).

Lyons and Burgard (1990) took a different tack. Great Shape demonstrated simple exercises and discussed the benefits of movement within a context that acknowledged the psychological, social, political and physical barriers that prevent fat people from taking part in such activities, including a feminist perspective of women's relationship to sport. The work recognised possibilities for community-building around exercise, and celebrated inspiring individuals. Lyons and Burgard presented ideas for tailoring exercise to individuals needs, and listed resources for relevant clothing and equipment, including a section for people who wanted or needed to sew their own.

Whether or not they were directly influenced by Great Shape, a number of ventures appeared, particularly within the strong fat activist community of the Bay Area, that reflected the book's values. Examples of these include Making Waves, a weekly fat swim at the Albany High School Pool in Berkeley, stipulates that participants must be women weighing 200 pound or more; Haddon and DeMarco's home exercise video series Yoga For Round Bodies (1996), featured adapted Hatha sequences; and the increasing numbers of fitness instructors, such as Jennifer Portnick, pushed a size acceptance agenda in their work. A shorter-lived project in the UK was Fat And Fit Group Health Action in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. This publicly-funded initiative took a fat liberation approach, and was hoped to be a pilot for further projects, but was eventually discontinued.

### Lobbying

The second wave witnessed the establishment of some heavy-hitters in the movement. Organisations such as the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination, home to former Fat Underground activist Lynn McAfee; The Healthy Weight Network and Healthy Weight Journal; The Association for the Health Enrichment of Large People (AHELP); and The Body Image Taskforce expanded on the tactical approach instigated by Louderback, NAAFA and The Fat Underground. These groups confidently approached power structures invested in the bio-medical model of obesity, for example McAfee attended meetings of the Federal Trade Commission in the US and the National Institutes of Health as a lobbyist and testified on weight-loss prescription drugs at Federal Drug Administration hearings. Meanwhile, diversity lawyer Solovay (2000) and was instrumental in getting height and weight anti-discrimination legislation introduced in San Francisco in 2000.

### Groups

Local support and activist groups mushroomed during the 1990s, though many were not sustained in the long term. It is possible that the supportive nature of these groups arose to provide an alternative to weight loss groups.

An example of such an endeavour was a second Fat Women's Group in the UK,

which I started in 1992. Until 1995 a small and changeable group met at the London Women's Centre in Wild Court to talk about our lives as fat women. We went on to publish a newsletter, *Fat News*, which we distributed to approximately 100 subscribers around the country, and we distributed copies of *Shadow On a Tightrope*. The group later became *SIZE: The National Size Acceptance Network*, under the leadership of Diana Pollard, they produced an art show, but failed to maintain momentum.

Although some second wave resources, for example the International Size Acceptance Association, were devoted to drawing together the global components of the fat liberation movement, including those in the UK and Australasia, these were limited. In addition, the inward and provincial focus of activism in the US (Cooper 2009) has often meant that groups outside that country remained isolated from one another. Nevertheless, some groups appeared outside the UK and US, such as *Bond van Formaat* in The Netherlands.

Perhaps the most successful group of that period, and one still going strong today, is *Allegro Fortissimo* in France. Françoise Fraïoli established the group in 1989, early interventions included lively fat fashion shows, and they were popularised by the celebrated fashion photographer William Klein's iconic 1990 photograph of the group bathing in a hammam. Later, it was felt that fashion had a limited range and the group began a long process of lobbying medical policymakers in order to address the substandard care directed at fat people in France. Today *Allegro Fortissimo* has a multifaceted approach to activism, with branches dedicated to sport and wellness activities and art; activist groups working to making public architecture and furniture accessible; anti-discrimination activities, and regional sub-groups.

#### Fat Admirers

NAAFA was founded by a Fat Admirer (FA), a term that describes people, usually men, who have a sexual preference for fat partners, usually women. It is common for normative-sized men in this group to be attracted to very fat women, there is a subculture of associated slang and values, and some FAs recognise that there is a social stigma attached to their sexual identity.

During the second wave, the involvement of FAs in powerful positions within fat activist organisations came to be regarded as problematic by some. Feminist activists such as Karen Stimson (Cooper 1998) provided evidence that FAs within the movement were harassing fat women activists and treating them as potential sexual conquests, and there was concern that FAs were reducing the potential scope of the movement to one focused on dating. The emergence of a BBW (Big Beautiful Woman) culture suggested that there were many fat women also in fat activist communities who were amenable to these goals. An added issue was that around feederism, a fetish involving the encouragement of weight gain, which was regarded as abusive.

