

Barnard Fat Activism Panel 2016 Notes

- Hi everyone! I'm excited to talk to you all today about fat fashion and an intersectional fat activist project I've been working on for the past 4+ years called the Big Fat Flea.
- For those of you who don't already know, what is the Big Fat Flea?
 - The Big Fat Flea is a fat fashion rummage sale selling clothes sizes L and up
 - All of our clothes are donated to us by individuals and by small plus size clothing shops, and everything is sold for \$10 or less
 - All of the proceeds go to NOLOSE, which as Rebecca mentioned, is a fat and queer organization that puts on an annual conference, and the funds from the Flea mostly go toward scholarships for folks to attend who are under-represented in fat community. Namely, at NOLOSE, that is POC, working class fatties, people with disabilities, superfat folks, and trans folks.
 - The Flea is all volunteer run. Over 100 people volunteer to make the Flea happen, in the time leading up to the Flea, and the day of the Flea. And the core organizing team has had between 4 and 7 people.
 - The Big Fat Flea was founded in 2002 by long time fat activist Deb Malkin, who started it as a fundraiser for the NOLOSE conference scholarships that I mentioned.
- So, before I get into the details of what the Flea is and why it's an intersectional fat activist project, I want to talk about fat fashion and fat fashion communities.
- I've been involved in fat fashion communities for over 15 years now, including as a co-moderator of the fatshionista livejournal community, a participant in many other different online fat fashion communities, a guest podcaster on fat fashion, and I've also written articles about my experience as a fat queer Asian femme in the fat activist movement and fat fashion community.

- In my experience, the fat fashion industry and many online fat fashion communities have historically catered to exactly who you might expect - white, class privileged, cis women who are on the smaller spectrum of fat, and who have hourglass shapes.
- Most fat fashion blogs and online fatshion communities are either myopically political or staunchly “apolitical” (which we all know does not exist and is just a coded way of saying that oppression runs free in those spaces), and when they do try to delve into even just the politics of being fat, or the politics of fat fashion, it almost never goes well. Attempts to discuss something like appropriation in fatshion or whether an item of clothing is racist generally goes horribly and/or explodes and eventually destroys these online communities. I’ve seen it happen time and time again. So, with a few exceptions, online fat fashion communities pretty much have a terrible track record on addressing oppression period, let alone operating from an intersectional fat politic.
- Although there has been an incredible upswell in the voices and representation of non-normative fat bodies online, there is still a huge dearth of both representation and authorship by people who don’t fall into the “acceptably fat” category.
- In person, there are even less options for fat people to gather intentionally. And on the rare occasion that there are fat fashion gatherings, very few of those gatherings have any sort of intersectional or social justice-based orientation.
- So, there is a huge gap and a huge loss of opportunity out there too.
- Because to me, fat fashion communities, both online and in person, are places with a huge potential for politicizing people:
 - 1. We all have to wear clothes, and most of us fat people have to buy them.
 - 2. Fat clothes are hard to find, so there is already lots of organic resource sharing and desire to know more about fat clothing and fat fashion online.
- So, I wanted to ground us all in that context to explain more about the state of fat fashion and why the Flea is so unique.

- When I first attended the Big Fat Flea in the mid 2000s, I was blown away. Like many people who have attended the Flea, it was the first politicized in-person fat space I had ever been in.
- And to this day, the Flea is still one of the only in-person fat fashion events with a social justice aim.
- I started organizing the Flea in 2012, and at that time, it was still called the Fat Girl Flea.
- Although much hard work had been put into the Flea in previous years, the core organizing team had an ambitious vision of how it could be even better.
- We wanted the Flea to not just sell people clothes, but to also be a politicized space grounded in our shared intersectional fat politics, and to reflect back the joy and beauty we saw people seeing in themselves
 - The Big Fat Flea is an incredible space, and not just a place where people go to buy clothes; it's one where people cheer each other on, where people are eager and excited to volunteer, where shoppers and volunteers gleefully become personal shoppers for a day to help others find their dream garment, and where fat people have a space with mostly other fat people in the room where they can be proudly, unapologetically fat and in various stages of dress and undress in a public place and be validated and celebrated for that.
- So, what did we do to make the Flea an even more liberatory space?
- First, we changed the name from the Fat Girl Flea to the Big Fat Flea. Previously, the Flea mostly sold clothes on the feminine spectrum, and it was really important to us that there be access for people of all gender expressions, and since then, we have worked to build out our “masculine” clothing section too.
- In the past, the Flea has had group dressing rooms, which for a lot of folks was a place of joy and fat love and appreciation. But we also recognized that there are a million reasons why someone might not want to change in front of others, so we made private changing rooms in addition to the group dressing rooms.

