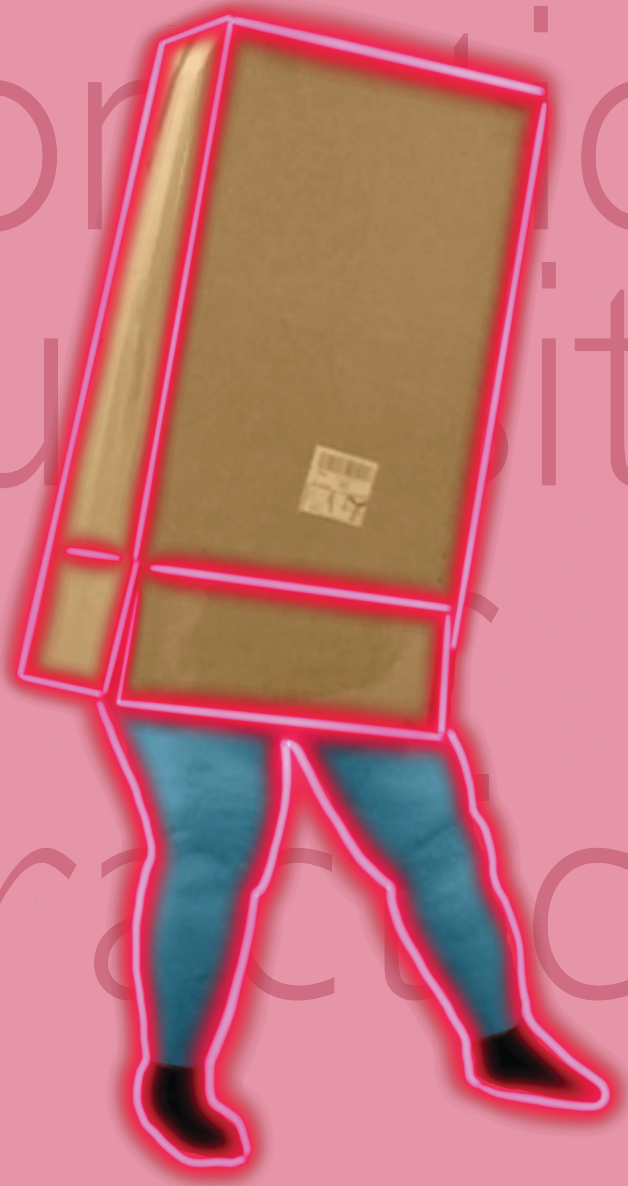
Fat Body Work



Charlotte Cooper

"Another corker from one of the greatest" – Scottee

Fat Body Work

Somatics, Curiosity, Care and Practice

Charlotte Cooper

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For Cat Pausé

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Content note: I explore fatphobia in this book.

Moved

Swing by my ankles
Aeroplane
Ride on Dad's back, shoulders
Music and Movement
Mad tickles
Scream
Farts, burps
Swing, slide, spin, climb
Dangle upside down
Run and hide, chase you, stuck-in-the-mud, 123-it
Down there WOW!!
Build a den, get inside
In the sea, river, lake, pool
Dread family walks
Too fat
Mum sez
Too fat
Elastics, claps
Country dance, heel-and-toe
Sing, recorders, clarinet
Ride a bike, a horse
Synchro, badges, competitions
PE
Picked last
Come last
Starved by adults
Too fat
Too fat
Too fat
Everyone sez
Mum bruv school friends
Starve myself
Handstands stopped
Still too fat
Too fat
Too fat
Everyone sez
Pimple popping

Dance in secret
Sing in secret
Dream
Other Possibilities
Under-18s discos
Hip-hop
Punk
Feminism
Haircuts
Too fat
Too fat
Too fat
Everyone sez
Boyfriend best friend strangers telly mags
Doc, nurses
Corset
Walk in heels
Mosh pit, bruises
Run from men
Smoke in lungs
Really really drunk
Dance floor, late night
On on on
Sex
March home at night
Speed, acid
Limitless
Catwalk, stage
Weights, treadmill, yoga mat
Too fat
Housework, care work to infinity
Ride a moped
Queer
Sauna, steam, sweat, massage
Naked for cash
Forest, mountain, fjord
Plane, train, car
Commute, run for the bus
Stand, lift, carry, bend, walk, push, hold for money
Flogger, hypodermics for fun
Spectacle