Some criticism levied at FAs came from a feminism which was also highly critical of patriarchal sexuality and pornography (for example Dworkin 1981, Jeffreys 1991).

This branch of feminism also blocked other attempts to address fat and sexuality in that period. For example, The Women's Press, a British feminist publisher, refused to produce my book *Fat and Proud* unless passages regarded as incompatible with feminist values were removed. These included references to queer sexuality, transgendered people, and fat women's complicity with their own oppression. *FaT GiRL*, a small, independent, collectively-produced zine producing material by and for "fat dykes and the women who want them" was singled out in particular as promoting pornography.

FAs saw themselves as an integral part of the movement. Feederism was discredited, but FAs sustained a market for magazines such as *Dimensions*, *Plumpers* and *Belly*, which published softcore photospreads and pornographic features, as well as less contentious community content, and generic material. In Britain, Amanda Bailey, also known as Creamy Claire, an Australian ex-pat involved in London's fetish club scene, set up *Planet Big Girl*, a night club catering to fat women and FAs. *Chubby Companions* was a UK dating agency established for a similar demographic.

Ultimately, the emergence of pro-sex feminism (Rubin 1994, Califia 2001) enabled a more considered view of consensual and kinky sex within FA communities. Blank (2000) provided a much-needed sex-positive feminist perspective within the fat liberation movement, and I would argue that the appearance and subsequent acceptance of Bear culture within gay communities (eg Hennen 2005) also indirectly validated FA identity.

### *New advances in the second wave*

#### Fashion

The UK witnessed a growth spurt in larger-size clothing retailers in the 1990s as businesses began to recognise the existence of a niche market of fat consumers, fat people started demanding better services, and the term plus-size began to appear. Most visibly, a number of high street shops introduced specialist ranges, such as H&M and Etam. Evans Outsizes dropped part of its name, which had been seen as stigmatising, relaunched as simply Evans, and had a marketing strategy that was brought closer in line with other fashion brands owned by The Burton Group, later Arcadia.

The expansion of fat fashion was not limited to large corporations. Many smaller, independent retailers began to appear. *Pretty Big* magazine documented many of these businesses, particularly those that traded in regional cities. There were also businesses, like William Fabrey's *Amplestuff* Catalogue, which sold specialist products in the US of use to fat people.

Fat celebrity Dawn French supplied Evans with a diffusion line of her co-owned fashion range, 1647, which suggests that there was a relationship between small independent businesses and the larger fashion corporations. Certainly smaller businesses were retailing goods made by international wholesale fat fashion labels,

such as Marina Rinaldi and Elvi. French's involvement hints at the intermingling of fat, fashion and celebrity that was starting to take place at a corporate and also more literally homespun level, exemplified in her co-authored book *Big Knits* (1990). *Pretty Big*, and Evans' own short-lived magazine, *Encore*, suggest the importance of affiliate businesses, the then nascent fat fashion press, in normalising, contextualising and promoting the plus-size fashion industry.

These interventions raise questions about the relationship between business and fat liberation, and stretch the notion of fat activism. Greater consumer choice had a positive effect on the fat women who could afford to participate and whose bodies fitted the still limited plus-size selection available. As shopping became more pleasurable and accessible, the fat women reflected in *Pretty Big*, *Extra Special* and *Yes* women's plus-size fashion magazines appeared unapologetic, able to consider themselves as equal citizens with equal consumer rights, and adept at using fashion to developing a positive relationship with one's body, and as a means of self-expression.

The growth of fat fashion was a mass movement, yet it was also problematic. As I mentioned at the start of this section, these interventions were somewhat timid and assimilationist. LeBesco (2004) also rightly points out that there was no critical engagement with the politics of capitalism and globalisation inherent in that commercial growth, or of discourses around beauty and appearance, and that a liberation movement based on the ability to buy is resting on shaky ground.

### Celebrities

A popular discourse about the need for positive role models became established in the second wave alongside a corresponding discussion, that shows no sign of slowing down, about the media's negative portrayal of fat people.

In the UK, Dawn French and the comedian and writer Victoria Wood were widely saluted as positive role models for fat women. French embraced this position, as well as 1647 she poked fun at fatphobic attitudes in her comedy, and filmed a *South Bank Show* (1994) that featured a more sober exploration of fat. Wood was perhaps more reticent about becoming a poster girl for the movement. Social observation about bodies and dieting formed a part of her comedy repertoire, but she was ambivalent about the subject and it was not until 2004 that she took a more active stance in Victoria Wood's *Big Fat Documentary*, her series about the diet industry.

