

Fat Activist Vernacular

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First edition 2016, second revised and expanded edition 2019.

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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' Adipositivity 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.

Alliteration

Literary device that is irresistible to people writing about fat, especially journalists: piling on the pounds, fat fighters, weight watchers, and so on. Maybe they do this because fat is intrinsically funny to write about, not like serious stories or hard news.

Ally

Someone who's supposed to stand by you and help. Often someone who exploits and betrays you, uses you to prop up their own privilege, doesn't understand and doesn't help. Maybe this model for people in social justice is not that great.

Ambivalence

An understandable position. There is no point in being convinced by the strange, cobbled-together ideas of crackpots who know nothing of your life when you can bask in the omnipresent hatred that has saturated your reality for as long as you can remember.

Anal Leakage

A side-effect of certain weight loss wonder drugs. Similarly known as cacking your pants.

Animal names

People try and insult fat people by calling us animal names like pig, elephant, whale, hippo and cow. This is because they do not see us as fully human. Sometimes we call ourselves these names. Some of us have realised that pigs, elephants, whales, hippos and cows are fine creatures and that it is not insulting to be compared to them.

Anorexia and Obesity

Neither opposites nor body types but frequently treated as such and bunched together as problematic behaviours and bodies.

Anti-heroes

The bad, the awkward, the weird. Say hello to La Saraghina in *8½*, Shirley Stoler in *The Honeymoon Killers*, Roland from *Grange Hill*. Better than a hero any day.

Anti-racism

A massive influence on fat activism but rarely acknowledged.

Anxiety

Commonly experienced by fat people because of living in cultures where we are hated.

Apron

An unflattering name for a hanging, flapping belly, a panniculus. A name that has infantile, domestic and feminine connotations.

Archive

It is hard to find out about fat people's histories of resistance, organisation, agency and activism. Fat activists have not been very good at sharing and valuing these important stories. One of the ways you can find out is by seeking out and visiting archives that have fat activist holdings, and donating fat activist materials to archives so that people of the future will have something to build on.

Arse

An impressive weapon if big enough.

As Cool as Fags

Creative response to Cancer Research UK's ugly campaign equating fatness, cigarettes and cancer. Some activists took selfies smoking in front of the poster, which was distributed in bus shelters and billboards in the areas where poor people live. Kay Hyatt made a poster arguing that CRUK were saying that being fat is as cool as smoking.

Aspartame

Controversial, meaning possibly carcinogenic, artificial sweetener endemic to low calorie diet foods and drinks. Massive increase in use in response to the UK sugar tax and now hard to avoid. Foul taste. Preceded by saccharine, which is still used. More recently Stevia has been introduced, allegedly a more natural sweetener. The diet industry is built on chemistry and a confusing relationship to health and accountability.

Assimilating

When you have a lot of experience of being denied things you start to want them really badly. You divert all your energy into getting them and eventually you get a version of them, but it's not quite the real, original thing you wanted. In getting it you have reinforced its value to people who are denied it, the cycle continues, and you have lost what was once special or remarkable about yourself. The things you got were probably not that great anyway and quickly became disappointing once you had them. Fat people want to be able to buy the things that thin people buy, be thought of as sexy and beautiful, be seen as

athletic. These are very limited forms of power. The zenith of our dreams is to become normal and unremarkable, just like everyone else. This author thinks fat people should aim higher.

Assistive Devices

Long-handled shoe-horns, porta-bidets, grabbers, lotion applicators, sock-helpers. Clunky, unglamorous technology made of plastic that helps you to do what you need to do.

Aunt Jemima

Occasionally fat stereotype of black womanhood, the kitchen and food that romanticises slavery.

Axungia Hominis

Human fat used in pharmacological preparations.

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.

Bear

A fat and/or hairy gay man and a social scene by and for the men who are into them.

Beauty Contests

Fat women are commonly denigrated as ugly. Beauty contests are a strategy for challenging that belief. Some beauty contests are more radical than others.

Before/After

A visual cliché. An image of a person over time. The before image depicts someone fat, schlubby, sad, unfulfilled, possibly close to death. The after picture depicts the same person much thinner or more tight of body, glowing with health, optimistic, upright, looking towards the future. The after person may be standing inside one leg of a large pair of trousers, or holding up a large garment that they used to wear and which is now too big for them. The garment is usually vile and they are now better dressed in comparison. A very powerful fantasy of transformation that is wielded mercilessly by the diet industry and plays on people's anxiety, fatphobia and investment in an idea of bodies as the product of wise marketplace choices. A false fantasy, the reality being more like: before/after/before again but fatter in new clothes you've had to buy because nothing fits you any more/after the second before/before the second after but fatter in new clothes you've had to buy because nothing fits you any more and looking ashamed for having failed/after the third before/before the third after but fatter in new clothes you've had to buy because nothing fits you any more and looking increasingly ashamed/repeat repeat/gallstones operation/etc etc until death or deciding to stop the charade.

