



Book Review

Fat activism: A radical social movement

Charlotte Cooper

HammerOn Press, 2016: 296 pages

Review by Cassandra Kuyvenhoven (Queen's University)

In *Fat Activism*, Cooper responds to mainstream and scholarly writings on fat activism that she claims create negative assumptions or “proxies” of fat people. These constructed proxies serve to efface, reduce, and oversimplify the voices and the lived experiences of fat activists and fat activism. Through proxies, fat people are further marginalized and estranged from writings about what it means to be fat and what it means to be an activist. In this context, fat is a descriptive word that rejects medicalized terminology and encompasses non-normative embodiments of adipose tissue. Fat is not a bad word: it is powerful, political, and not without controversy.

One of Cooper's major frustrations is that jargon-filled academic research only expresses a limited, monolithic scope of fat activism; therefore, she goes to great lengths to make sure that fat people are not othered or tokenized in her text. Cooper employs inclusive language—fat people are referred to as “us”, not “them”. We are fat, we are present, and we are not complicit in totalitarian obesity discourses that define fat as an issue that requires solutions or interventions. Through this first-person language, Cooper creates an arena for a more dynamic, comprehensive discourse that makes space for all types of experiences and voices in fat activist communities.

Cooper's six-part book describes the origins of fat activism proxies—like body positivity, fat acceptance, eating disorders, and health—and starts to “undo” and complicate these falsehoods. Here Cooper critiques some of the staples of fat activist literature—including Marilyn Wann's oft-cited *Fat!So?*—as contributing to overly reductive accounts of fat activism that are not representative of the expansive, messy social phenomenon as a whole. The second part of the book broadly explores what fat activism is and how to “do” it. Cooper outlines that fat activism is done through: political process activism and collective influence; community building; cultural work through the act of “making things” (p. 68); micro activism/identity

politics; and other forms of ambiguous activism that don't fit easily into any activism category. Cooper relies on her sample of interviews (n=31) to support her arguments and provide real-world examples of fat activism being enacted both publically and privately. The third part of the text explores Cooper's genealogy of fat activism to demonstrate its—and her—embeddedness in “historical, geographical, political, and philosophical spaces” (p. 96). This autoethnography-cum-historiography explores how Cooper and her interviewees encountered fat activism generally and fat feminism more specifically. Although Cooper's perspectives are peppered throughout the text, this is the most personal chapter and it explores how Cooper conceptualizes her fat and her activism.

The bulk of the text is contained within these three first parts, which makes the following half of the book seem slightly less developed in comparison; nevertheless, I would argue that the final chapters are extremely significant contributions to contemporary theoretical debates about fat activism. The fourth part of the text uses archival evidence and her interviews to trace how fat feminism “traveled” (p. 130) or journeyed through personal networks, organizations, publications, and communities in the United States—and how this travelling reverberates to the rest of the world. In the fifth part, Cooper goes on to describe the racial, ability, and class inequalities within fat activism and how certain individuals and philosophies have gained privilege and access while others remain marginalized. This is an important acknowledgement of other less visible forms of fat activism, which is further developed in the remaining pages. The final part culminates in a discussion about how to revive what Cooper interprets as a stagnating social movement. Using Judith Butler's (2006) definition of queer as “anti-identity” (p. 192), Cooper contends that queering the fat activism movement would allow fat activism to embrace non-conformity, reject dominant culture, and promote creative ways of thinking about what fat activism is and has the potential to be. Festivals, gangs (like the Chubsters), DIY timelines, zines, and events (like The Fattylympics) are all offered as ways to queer fat activism and demonstrate its fluidity, possibility, and inclusivity. The text does not have a distinct conclusion, which can make the text feel like it comes to an abrupt end. However, Cooper's final thoughts—in a section interestingly entitled “Who Knows?”—are a call to action, urging individuals to customize their own brand of fat activism and to continue to innovate and participate in the movement in their own creative ways.

Some might take issue with Cooper's argument that fat scholars must be a certain size to be considered fat activists. While Cooper states in the introductory pages that she opposes a universal measure of fat (p. 1), she later argues that fat activist literature is “dominated by normatively-sized researchers” (p. 31) who are necessarily outside of the fat activist community. This could be seen to be problematic because although Cooper is advocating for broader definitions of fat activism, she is simultaneously placing size limitations on who should be or who is able to be considered a fat activist. However, Cooper goes on to clarify that she is not being exclusionary—she is simply wary of “normatively-embodied” (p. 106) feminist scholars claiming ownership of fat experiences. These feminist scholars are often over-represented in the literature whereas fat activists are under-represented or ignored in scholarly discourse. Cooper

seeks to rectify this imbalance by emphasizing the lived experiences and narratives of fat people communicated by fat people and not through the lens of an outsider. Cooper is not advocating for exclusionary politics, rather she is making space for fat activists to re-occupy the fat discourse.

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References

- Butler, J. (2006). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge Press.
- Wann, M. (1998). *Fat!So? Because you don't have to apologize for your size!* Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.