- We also started doing an annual photo shoot with volunteer photographers, for anyone who wanted to come model some of the clothes, and we used these photos all over our social media and as a way to promote the Flea and build excitement.
- This, for me, is one of my favorite parts of making the Flea happen. Although we certainly have room to grow, especially around age and ability diversity, we have done a really amazing job at creating intersectional fat representation on a larger platform than many of these folks might be able to get themselves. Some of our models have never so much as taken a selfie before, and others are frequent posters to fat fashion groups, but through the wider social media reach of the Flea, we've been able to provide a much bigger platform for a wider range of fat beauty and fat fashion. This is important to me and to the other organizers, because it broadens the spectrum of who is reflected as beautiful and fashionable in fat media and who is worthy of being seen.
- Other things we've done to make the Flea more accessible and intersectional:
 - One of the co-organizers during my first Flea in 2012 was named Taueret Davis, and she sadly passed away last year. So after Taueret's passing, we started a scholarship for fat, black, and queer-identified folks, as Taueret's identities as black, queer, and fat were integral parts of how she related to the world and as such, her organizing. The scholarship is a \$100 shopping voucher for clothes, and it's done as a raffle so that anyone who ID's as black, fat and queer is eligible to enter.
 - We also started having accessibility volunteers a few years ago, who help shoppers physically and mentally navigate the building, the lines, and the actual space, because it can be overwhelming. We also let shoppers using wheelchairs, scooters and other mobility devices skip the long lines because the building we've been using has a complicated, circuitous accessible route.
 - We train all of our volunteers on how to stop fat shaming onsite, how not to use gendered greetings, how to make sure everyone

knows that everyone is welcome to shop in all clothing sections, and how to help people find the clothing of their dreams without making assumptions or fat negative comments about garments being “slimming” or “hiding problem areas.”

- A couple of years ago, we opened up the last hour of the Flea to both clients and social workers at social service agencies. If you're homeless and living in the shelter system, donated plus sized clothes can be really hard to find. So, after we close down the Flea to general shoppers, folks come in for the last hour and take as many clothes as they want, for free. And there are always so many clothes leftover, so we hope to expand the social service hour even more in future years.
- The Flea also keeps growing, and last year, we grossed about \$27,000 before expenses, the proceeds of which went directly to NOLOSE.
- So, that's the Flea in a nutshell. I proselytize it so hard because there is really no other space quite like it, and each year, it becomes more accessible, wider reaching, and I think creates a rare, politically-focused, radical fat shopping space that celebrates many different kinds of fat bodies and fat fashion. And of course if you're in NYC or can travel here, we would love to have all of you attend and volunteer!
- We don't have a date yet for this year's Big Fat Flea, but you can find us on Facebook as the Big Fat Flea and at www.bigfatflea.com

How do you see your work address narratives of desirability, aesthetics, and fatness in an intersectional way?

- The Big Fat Flea operates from the concept that every fat body is worthy of access to cute, well fitting, and affordable clothing.
- We aspire to have that represented in the types of clothing we have in wide ranges of sizes and gender expressions.
- We aspire to improve every year in the Flea's access to all fat bodies.