Behaviour Trackers

Wearable digital technology that sells data about what you eat, where you go, how you move, what your insides do, how you sleep and what you drink with companies who want to sell you more stuff. Their aim is to transform every part of your bodily activity into marketable data. Online interface does not include representations of fat, old, poor, ill, disenfranchised or disabled people, or those injured by doing too much of the wrong kind of exercise. Beloved by health insurance companies, corporate employers and Tory politicians.

Being Weighed

A political moment, a shaming, an opportunity for data harvesting. You are allowed to say no.

Belly

The part of your body that's under your tits and above your privates. Can be any size, shape, texture, colour, levels of hairiness, sweatiness. A place where fat accumulates on some people. Sometimes flops around, sometimes is bold and stout. Sometimes makes gurgling noises. Sometimes has creases and stretch marks. Sometimes has a mind of its own and will not behave. A delightful, gorgeous thing, a source of physical power much maligned and fretted over.

Beryl Cook

Popular British artist known for depictions of saucy fat suburbanites and working class culture.

BHM

Big Handsome Men. A heterosexual masculine equivalent to BBW only not really equivalent because of sexism and patriarchy.

Big

Another one of those words that people substitute for Fat because they're not ready to go there.

Big Bones

Fat people who attribute their heaviness to a heavy skeleton might be saying so just to see how angry and upset it makes you.

Big Calves

It remains hard to find things to wear that fit over big calves. This is why you sometimes find fat people in shops staring quizzically at knee-high boots and knee-socks.

Big Pharma

Mega-money spinning industry and, not to sound paranoid, but it influences a lot of things.

Bigotogenic

Creating bigotry, as in The Bigotogenic Environment (suggested by Lucy Aphramor @Lucy_Wellnow).

Bikini Body

Someone wearing a bikini.

Binge Eating Disorder

Some but not all fat people suffer from BED. The assumption that fat people are fat because of a disordered relationship to food is widespread and treated as a progressive approach. Unfortunately, the fatphobia inherent in these assumptions means that fat people who do struggle with BED are also likely to struggle to get adequate and appropriate care.

Biomsochism

The act of punishing yourself with your biomass, usually involving bathroom scales (suggested by Dr Andrew Dickson @AndrewDickson13).

Blame

The idea that it is someone or something's fault that there are so many fat people. Blame is usually assigned to fat people, but now correspondingly parents of any size. It is considered enlightened amongst public health proponents to blame the food industry or the built environment, but it is not enlightened at all because they still want to get rid of us and are peeved that we exist. Also, the idea that it is someone or something's fault that there is so much fatphobia: the media which bombards us with images, the fashion industry, social media. See explanations, excuses and denial.

Bloated

What celebrities become when they get fat, especially if they are addicted to drugs. One step before death.

The Blob

Fat activist name for I Can Not Help the Way I Feel, a sculpture of a fat figure by John Isaac which, for about ten years, was the centrepiece of the Wellcome Collection's display on Obesity. The gallery encouraged visitors to take and publish selfies with it. Isaac, a thin guy, specialises in grotesque sculptures of fat figures, including fat bodies that look as though they have fallen from a great height and splattered on a pavement. Following protests in 2016, the sculpture was retired and the Wellcome, one of the biggest medical museums in the world, issued a private apology for their part in perpetuating fatphobia.

Blood Pressure Cuff

If you have a fat arm the blood pressure cuff may not fit properly and you might get a false reading. This has repercussions for fat people's health and medical knowledge about fat

people, blood pressure and heart disease. It is hard to self-advocate in a clinic, but better in the long term if you can get medical equipment that fits you properly and gives an accurate reading. Fat blood pressure cuffs in clinics are often branded with weight loss drug names.

Marge Swanson, a fat acceptance activist who helped pioneer the concept of thin privilege, is dead from a heart attack. She was 34 years old. Swanson championed the notion that weight and health have no inherent connection. Originally published in 2016, *Fat Activist Vernacular* is a "collection of words, phrases and concepts exploring fat queer feminist activist sensibility" with 610 entries making up the 2019 edition. Expanding beyond bio-medical concepts of fat, Dr. Cooper's work shows the subjectivity of language and how it is constructed via our own positionality and experience. In addition to reading excerpts from her book, there will also be a slideshow, singing, and a Q&A. *fat-activist-vernacular* is a collection of words that subvert power from the medicalized language used to talk about fat people, and it may be interesting to discuss with clients. *Body Positivity*. Connie Sobczak and Elizabeth Scott (see Scott, this issue) founded *The Body Positive*, whose mission is to teach "people how to reconnect to their innate body wisdom so they can have more balanced, joyful self-care, and a. The fat acceptance movement (also known as fat pride, fat empowerment, and fat activism) is a social movement seeking to change anti-fat bias in social attitudes by raising awareness among the general public about the obstacles faced by fat people, experiencing the stigma of obesity. Areas of contention include the aesthetic, legal, and medical approaches to people whose bodies are fatter than the social norm.