Positive is a subjective stance, and humans are not static beings, which made adopting celebrities as role models a complicated tactic for fat activists in the second wave. For example, in the US, actress and talk show host Ricki Lake and singer Carnie Wilson were acclaimed as positive role models for fat women, until Lake embarked on a series of publicised diet and weight regain cycles, citing child sexual abuse as the reason she had been fat, and Wilson spoke about her self-hatred and broadcast her gastric bypass surgery live online.

### Becoming the media

Punk activist Jello Biafra coined the slogan "Don't hate the media, *become* the media" (1987) and fat activists, including those who not of Biafra's milieu, took this call for action to heart during this period, applying fat liberation ideas to various arts and media.

Alice Ansfield's magazine, *Radiance*, was a mass-circulation, mainstream women's magazine published in the Bay Area from 1984-2000. *Radiance* carried fashion advertisements and features like its British counterparts, but had a more overt connection to the fat liberation movement and a stronger community focus, exemplified by the group excursions that Ansfield organised through the magazine from time to time. *Hues* magazine did not have a particular fat activist strategy but sought to integrate it into its multicultural agenda.

Elsewhere, cartoonist Lee Kennedy, Fat Lip Reader's Theatre and Edison and Notkin (1994), alongside numerous other artists, were creating depictions of fat people, mainly women, that questioned dominant anti-fat paradigms. Stinson's self-published poetry chapbooks developed into novels featuring intentionally complex fat characters (1994, 1996).

The increased availability of the internet during this period had a transformative effect on fat activism. It brought together fat people who had previously been isolated and enabled new connections and discussions to occur. The pooling of knowledge and resources on early listservs such as fatdykes and Soc.support.fat-acceptance and Alt.support.big-folks helped to define new online communities of fat people.

Accessible publishing technology also made possible an explosion in fat zine culture. A zine is a homemade publication, usually produced for fun and not profit. Zines range from cut and pasted photocopied notes to more elaborate productions. Titles such as *FaT GiRL*, *Fat!So?* by Marilyn Wann, and Nomy Lamm's *I'm So Fucking Beautiful* started to expand ideas about fat identity. Sharp-witted, conscious of pop culture, young, personal and radical, they were a world apart from magazines like *Pretty Big* and *Yes!*. Sometimes community built up around zines, for example *GirlFrenzy* hosted a No Diet Day celebration, and the apa-zine *Living Large* consisted of reflections and ongoing conversations between contributors.

### ***The third wave***

This period covers roughly the years from 2000 to the present, and marks an era where a large number of new activisms have been established. The World Health Organization's (2000, 2004) reports of a global obesity epidemic, and the subsequent effects of these papers on public policy and social attitudes towards fat people, have created a sense of urgency and immediacy in fat activism. Earlier calls for acceptance have now become demands for liberation and a fundamental change in attitude towards fat people.

Fat activism is also increasingly visible, not only amongst activists but also within a wider cultural context. Where activists have developed what can only be described

as an obsession with media representations of fatness, deregulated and diversified media makers have an equally fanatical interest in creating fat-related, and typically fatphobic, content for a voracious audience.

### *Building on the second wave*

Whilst many of the themes initiated in the second wave have continuing relevance, there have been significant third wave contributions to earlier discourses.

#### Health

The dominance of a bio-medical model of obesity has ensured that questions around fat and health remain of central concern to fat activists. One of the consequences of anti-obesity rhetoric and policy has been an organised and vocal resistance to it by health professionals and researchers (for example Aphramor 2005, Bacon 2005, Robison 2005) seeking to incorporate Health At Every Size principles (ASDAH 2008) into their work. Popular writers such as Sandy Swarc (2003), Paul Campos (2004) and Gina Kolata (2007) are also addressing the junk science inherent in the bio-medical model, and unpacking unreliable evidence about fat and health long held to be sacrosanct by the medical establishment.

#### Fashion and Community

As the fashion industry in the West has become dependent on a globalised manufacturing base and generic branding and retail strategies, there are elements of fat fashion that are seeking to develop a less corporate approach.

In 2004 Amanda Piasecki founded Fatshionista, an online LiveJournal Community she intended as a resource that would be devoted to the intersections of fat fashion and politics. Posts include discussions about cultural appropriation and fat fashion, cures for Chub Rub, and Outfit of The Day, where members shared photographs of themselves wearing their favourite clothes. The group has grown to over four thousand members and has affiliated communities. In addition, critical discussions of the globalised fashion industry popularised by Fatshionista have enabled small ethical fat fashion businesses to flourish, particularly on Etsy.com, a website where people buy and sell homemade items.