Tattoo
In front of a lens
Sit on the floor
Outrageous pain
Drudge physio
Too fat
Too fat
WHO, DoH, NHS, NICE, NIH, CDC, AMA
All the news, all the media
Everyone sez
Totalitarian
Internet
Scholarship
Perform perform perform
Dance for a vid
Clubs stopped
Epping Forest
Garden
Books
Computer
Busy hands, eyeballs
So rich
Forgot
Forgot
Get on
Edges fray
Forgot again
Remember
Find it
Get it

This book

I have wanted to talk about my body and the ways in which I move for a long time because I've seldom come across things that reflect my experience. The punchline is that I have been moving for as long as I have been alive. I didn't know that when I started this book. How come I didn't know? Well, there's a question.

Body work is a term that comes with a lot of baggage. What immediately springs to my mind are things like breathing exercises, bending yourself around, working with a practitioner, dancing weirdly, exercise things, building up a sweat, relaxation techniques, flailing and wailing. A barefoot, loose-garb situation with Boomer hippies, horribly exposing boundary-transgressing cathartic group process. I must have come to these stereotypes because body work has philosophical beginnings in religious practices, psychoanalysis, indigenous praxis, shamanism, new age spirituality, appropriation and now, thankfully, decolonisation. A lot of mystifying jargon gets thrown around, and many sub-sets of thought and action make it difficult to pin down. Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, yoga, Pilates, ritual, mindfulness, manual therapy, Gestalt are common techniques among many approaches, some perhaps baffling. Body work has a number of purposes, including healing and recovering from trauma, pain and emotional distress; self-help; social change; business development, some of which are contradictory aims. So allow me to clarify things: when I use the term body work I mean deliberate actions, usually movement, made to have some effect on your body-mind.

I'm into body work but this has tended to feel incongruous, maybe embarrassing, because, in the culture where I live, my body is failed and far from ideal. I imagine many would propose that the work hasn't worked. Yet, over the last decade, I have been developing a movement practice built on older experience, a journey filled with embodied, psychological, and social obstacles. This book is about that practice and what I have been discovering along the way. It is a long term embodied research project informed by somatic theory, which means a way of developing knowledge that doesn't just come from or is expressed through language but is also felt and sensed in one's body.

As a psychotherapist specialising in fat embodiment, trauma and liberation, I bring decades of experience working with clients navigating fatphobia and oppression.[1] This book is both a reflection of my personal journey and an extension of my professional practice. In sharing my body work stories I want to clarify what informs a fat body-mind and how we might live well with it. I believe my body is political, as are its remedies, which makes me curious about body work rooted in fat liberation and its potential for healing. I want to know how fat people develop and sustain practices around movement. This entails unpacking the Health At Every Size instruction for joyful movement and sharing some of its complexities.

One of the problems of talking about fat body work is that conversations quickly become generalisations about presumed common denominators which further marginalise the outliers. Much of the sociological literature of embodiment refers to "the body" or "bodies." This has long irritated me because bodies are specific and I resent the universalising of bodies that are written into the world by, often, straight white cis men academics. So this book is not about the body or bodies. It is about my body, I work with what I have. Autoethnography is typically the means by which I explore subjects and that is true here.[2] I am one person and I can't speak for all. In addition, *Fat Body Work* is not a self-help book or a programme, I am working to make sense of my experiences and hope that this resonates with other people.

Fat and fatphobia

Embodiment and oppression go together. As women and femme, disabled, black and brown, working and underclass, older, trans and non-binary, minority ethnic and queer people our bodies are prime targets for attack. Our bodies also offer us the possibility of liberation. Evidently, I am centring fat with this work because our body work needs special knowledge and encouragement. I present broader and more universal themes but it is specifically about fat. Fat is enough of a subject, it doesn't need anyone's approval. Movement reveals a lot when you are fat.