- We also try to showcase all kinds of fat bodies and fat styles in our pre-Flea model shoots as well as the photos we take of folks onsite at the actual Flea, and this I think is one of the main ways that we address the narrative around aesthetics and desirability, because we showcase our models, many or perhaps even most of whom fall out of what kinds of fat bodies are typically seen as desirable or fashionable.
- Like I mentioned before, we train volunteers on how to make everyone feel welcomed in the space and to not use fat-negative or gender policing comments that often reinforce narratives about how a fat person “should” look.
- We also know that intersectionality isn’t achieved on accident or just by virtue of good intentions, so we do things like create specific policies and practices around representation of our models, how and to whom we outreach, and who we put in specific volunteer positions, all of which help us make the Flea more and more intersectional and far-reaching each year.

What are your organizing or collaborating models?

- Our core organizing team consists of anywhere between 4-7 people since I’ve been organizing with the Flea, and we all have different roles and the same amount of say in our organizing.
- There is no head leader, so the decision making body is the core organizing team, and although we aren’t a consensus body, we work towards it and almost always get there.
- We have “super volunteers” who may take on specific projects or sub-areas of work and who get a lot of input into how their pieces of work get done.
- We also try to solicit ideas and feedback from the community of shoppers and volunteers whenever we can.

Where do you see growing edges for the movement or your work? What are the next steps you want to see?

The Flea isn't perfect by any means, and there are so many ways we want to be better.

- For example, and one of the things that comes to mind first, is that because being on the core organizing team requires a lot of one's free time, and because we try to meet in person when we can, it means that only people who have access to that kind of time and space can organize with us in that kind of leadership role. That means that our organizing team has historically had an over-representation of white, class privileged, smaller fat cis women.
- We need to be better about creating spaces and access for transgender folks, especially for transfeminine fat folks.
- In terms of access, limited funding and the desire to send as many of our proceeds as possible to NOLOSE means that finding a NYC-based venue big enough and centrally located enough has been near impossible.
- We also can't be scent free because the clothes are donated, and to launder the many thousands of secondhand clothing pieces and accessory items we receive would be prohibitively expensive.
- We want to expand our social services hour and make it more widely known that fat folks in need can access high quality, free clothing.
- We also have huge fantasies of the many other things that the Flea could be with more time and resources, one of those dreams being creating resource guides for how people can put on Big Fat Fleas in their cities.

What does intersectional mean to each of you in your own work, fat activism in your work.

- To me, intersectional fat activism means that fat is never just fat. Fat is mediated by race, gender, ability, sexuality, class, and a million other things. As a fat, queer, Asian, biracial, middle class, cis femme woman, my fat activism can never not take those things into account, and the movement will never be successful without operating from the position that fat is just one part of the way that so many of us experience the world and oppression.

- The Flea itself could probably be more profitable and have a higher visibility if we only used conventionally fat attractive models, or if we were more aggressive about going after wealthy, white shoppers who currently make up much of the plus sized clothing market (or at least that's what we're told to believe), but those folks will never be our priority.
- And again and again, I see fat communities and fat fashion communities in particular, really fail to prioritize and represent non-normative fat bodies, and also fail to be politicized. And again and again, though several have tried, most of these spaces mostly fail at becoming places for politicization around fat as an intersectional identity. So, to me, it's important that we use the space that we have that is so widely loved, to create a joyful, celebratory fat space that is also intersectional in the way that we operate.

2013 Big Fat Flea

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2014 Big Fat Flea



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10am-8pm, Sat 3 10am-6pm, Sun
4 11am-4pm.

A sale for curvaceous bods

Big Fat Flea

This plus-size market features
both new and vintage clothing
in sizes large and up for ladies
and men, and guess what? No item
is priced above \$10, which makes
the admission fee (\$10) at the door
worth it. You'll find goodies from
awesome brands such as ASOS,
Dorothy Perkins, Carmakoma,
Torrid and more on the racks. And if
you get there 30 minutes early
(10:30am) and pay \$25, you can
shop before the crowds hit. All
proceeds benefit Nolose, a body-
empowerment organization. 40
Washington Sq South (bigfatflea.com). Sun 4 11am-5pm.

**Compiled by Jennifer Picht. Have
a sale or shopping event? Email
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2015 Big Fat Flea

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