

NHL NormiHomoLehti interview

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Answers by Charlotte Cooper

Full unedited English version

About you

I'm 42 years old, London is my home, I'm a dyke, white, of working class heritage. I also come from punk and have strong roots in DIY, feminist and anarchist communities. I've been a fat activist for about twenty years, and fat all my life. My activism revolves around writing, publishing, speaking, performing, film-making, being out in the world, and scholarship. I also started a fat queer girl gang called The Chubsters. I turn my hand to many things.

Activism

What is fat acceptance?

I tend to use fat activism rather than fat acceptance to describe what I do. I think anyone can be a fat activist, regardless of how accepting you are of your own fat body. To me fat acceptance suggests that accepting fatness within yourself or other people is all there is to do, when actually fat activism is a very broad thing that people approach in multiple ways. I think of fat activism as a political project, it's about altering the way that fatness is understood and understanding fat within a framework of power relations. It includes cultural elements and there are communities of people engaged in myriad ways with fat activism, sometimes in opposition to each other. I think of fat activism as something that generates fat culture, shows the richness of fat people's lives, validates us as worthy human beings, and counters prevalent negative cultural messages about "the obese".

Can you tell me about how you became a fat queer activist?

I'd always been fat, and had tried to get thin for most of my life, without any success whatsoever. When I was a teenager I knew a lot of very cool punks, and a few queers. From them I learned that being 'normal' was highly overrated! They helped me question the idea that being thin or straight was something I should strive for. Later I encountered feminism, which gave me a way of critiquing weight loss, and showed that there were issues of power and control woven into bodies, fatness and thinness. Later still, I came across work by fat feminists, who I later discovered were also mostly lesbians, and their analyses of fatphobia and fat activist community pushed my thinking along. I was doing odd bits of activism myself by now, which would have been the early 1990s, and I did a postgraduate degree about fat politics,

the dissertation for which later became my book, *Fat & Proud*. I think getting involved with a zine called *FaT GiRL*, based in San Francisco in the mid-90s, was the thing that helped me think of myself as a fat and queer activist, the folks who produced that zine were the first people who synthesised all these previous elements and more: punk, DIY methods, feminism, rigorous critical thinking, fun, collective energy, queerness, a kinky sensibility and sheer badassery. I met them and never looked back.

Why is fat activism important?

The dominant cultural messages about fatness, not only in the West but in many parts of the world, promote the idea that to be fat is almost the worst possible thing ever, to be eliminated and avoided at all costs. Unfortunately many (fat) people agree with this. Fat activism shows that not only is this wrong, but that fat can be a powerful identity, it can underpin amazing social change, and help support diverse cultural production.

What does it mean to you?

Oh, only everything! I've been writing and thinking about fat now for a very long time, it's a daily part of my life, a lens through which I understand things. Many of my friendships have come about because of my fat activism, I get invited around the world to speak, people from all over the place who I've never met send me letters and emails telling me that my work means something to them, and unexpected privilege has come my way because of what I think and do. Fat and fat activism are at the heart of my personal, creative and political lives, and increasingly my professional life too. I see myself as part of a long line of fat activists, and hopefully as someone supporting people who are new to the ideas.

What is the fat queer activist scene like (local/global)?

Locally, in East London, it seems to be made up of me and a bunch of mates. We do things together because we like each other and have similar ideas about stuff. I think this is the way a lot of fat activism goes, people using whatever networks and resources are available to them. There's a club called *Unskinny Bop*, run by a couple of fat dyke friends, that acts as a kind of social hub where we hang out and dance. Otherwise, it's just us making zines and putting on events, a couple of us are academics and we work together sometimes too.

I'm a white British Anglophone, and this has a bearing on my limited global perspective. I would love to know about fat queer activist communities beyond these places but, as far as I know, there are significant fat dyke and trans communities in several cities in the US, including New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Ann Arbor, Portland and the Bay Area. Toronto is also a centre of excellence for fat queer activism, and there are new pockets forming in Sydney, Melbourne, Hamburg and Berlin. People's activism includes all kinds of things, from gatherings, film-shows, doing physical activities together, to blogging, sex parties, and small businesses. Of

course 'queer' includes men, and there is a massive global Bear scene, though this is very different and almost always separate to the kind of feminist-based fat activism that I'm looking at.

