



## **Towards a Fatter Insurrection: Introduction to a Revolutionary Body Liberation Movement, by Shane Burley**

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After Jessica parked, she was too busy juggling her phone and keys to notice the crowd of teenage boys moving toward her vehicle. As she got out she immediately recognized what was happening. It wasn't the first time. She began walking to the café as quickly as possible and they began hurling insults about her weight and appearance. "Hey you, I bet you're just starving, bitch!" "Watch out, an elephant is coming through!" The lines turned aggressively sexual as the door closed behind her.

She waited at her table in front of an empty cup of coffee for almost two hours. The shop was getting close to closing, yet the staff could see why she was hiding and gave her a few minutes after they switched off the sign. The boys had decided to stay, waiting for her to come out. She gathered her things and decided that she had to get back to her car as quickly as possible. As she exited the building she looked at the several yards between the doors as what it was: a

public walk of humiliation. Their words were followed by pieces of trash, some throwing scraps of food that strayed across her face, hiding what tears were starting to form. As they surrounded her the fury of objects became a sort of violent pornography, covering the face of a person they saw as nothing but a parasite. Threats of rape, which they said she should welcome, were only a small piece of the desecration. When she closed the car door she was covered with smears of rotten fast food, and she could hardly hear her own sobbing over the laughter of the teenage jury.

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The fat liberation movement came out of the 1970s, given strength by the rise of feminist voices, liberation-oriented queers, of anti-war punks, and social ecologists, in a time when challenging even the most fundamental types of injustice seemed to blow with the wind. (1) It was swallowed up in the consumerism of the 1980s, the obsessive yo-yo dieting that became branded and turned into a middle-income commodity, and in narratives like the “obesity epidemic” and the food justice culture around anti-GMO and processed food activism. Today we are seeing a strike back, the movement climbing up out of the recesses of a fragmented past and demanding recognition.

Fat bodies exist. They cannot be eliminated. They will no longer be subject to ridicule, hatred, and displacement.

The ideas implicit to body liberation are steeped in revolutionary meta-politics, when we see how deeply they tie to systems of oppression and stratification. So where is our ‘fat anarchism?’

At its core, anarchism is concerned with the abolition of hierarchy. The smashing of white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and other forms of social division where difference is only defined in terms of “better” or “worse.” This modern world of late capitalism forces hierarchies as the fundamental crux of social organization.

Like anything in class society, our bodies are ranked. Bodies are not just seen as natural to their person, but signs of the successful behavior of the soul inside them. Fat bodies arrive low on the social ladder with a host of designations implying that they are the result of poor life choices and that they cannot be desired. In this way, a sort of “body meritocracy” takes root in our social relations. This myth, similar to the standard meritocracy that teaches us that people are poor because they lack intrinsic worth and effort, tells us that our bodies are the result of our behavior. Skinny bodies, those near the top, are earned with superhuman feats of self-control and conviction. Fat bodies display a lack of self-respect, the inability to control basic urges, and of course, a disregard for personal health and hygiene. This stratification models itself as a class, with those on the top, those on the bottom, and many operating somewhere in between. The person with the fat body will see that body type as something to be overcome so

as to be welcomed into a “real life,” one where people see them as rightfully desirable, welcome, and “good.”

The derision of the fat body is imposed from the outside. That is to say, this social exclusion comes from feelings that others have towards the body, the ability to fit in clothes and spaces without ridicule, and the freedom to have access to institutions like fair healthcare, jobs, and secure relationships. In the rare instances that fat bodies are allowed into an acceptable light, they have to mimic the proportions of the skinny body to be one of the “good fat bodies.” This would mean, for women, to have fat bodies that accentuate sexualized features like breasts and backside. If a fat body has too much weight in areas like thighs or stomach, this is seen as a special affront, and treated with disdain.

### **Fat Like Me**

In the first world, our conventional discussion of bodies is steeped in an essentialist idea of what they are. Fat bodies are inherently non-beautiful because they represent some type of unhealthy lifestyle, which can then be traced back to some debased understanding of evolutionary psychology that says fat bodies are a signal of a poor mating partner. Since it is pretty well understood that there is subjectivity in appearance and aesthetics, why have we not risen above the idea that body type contains a standard of universal attractiveness?