Whilst online community is central to these activist interventions, perhaps the best example of the intersection of fat, activism, fashion and real life community is The Fat Girl Flea in New York City. This event is an occasional, volunteer-run, fundraising, large-sized clothes jumble sale for NOLOSE, the organisation for fat queer women and their allies. The event attracts approximately 500 visitors of diverse backgrounds, and is held at The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center.

The Flea has become a beloved and joyous experience. It builds community and autonomous fat culture across social boundaries, and participants are encouraged to share stories and clothes. It also exposes an archaeology of fat fashion, digging through the stacks of clothes gives a clear picture of what the fashion industry has

decided is appropriate garb for fat bodies. Yet at the Flea these rules are subverted, people squeeze into clothes of the "wrong" size, they make things their own, and play dressing-up for the fun of it. This empowers an underclass of people with a pernicious heritage of self-hatred to experiment with kinder and more affirming ways of experiencing our bodies through playing with clothes in a supportive atmosphere. The Flea addresses American consumerism and suggests more environmentally-friendly alternatives. Profits go towards making NOLOSE conferences accessible to people who could not normally afford to attend.

### Social

The groups of the second wave been replaced by different kinds of supportive social spaces. Unskinny Bop, a nightclub based in London is an example of a new kind of fat liberation and fat activist presence. Unlike Planet Big Girl, The Bop does not seek to attract FAs, rather the emphasis is on the music, dancing and community. Fat people are welcome, decorative posters and the club's zine have an explicit queer and fat activist perspective, and the club's founders and organisers have close ties to The Chubsters (see below). The Bop is not separatist, people of all sizes and backgrounds are encouraged to come together, appreciate each other and to have a good time. In this context fat activism is low-key, hip and fun, yet made relevant to a diverse constituency.

### Performance and Celebrity

Performance in the third wave has become a vibrant and complex area for activism. Perhaps this is most apparent in groups like The Padded Lillies, an occasional synchronised swimming troupe, who send up the fixed smiles of the genre, make use of a vintage Hollywood aesthetic, yet whose physicality is both ironic and sincere. Pretty, Porky and Pissed Off, and The Fat Femme Mafia also perform with a mixture of knowingness and pop-culture awareness, as does stand up comedian Kelli Dunham, whilst The Fat Bottom Revue, Heather MacAllister's professional fat burlesque group added a playful yet frank eroticism. Community and performance intermingle in these groups, as with Fat Girl Speaks, an irregular cabaret event in Portland, Oregon, which plays to audiences of 800 or more, and Marina Wolf Ahmad's Big Moves, a dance company which offers choreography commissions, a touring revue, performing ensembles and workshops.

Fat celebrity has become a bigger prospect with the arrival of The Gossip's fat activist singer, Beth Ditto, who topped the NME Cool List (2006). Where fat celebrities were more coy and cosy in the second wave, Ditto is outspoken, queer, working class, feminist and politicised, and brings this experience to her public.

### Media

The paper-based fat media of the second wave has given way to a massive outpouring of fat activism in new media, particularly via Web 2.0 platforms such as blogs and social networking websites. The term fatosphere has been coined to describe the interlinked communities of bloggers and commentators. Some activists, such as McAleer and Big Fat Blog, have branched out into real world activism; his Coalition of Fat Rights Activists hosts Think Tanks, is documenting the legal position

of fat people in the US, and is targeting the media's use of headless fatties (Cooper 2007). Others are using already existing online resources to promote fat activism, such as Nash (2007) on YouTube; Blog Carnivals, where posts on a given subject are curated by a principal organiser; various fat resources lists based on wiki technology; groups, such as Fat Studies on Yahoo; Just As Beautiful, a traditional fat fashion magazine that is distributed as a PDF attachment via email; ad hoc protest groups on FaceBook; or Femme-Cast, a downloadable podcast.

### *Innovative third wave activist interventions*

I would like to suggest a few current areas of activism which, to me, exemplify the increasing sophistication of the movement in the third wave.

#### Fat Studies

The rich nature of fat and fat activism, not to mention its relevance and application in 21st century cultural life, makes it a subject ripe for academic interrogation. Unlike academic individuals and organisations which uphold a bio-medical approach to obesity, such as, for example, Liverpool Obesity Research Network at the University of Liverpool, Fat Studies takes a more questioning view of dominant paradigms relating to fat, as well as an interdisciplinary perspective, and is explicit in its desire for social justice regarding fat. At the time of writing, Fat Studies exists through a series of books, for example Evans et al (2008), Monaghan (2008), Solovay and Rothblum (2009), Tomrley and Kaloski (2009) and many others; events such as The Popular Culture Association gathering, Fat and The Academy, Resisting Treatment, Fat Studies UK and Bodies of Evidence: Fat Across Disciplines; and online discussion fora, such as Fat Studies and Fat Studies UK.

