



Fat Studies

An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society

ISSN: 2160-4851 (Print) 2160-486X (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ufts20>

Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement, by Charlotte Cooper

Elliot Director

To cite this article: Elliot Director (2016) Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement, by Charlotte Cooper, *Fat Studies*, 5:2, 228-230

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2016.1145030>



Published online: 27 May 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement, by Charlotte Cooper, Bristol, England, HammerOn Press, 2016.

Charlotte Cooper's newest text, *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*, is many things. It is, in the author's own words, a history of fat activism cobbled together from a "scavenged... mixture of research tactics," including oral history, archival research, autoethnography, and more, situated within a diverse theoretical framework that runs the gamut from queer and feminist theory to critical race and fat studies (p. 39). At times highly theoretical and at others witty and conversational, Cooper's *Fat Activism* traces the varied lineages of fat activism, offering an impassioned argument that not only is fat activism thriving and diverse (if at times troubled), but that it is a "coherent social movement [...] that uses many strategies and operates on infinite fronts" (p. 92). Rigorous, thoughtful research traces this movement from its inception in the late 1960s to its spread across time, continents, and communities, finally examining some of the successes and pitfalls, both of the movement itself and of her own engagement with it at various points. As a scholar and an activist whose introduction to fat activism came with an encounter of both Marilyn Wann's 1998 work *Fat!So?: Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size* and Charlotte Cooper's 1998 volume *Fat and Proud: The Politics of Size*, I ardently wanted Cooper's *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* to be another in a string of revelatory works by Cooper. Perhaps because of this I found myself alternately delighted—and disappointed—by *Fat Activism*. Still, while there are issues and omissions which I would hope to see the author revisit in a future edition, in many places and for the most part, this new work by Charlotte Cooper shines.

I found troubling Cooper's selection and discussion of her research participants; she describes a pool of 31 participants whom she interviewed over a period from 2010 to 2011. Of her sample, all but one identified themselves as queer; five as disabled; two as people of color; two as coming "from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds" and ten as "members of minority ethnic groups, including Jews of Eastern European descent" (p. 43). I struggled to reconcile the presence of only two self-identified participants of color and two multiracial participants with the extensive focus Cooper gives later in this work on the domination of fat activist narratives by white, Western voices. This becomes especially troubling in light of her assertion, some pages earlier, that:

Despite their extensive knowledge and experience of fat activism, there were some people I did not approach to interview because I don't have much of a rapport or relationship with them. This omission highlights some of the tensions that exist within fat activism. (p. 42)

Given the anonymity of all but one of the participants, it is impossible to know what voices were excluded, and which activists were deemed unfit for inclusion because the scholar did not have "much of a rapport or relationship with them." While this certainly demonstrates the tensions that exist within the movement, it also suggests, to this reviewer at least, an unwillingness to do some of the most difficult work in order to obtain a more honest rendition of the story she is telling. Engaging with those who like, agree, or are friendly with us is easy; far more demanding (and, I would argue, even more *necessary*) is engaging with those voices that may counter our own, especially if similar goals are held. The silences that are left as a result of this research decision don't seem to benefit the book at all; far from it, those activists—whoever they are—seem to linger, voiceless, in what must surely be untold histories and moments in the movement. The narratives shared within *Fat Activism* undoubtedly paint crucial parts of the picture

of fat activism; it is my hope that future editions might include more voices and paint an even more vibrant one.

That said, the interviews that Cooper has conducted make this text absolutely outstanding—and moreover, given the passing of some members of the fat activist movement she discusses since she interviewed them for the text, they make this *crucial* to any scholarship on the movement’s early history. Activists’ testimonials (both from interviews and archives) highlight key points in the history of the movement, such as the founding of the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (later renamed the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, or NAAFA), the splintering off of the radical fat feminist group the Fat Underground, and the spread of fat feminism in the United Kingdom with the London Fat Women’s Group in the mid-1980s—give previously unseen insights into a movement that she reveals to be more diverse, fractured, and vibrant than has been demonstrated in previous scholarship. These voices help readers situate the cultural context that helped give rise to the FaT GiRL zine in the 1990s and, perhaps especially important, offer unassailable criticisms of some of the problems that fat activist movements have struggled with from their earliest days, including issues with sexism and misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and racism, as well as healthism and exclusionary practices.

These critical interventions serve as invaluable glimpses into the struggles with which fat activism continues to grapple, and I suggest that they should be *essential* reading for those undertaking fat activist work in the future. For example, Cooper mentions criticism surrounding the 2008 project “1000 Fat Cranes,” wherein activist Wann responded to “a Japanese policy to monitor and fine employees based on their waist size” by encouraging fat activists to fold and send special fat-shaped origami cranes “flying on a peace mission to Japan” (p. 156). Although I had been familiar with the project and the public discussion around it in 2008, I had been uninvolved in and largely unaware of both the circumstances of and the issues with her later “I Stand” poster initiative. Cooper describes this project as emblematic of U.S. activists’ issues with incorporating racist (and at other times, nationalist and imperialist) themes in attempts to further their agendas. Responding to a state-sponsored anti-child-“obesity” campaign in Georgia, Cooper describes the project as having entailed creating

Posters of fat activists with slogans offered in solidarity with the children. At least 389 of these posters were created and disseminated through social media. The original campaign targeted African American communities whilst the subjects in the hundreds of fat activist posters were overwhelmingly white Westerners. The fat activist posters were produced for the benefit of a community that was not included in the project which, ironically, reflects how anti-obesity policy is also usually produced. Scant attention was paid to the impact of the project on the African American children of Georgia and instead I Stand became a missive to an idea of a universalised child from a universalised white Western body of activists. Nuances of race and class were lost, the white Western voice was presumed to speak for all with authority. (pp. 181–182)

Fraught engagements with race and ethnicity are by no means exclusive to the United States, however, and Cooper goes on to offer a compelling personal narrative wherein she describes a 2012 fat activist workshop in Berlin where, despite free food being publicly made available, Roma women and children were chased away and made aware, implicitly if not explicitly, that both food and access were meant for the white workshop attendees and not for the Roma in the vicinity. In both instances, the voice and privilege of white, western fat activists is enshrined and challenges to that enshrinement are met with either resistance or silence.

If there is a central take-away from Cooper's text, it is, perhaps, that: a challenge to activists, not only to find our own voices, but to use them in a way that does not silence others. Although this text at times stumbles, in the end it stands tall as a testament to the survival of a movement even in the face of widespread, sometimes vicious attempts to eradicate it. Charlotte Cooper's *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* may not be the final volume on fat history, but it is, without doubt, an essential one, and should be required reading for all generations of fat activists, both in the academy and beyond it.

References

- Cooper, C. (1998). *Fat and proud: The politics of size*. London: The Women's Press.
Wann, M. (1998). *Fat!So?: Because you don't have to apologize for your size*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.

Elliot Director
American Culture Studies, Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, Ohio
 elliotdirector@gmail.com

© 2016 Taylor & Francis
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2016.1145030>