[1] Embodiment is academic jargon that refers to ideas around what it is to have a body.
[2] Autoethnography is a way of finding out things by focusing on the researcher.

I make a number of basic assumptions about fat people in this book. We are part of the fabric of humanity, the desire to eradicate us is a eugenicist project, the War on Obesity transformed us into political scapegoats.[3] Meanwhile, the weight loss industry is invested in making us perpetual consumers of their products. The assumption that fat people are fat because we eat too much and don't burn enough calories is very strong, but fat people are a diverse group and this is a simplistic and damaging message. Weight loss interventions are more likely to result in weight cycling, mostly unsustainable and result in poorer long term health outcomes. Whether it is healthy to be fat depends on multiple factors including the availability of quality care, which is poor for most of us. We face multiple access restrictions in the material world. Fat people aren't seen as fully human, we are spoken for and treated as sites for intervention. We have community, culture and histories but these are unimaginable to most people. A multi-faceted fat liberation movement has been active since at least the late 1960s. You are welcome to download my free zine, *Welcome to Fat Lib*, if you want more of an introduction to these themes.[4] If you really want to go the whole hog you can read my book *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*.[5]

Body work as a creative or political project by fat people is not often told. There is a dearth of literature on the subject, especially by and for fat people. I treat my body as a source of data in this book and analyse that material through a particular methodological lens. Research Justice takes the view that the people most affected by an issue should be those generating and owning knowledge about it.[6] This follows the disability rights tenet: Nothing About Us Without Us. This community orientated way of building understanding is extremely rare in the case of fat people. I want us to become owners and originators of the knowledge that affects us, to share the load and learn from each other. This is a central part of my fat liberation work.

This book is also about fatphobia because it has been through body work and reflection that I have been able to recognise how much it has blighted my life. There are language politics concerning this concept. Sometimes I use fat oppression to honour the first fat feminists whose

[3] The War on Obesity refers to a series of global policy initiatives rooted in the 1990s, aiming to find a solution to the problem of being fat.
[4] (Cooper 2024)
[5] (Cooper 2021)
[6] (Jolivétte 2015)

work means so much to me, that was their term, and fat hatred to tell it as it is. Anti-fatness is another concept and so is weight stigma. I use fatphobia primarily because, like homophobia, transphobia or islamophobia, it expresses an irrational fear and hatred that leads to devastating consequences.

Fatphobia refers to the endemic macro- and microaggressions that corrupt our collective body-mind.[7] It pre-dates an idea of an obesity epidemic, it has racist roots in the white supremacist disgust at black women's bodies, but the War on Obesity exacerbated the problem from the 1990s onwards. Fatphobia intersects with other demeaning forms of oppression and shifts across time and place. It has a number of rationales, depending on your point of view, which include extinction, hegemony and the creation of perpetual and dependent consumers. It is characterised by disgust, bullying, exclusion, ridicule, pity and shame. Fat people commonly adopt these life-limiting qualities and they become self-fulfilling prophecies when collectively endorsed.

Transformation is not an aim

This book is about a journey, but it is not one of transformation. The promise of bodily transformation is central to fatphobia. Fat to thin. The transformation more often plays out as fat-to-thin-to-fatter repeatedly, but this is not usually acknowledged because the dominant fantasy of perpetual thinness is powerful.

Fatphobic discourse popularised through some schools of feminist psychoanalysis, taken up elsewhere, asserts that working through psychological maladjustment inevitably leads to weight loss.[8] This is based on the erroneous principle that fat people are fat because of over-eating and that resolving the underlying distress results in transformation. Whilst it is true that resolving underlying eating distress can lead to changes in body weight, it doesn't always follow that those shifts will make someone thinner. It might be that people stabilise at a higher weight. I have no doubt that becoming permanently thinner is a complex experience for those who used to be

[7] Macroaggression refers to the blatant ways in which hostility is expressed towards marginalised people. Microaggression means the subtle and deniable ways in which that hostility is also expressed.
[8] Discourse is academic jargon that means all the things that people think and say about a particular subject.

fat, especially fat liberationists, and don't want to trash anyone's experience. However, this fake-feminist pseudo-psychological weight loss transformation fantasy continues to be widespread. It underpins a hidden form of weight loss body work, of reduction as self-actualisation, a mere by-product of the true psychological work, it disavows its connection to fatphobic ideology. You haven't intentionally lost weight, you've found your authentic self, everybody cheer!