What is NOLOSE?

NOLOSE is a community of fat dykes, bisexual women, transgendered folks and allies, based in the US. It's been going in various incarnations since, I think the mid-90s and, although there are small side projects, it manifests primarily in a more-or-less annual mind-blowing conference. I've been privileged to present the keynote on two occasions.

Tell a bit more about your activism

My fat activism is pretty integrated into my life, it's not something that I need to put on a special outfit to perform or go to a particular place, so this means that it's just what I do every day. I can give some examples. Typically it might involve answering emails, lately I've been involved in a long and difficult exchange with an acquaintance who is on a diet and who got really angry when I wrote a blog post criticising the company to which she is giving her time, energy and money. I'm writing a piece for a friend's zine about DIY activism, and the fat consciousness we've both brought to that scene, and I'm also writing a Chubsters workshop plan for an event in March. The Chubsters is my semi-fictitious platform for all kinds of peculiar fat activism, and at this workshop we'll be learning how to behave in an anti-social way, learning how to spit accurately and to shoot spud guns! I'll also show a film I made about the gang and talk about its history. I'll make plans to attend a Fat Studies seminar later in the spring. I'll probably update my blog later today with some thoughts about hybridity and fat activist community belonging, though I'll try and make it sound less dry. I'll exchange quips on Facebook with other friends doing similar work, there's a fatshion (fat + fashion) blogger gathering at the weekend for example that's been organised online, maybe I'll Skype with a fat pal in California. I'll book a plane ticket to Hamburg, where I will be an Artist in Residence in a couple of months, making a zine out of a Fat and Queer Trans Timeline that I helped build and facilitate at a workshop last year, and finding out more about fat activism in Germany. I'll dance around my flat a bit, and I may go swimming. I'll post a cassette back to some older Jewish lesbian fat activists in Boston, they lent me a recording of two radio shows they produced in 1984 and 1985, my boyfriend digitised them and we are hoping to make them publicly available again, they are spectacular. I'll chat about some fat stuff I've been thinking about with my loves. I'll eat something good I've made and do some reading, I'm taking part in a reading series called Race Revolt, a kind of queer, anarchist activism on race and racism in the UK, and I'm interested in broadening my fat activism to include some of these ideas. Oh, and I'll do some work!

Research

Your current academic work is very exciting and it also touches upon fat activism, can you tell about that?

Fat activism is the primary focus of the study. I'm on a scholarship, doing a PhD at the University of Limerick in Ireland, using Sociology to think about fat activism as a social movement. This work is being funded by the Irish government and I am due to complete the research in 2012. Obesity rhetoric typically presents fat people as passive, stupid, a medical or social problem that needs solving, and is completely ill-equipped to address the richness and diversity of fat activist culture, so I'm interested in making this world more visible and known in the hope of effecting some kind of long-term paradigm shift. Because I am in the lucky position of being a researcher-activist, and a part of the world that I am studying, I'm producing an autoethnography that includes me, I'm not taking on a role of pseudo-objective academic expert-outsider observing a mysterious Other. I think this makes the work really unique and valuable, fat people are often spoken for by people who have an interest in our oppression, it's incredibly rare for us to be given a privileged space in which we can articulate our own lives autonomously and, because academia is a high-status area of life, be listened to and taken seriously. This thrills me so much I can barely say it.

What do you study and how you go about it?

It's very simple, I've just been talking to a sample of fat activists from my own social networks in the UK, Europe, US, Canada and Australia. I've been asking people to try and define what they mean by fat activism – it really varies – and talk about what they do and why they do it. I've been looking at archival fat activist materials from the early part of the movement, specifically fat feminism from the 1970s and 80s. I'm interested in how ideas underpinning what we think of today as fat activism have travelled and morphed over the years. I've also been taking part in a lot of fat activism, basically doing as much as I can, and reflecting critically on what it is that I do.

Your work takes you around the world a lot, most memorable fat & queer moments?

Well, there have been plenty that involve hot butches! I've had some great times posing for Substania Jones' Adipositivity Project, we just did a shoot in New York that involved me being photographed in my underwear on the street, so naughty! I think my most favourite moments have been showing my films at queer festivals, the audience response is usually amazing, spontaneous dancing broke out once, and people talk about it as being transformative experiences. Sheer pleasure.