For centuries, fat bodies were seen as ideal, associated with wealth and aristocracy, symbolizing a Godlike nobility and personal virtue. It was even thought at times that female bodies, the ones that have always been most closely policed, could not become thin unless it was through a *failure* of virtue. Skinny bodies were associated with malnutrition and poor health, much in the same way that fat bodies are today. Women would attempt to gain weight as much as possible, a thing we still see in less food-plentiful tribal cultures in the Global South. Both then and now, in cultures that worshiped the larger bodies, they were seen as natural and good, indicative of good breeding. As industrial agriculture and economic exchange made food more plentiful, the body type associated with wealth changed. Instead, fat bodies were associated with “vice eating,” non-nutritious and high-fat foods, and the inability to spend time maintaining a body type that is not natural to their body chemistry. With the first diet books being released in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the advertising made clear what the white, wealthy body should look like. This was opposed to the curvy bodies that they associated with “primitive” cultures, low incomes, and, especially, non-white peoples. (2)

Today, fatness is usually reserved to the classes of commoners that have to focus on work, family, and maintaining an existence rather than constantly sculpting their bodies to meet expected standards. We are presented with images of actors and celebrities who have the ability to shift their appearance like human chameleons, though they clearly have the financial freedom to focus on crafting their appearance in ways that the working class does not.

## Shame Disguised as Health

The counter-argument is that fat bodies are simply unhealthy. That means they perform poorly, die early, and lead to a general feeling of ill health. The evidence about the relationship between weight and health is mixed, but it would be wrong to completely ignore a correlation between these things. Body weight can certainly sometimes both affect health outcomes and/or be a sign of illness. However, questions of health are irrelevant to the issue of body shaming.



Concern over the “obesity epidemic,” while in some respects valid, subtly shifts the focus to appearance and body type rather than health. In the toxic food culture in which we live, there is a clear “epidemic of ill health,” and unhealthy weight gain is a part. However, to label this simply as an “obesity epidemic” is to reduce ill health to an entire swath of the population rather than looking at the complexity of the issue, which involves disparities in healthcare, nutrition access, and that it is specific illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes that is causing a morbid population.

Fat shaming is directed against the *appearance* of fat bodies. A body cannot be scanned for diabetes or heart disease simply by looking at it. So the emphasis on health claims is spurious at best. The reality is that discomfort over fat bodies is a learned response that is provided legitimacy through the correlation of fat and ill health. The fat body is seen as “deviant” and disgraceful, something that should not exist because bodies must fit within a set ideal. When the social degradation of fat bodies happens it is usually paired with judgments about the body’s appearance, and the person’s lifestyle is subject to intervention in ways that other people would not be. If health were the issue, then tobacco use, reckless driving, sun tanning — all of which have a more direct line between the behavior and ill health consequences —

would be the objects of extreme social shaming. But this is simply not the purpose of the shaming. It is not designed to change behavior that could be medically harmful, but instead intended to shove a person from view.

While fat bodies do hold a certain core in a system of “body meritocracy” and hierarchy, it is not just fat bodies that see this kind of marginalization. People who have experienced extreme weight loss, have stretch marks, have genetic differences such as differently appearing limbs, women who have unshaved body hair or lack hair on their head, and a whole number of other points of body diversity are all separated from the pack as deviations.

For people with dramatically different body presentations, such as missing or altered limbs, the stigma against fat intersects with ableism in key areas. The person is often seen with pity and everything is done to “fix” their difference rather than engage with it. This position of pity often leaves them forcefully desexualized or fetishized, but never allowed into socially standard relationships. In careers, education, and other institutions of social production, they are usually seen as a liability. Entry into the upper echelons of success is all but prohibited.

The appearance of disabled bodies operates as a motivating factor in this process of marginalization: how the sight of these bodies makes the viewer feel, whether it fills them with a sense of charity or disgust. While the emotions may be different, they all work to single out the unacceptable body and remove it from polite society.