Fatphobia stops fat people from being treated as reliable narrators. Most of us lack access to good quality information about our lives and bodies. The promise of a better life, an end to marginalisation, through a few simple steps is extremely tantalising. It's not surprising that statements of intent and of cause and effect get mangled. So I can only speak for myself. Experience shows me that I am unlikely ever to become thin unless I get seriously ill which, obviously, I would like to avoid. So far, body work has not led to any significant changes in my appearance and what I know about transformation and fatphobia is enough to put me off that particular enterprise. I move with the body-mind that I have and the body work I am interested in is anti-oppressive and in service to fat liberation.

What's here and what's missing

Fat Body Work comprises a series of short essays and reflections as well as archive material, poems and drawings. These pieces all join up into a critical and chronological narrative of the things I've been doing with my body. Sometimes this looks like activities that might be thought of as exercise, other times it emphasises creative expression, dance and performance, sometimes it goes off into other directions. So I begin by introducing the book and my body, offering some older archive pieces and considering the current literature around fat body work. I go on to show how working with Project O on a dance performance deepened my engagement with body work. I describe what happened when that work was taken up autonomously and how it transformed my attitude to movement. I discuss how my body work changed shape as a result of a global rupture. I end the book with new understanding about fat body work and its importance.

I recorded my experiences from 2014 onwards in notebooks and with time lapse videos to help remember concisely what happened. This book was largely built on that material and is perhaps a lesson in

documentation for anyone doing something they don't fully understand in the moment. When I refer to my notebook I am citing reflections I made at the time in my journals and process notes.

I bring some personal and professional qualities to this book including several decades of engagement with the fat liberation movement, a body of scholarship that includes feminism, queer theory and disability activism, and a longstanding experimental DIY way of doing things. I am a creative practitioner, that's part of this book too. I have been working in mental health for over thirty years. I specialise in psychotherapy with marginalised people, especially those who are wrestling with fatphobia, disability, queer and trans embodiment. If you are seeking a therapist or consultant who can work with these issues, feel free to contact me.

I refer to body-mind and stay true to that concept. Being a therapist, there is a lot more I could say about mind which I have left out for now to avoid overwhelming the material. There are many forms of fat body work that would need other books or other people to tell. At this point I don't have much to add to the literature about fat people and eating or the feminine body work of smoothing, smiling and masking. There is plenty of body work carried out by super-fat, disabled and chronically ill people that is beyond my own experience, as well as specific forms of racialised body work and the body work of trans and non-binary people that require telling by those with direct knowledge. I have also omitted the body work that people perform in order to make a living, bring children into the world, or go to sleep at night. I haven't talked about sex and neither have I said much about cosmetic body work. I have omitted the body work of trying to lose weight because it's usually a doomed project that depletes diversity, not my thing at all.

Body work as the creative or political project of fat people is a tale rarely told

Fat Body Work invites you into a rich, deeply personal and politically charged exploration of movement across the life course. It blends embodied research, critical reflection, archival writings, drawings and poetry.

Drawing on anti-oppressive values, Fat Studies, queer ethics and creative practice, *Fat Body Work* traces the shifting realities of fatphobia, ageing and care.

This book is a necessary resource for anyone interested in the complexities of movement, liberation, healing and joy.

Moving is life, solidarity, oneness, peace.

Charlotte Cooper is a psychotherapist working in East London. She is the author of *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*. Charlotte is also a cultural worker influenced by DIY ethics and aesthetics and performs as Homosexual Death Drive.

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