#### The Chubsters

The Chubsters are a semi-fictitious international fat girl gang. The gang's activities, members and ethos is documented on its website ([www.chubstergang.com](http://www.chubstergang.com)), and potential initiates can download joining packs in order to earn their own membership card and badge with daring feats of fat activism. The website also features information about Chubster calls, hand signs and greetings, and tools such as graffiti stencils, the Chubster Theme, and calling cards. The Chubsters have taken part in real life events, for example the gang had a rumble with The Imps, a children's motorcycle display team; and the group has held workshops where participants learned how to pick a fight and how to strut.

The Chubsters blurs the line between fantasy and reality, it creates an alternate world where fat people are self-aggrandising, belligerent, tough, obstructive, resistant and highly organised. The gang seeks to embrace freakhood and turn upside down fat people's anxiety that we are all those hateful things touted in the dominant model, our stereotype threat. The Chubsters is a channel for the rage and frustration that many fat people feel in response to fatphobia played as a deadpan joke; where fat people are usually considered an embodiment of safe, affable jollity, The Chubsters' humour is aggressive, angry and unnerving. The group is intentionally mixed, being fat or female is not a prerequisite for joining, and

malevolent attention is directed not at thinner or average-sized people, but towards fatphobic industries and individuals, called Narrow Fucks in Chubsterspeak, because they are narrow of mind.

#### Confident individual interventions

As fat activism discourses gain more visibility, it follows that more people are likely to encounter and be inspired by these modes of resistance to the dominant obesity model. Although they are largely undocumented, individuals are adapting fat activism to their own circumstances and creating a powerful body of imaginative new interventions. Wann's Yay Scales, for example, are a set of bathroom scales that she has customised. Instead of delivering a dreaded number when one steps on the scales, the dial reads "you're perfect", "you're gorgeous", "you're hot!" Students in Colorado have taken this idea and made Yay Scales of their own (Elam 2006).

The Fat-In kicked off fat activism with a community prank and the tradition continues. With an intervention reminiscent of those described by Vale and Juno (1987), which incorporated hysterical fatphobic headlines and the protagonist's own experiences, Kimberly Brittingham made a dummy self-help book cover for *Fat Is Contagious: How Sitting Next to a Fat Person Can make YOU Fat* (2007), and sat close to people on the New York subway. She hoped to encourage people to question the reasons why they chose not to sit next to a fat person on public transport, and her account of the experiment is amusing and thought-provoking. Copies of the book cover are available online.

Mischief is certainly an incentive for individual activists. When my university's student wellness department hosted an Obesity Awareness Week I responded by making a zine called *Fat Stuff*, photocopying it in secret at work, and distributing it with my girlfriend Kay Hyatt around the campus. The zine contained a critique of Obesity Awareness Week, a list of alternative resources that students might find in the university's library, and local suggestions for fat activism that readers could undertake instead of worrying about their weight.

#### **The future**

I hope this account demonstrates the richness and complexity of fat activism, and shows that the fat liberation movement is likely to continue evolving and challenging the dominant model, even in the face of current vicious obesity epidemic rhetoric. Fat activism is increasingly self-confident and multi-faceted, and is beginning to form a widespread and viable community.

I also hope that understanding what has gone before might help activists to strategise more effectively. Future trends could build on past work, perhaps to include the documentation and appreciation of our history and cultures; more sensitive cross-cultural analyses which expand fat liberation further than the US; more powerful and better managed lobbying organisations; legislative change; a critical engagement with business and fat activism; stronger attempts to make media of our own, to put our obsession with media representation into practise; tackling the

power structures that surround healthcare and ensuring that practitioners implement Health At Every Size; community building; an effective response to the diet industry's appropriation of fat activist language; a means of addressing fatphobia directed at children, and so on.

Amidst these possibilities I am mindful of the complexities of being a fat activist. The self-hatred engendered by fat oppression means that many fat activists have a complicated relationship to our bodies and to activism. We seek massive social change, and yet we are often unable to come to terms with our bodies. How can we move past these barriers? Debates are currently raging over prominent activists who have elected to have weight loss surgery. These arguments beg questions about who can be an activist, how to move forwards most powerfully, and, yes, again, what this thing called fat activism might be.

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