



Fat Activist Vernacular

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Introduction

Fat Activist Vernacular is a zine I published in 2016 and have now zhushed-up with a revised and greatly expanded edition. It's a sort of dictionary of terms that inform fat activism, a subversive demonstration of how people use language to shape their realities. I've written this mostly by myself as a fat feminist activist of several decades experience.

There is so much cultural noise around fat, everybody has something to add to the clamour. In dominant culture formulations of us, fat people are nothing, less than useless, dehumanised, in need of rescue, often represented without even heads or faces. We are spoken about and for, lectured but rarely listened to. At worst we are terrorists, diseased, disgusting. Many of the entries within the Vernacular have been ruinous. I have seen how badly words can hurt in my therapy practice.

But language can also validate marginal experience. As with a lot of fat activism the Vernacular is an act of reclaiming language and showing how things are said and understood. If you can't depend on the world to create a space for you, you must create your own and share it with others who appreciate how you see things. The worlds you create are rich and exciting places to be, culturally sophisticated, not at all barren or lacking.

I've listed things in this zine that I think are interesting and I know I have barely scratched the surface. It's mostly about how I see things, I haven't conferred with many people, it isn't a universal statement of how things are. I've included words and phrases that are made up by me or other people; some are in common use but have a different meaning for fat people; some are used within fat activism to explain how we see things; some are cultural touchstones. If you come across terms you don't understand, there's a chance I will have defined them later in the text. The words here are in English and reflect how some of us talk about fat in the UK at this point in time. I'm sure there are other words I don't know about that people use when they talk about fat in other places and in different languages and periods, it would be great to hear those words. I have not been at all humble with this project, it is sharp, direct, opinionated, about talking back, being irreverent, valuing lived experience over propriety. Neither have I been that rigorous, it's not an actual dictionary, or

a lexicon, so I've called it a vernacular in honour of the grassroots knowledge it represents. There are no citations and few references because it's a zine not a thesis. I will have missed a lot of things out. Language is always changing, dictionaries can never be complete, so there's that too.

There are more than 600 entries in this collection and each of them is a universe supported by histories and genealogies. There is so much to understand. Fat is not just a case of faulty energy balance or medical intervention, it is political and cultural and exploring these dimensions can reveal powerful seams of knowledge and understanding. I hope the Vernacular offers readers ideas for social transformation through culture-making and encourages fat people to name and define our own reality.

1-10

1647

The statistic that 47% of women in the UK are a size 16 or over was regularly quoted by fat activists in the 1990s, pre-obesity epidemic, but now you rarely see it. It's not clear where the statistic originated. The idea was that a large number of fat women existed and were not being catered to, especially by entrepreneurs. Size 16 doesn't seem so fat nowadays. Dawn French had a stake in a fat clothes business called 1647.

88

Two fat ladies.

95%

This is the number of us who regain weight lost and then gain more weight when we try and get thinner. It is a fundament of fat activist rhetoric and is regularly invoked. The source for the statistic is obscure but possibly came out of The Fat Underground's research courtesy of Lynn Mabel Lois, now Lynn McAfee of the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination. If anyone knows where this number comes from, it will be her.

A

A Moment on the Lips, Forever on the Hips

Diet corn championed by people who prefer not to think.

Access

A chair, a train seat, a fixed desk, a booth, a way in to the worlds of work, leisure, travel. A space where you can be. Instead of thinking, saying, protesting and organising around the fact that many parts of the world have been constructed by people who don't consider that we might need to be in those places, or actively want to keep us out, we say: "I'm so embarrassed, I don't fit, I must lose weight."

Adipophobicogenic

The creation of fat hatred particularly by public health and medical institutions (suggested by Lily O'Hara @lilyohara).

Adipose Tissue

The stuff on our bodies made up of fat cells. Pesky.

Adiposer

A lucky person who has participated in Substantia Jones' Adiposity Project, a mind-blowing online gallery of contemporary fat portrait photography.

Agreeing

A monoculture created when dominant culture fat activists demand that everybody agree with them on an issue or else be ghosted or character assassinated. A means of marginalising the marginalised and not appreciating difference.

All Bodies

Universalising declarations on social media about the great value of simply having a body. These faux-profound statements are not that soothing and contribute to the idea that class, race, gender, sexuality etc do not matter, that we're all essentially the same. On a planetary level maybe, but otherwise these statements are bland, meaningless and unnecessarily placatory.

B

Back Fat

Rolls of fat that originate from the middle of your back. A source of shame for many fat people. A tender spot.

Back of the Picture

You might well be the fat one in a group shot right at the back. You become a little head peeping through, you have no body to get in the way.

Back of the Shop

Bricks and mortar places selling fat clothes are disappearing but where they do exist you will always find the fat stuff at the back of the shop. This entails walking past all the stylish thin stuff that you'd much rather wear but are not allowed to. Mind you, nowadays the thin clothes are just as horrible as fat ones.

Backlash

Fat activism threatens certain institutions, power structures and ideologies that have interests in keeping us in our place, or harming us. Organisations and individuals try to mitigate against these threats through various means: ignoring, ridiculing, attacking, abusing and trying to repress us. Sometimes these tactics work and sometimes they don't. Fat activism keeps coming back in different forms and through different generations.

Bariatric

Usually refers to weight loss surgery but now applied to specialised equipment and furniture for fat people, including chairs. An important and scientific-sounding word with a Greek root. A word that embeds fat people in the medical-industrial-complex.

Bariatric Divorce

Journalistic concept describing relationships that end when one person loses a lot of weight after surgery. Another way in which fat people are left high and dry without emotional support, including relationship counselling, after weight loss surgery.

BBW

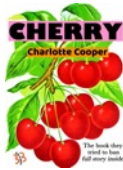
An acronym for Big Beautiful Woman. A mostly heterosexual fat social scene where thin men chase fat women. A concept used by fat sex workers.

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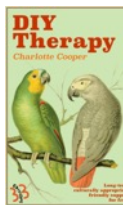
Encounters with Nature

Quiet and sensitive proto climate queer zine. Autobiographical stories told through my other-wordly encounters with wild animals.



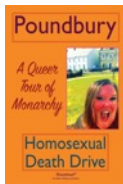
Cherry

An updated edition of the award-winning queer novel about a dyke leaving behind the straight world forever.



DIY Therapy

An alternative way of doing therapy based in radical practice and critiques of the mental health system.



Poundbury: A Queer Tour of Monarchy

An artist's book, an alternative queer and Othered take on the soft and hard power of monarchy.

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