Fat bodies are seen as “abnormal” because we have been led to believe that fat is, first, a choice, and second, a bad one. Fat bodies, however, have always existed and usually exist despite the behavior of the person. Outside of eating disorders, which are real and can certainly lead to unhealthy changes in weight, behavioral changes seldom allow one to fundamentally change their body type. Weight is often fixed and determined within a certain range (usually 20-30 pounds). (3) It is actually the body’s *appearance* that will push them into situations of shaming. The proportions of a person’s body are something that they hold even less control over, yet it is this set of proportions that often raises or lowers the viewer’s perception of their weight as healthy or not. The disgust and anger that people with negative attitudes towards people of size feel is not a response to an “unhealthy lifestyle,” but a program that they internalized through social conditioning.

We don’t need to change our bodies because of your feelings; we need to smash the systems that teach you to feel that way.

### **Banned from Entry**

Social interactions require cultural short-hands to read and interpret people — cues as to how we are supposed to understand a person by their clothing, behavior, voice, and general appearance. The ability to see and register patterns is a common feature of human psychology,

but it is also one that is infinitely malleable by the social systems we interact with daily. Fat people are often stereotyped to be lazy, otherwise wouldn't they just work that weight off? Since fat bodies aren't seen as attractive, they must have poor hygiene, too. They are immediately associated with poverty, disability, and other forms of social stigma since there has to be some explanation for why they don't simply drop the weight and all the shame that comes with it.

This baggage is carried by all fat people, to varying degrees, into all social institutions they encounter. Fat people often do not have access to more current and fashionable clothing, which further marginalizes them in social and professional circles and more easily makes them the target of ridicule. People with weight above the standard are less likely to finish school, less likely to get hired than other candidates with similar credentials, much more likely to be discriminated against in housing, and certainly less likely to have medical issues taken seriously by health professionals. These are not trivial matters for a person's life outcomes, but serious barriers that only build on many of the other hurdles that working class people face. It is not just anecdotal, but statistical: research shows that young fat women make less money, are more likely to live in poverty, complete less school, and are less likely to get married than other women. (4) Studies show that "obese" women will be less likely to be considered for supervisory positions in the workplace, and that reports of violence and abuse attributed to weight will be taken less seriously. Studies have found that anyone viewed as obese is seen as being "less competent, less productive, not industrious, disorganized, indecisive, inactive, less successful, less conscientious, less likely to take the initiative, less aggressive, less likely to persevere at work, less ambitious, more mentally lazy and less self disciplined" than their middle or low-weight counterparts, with all other factors being equal. (5)

Healthcare poses one of the most distinctive challenges for people of size as their health concerns often get reduced to their weight. This was one of the primary issues that began to get raised as fat acceptance resurfaced in the 1990s, where people are forced to endure some of the most humiliating treatment imaginable just to have their health concerns and medical conditions treated seriously. This pattern has led many fat people to retreat from regular healthcare even when treatment is critical.

The desire to remove one's self from inspection is not just for fear of humiliation, but of the potential for violent harm. For people who do have bodies above "acceptable" size, those with very large bodies are thrown into a world of physical danger. Violence against large people is especially common, both in terms of random attacks in public areas and from abusive treatment from partners, family members, and colleagues. The hatred of very fat bodies is still acceptable in general social discourse, to a certain degree.

This type of discrimination and cultural hatred does not happen in a vacuum. We have a system of capitalist exchange that feeds these feelings and profits from suffering. By creating

spaces where marginalized body types cannot go, a company can ensure that this place will feel exclusive and be associated with privileged lifestyles and appearances. Fashionable clothing companies purposely create clothing only in smaller sizes and hire people of a certain size so that they can maintain the image of being associated with a more privileged appearance. One would assume that including more diverse sizes would increase profits, but it would also undermine the brand identity. Brands like Hollister, Abercrombie, and American Apparel would not benefit from having their clothing seen on fat bodies, as it would lower the desirability of that clothing. Being associated with fatness in any way makes you take on the social qualities of fatness, and what company would voluntarily destroy their well-crafted brand mythology?

Beyond this, institutionalized fatphobia has generated an entire economic sector based solely on the fear of fat that people are instilled with. Weight loss and exercise products, remarkably elaborate feminine hygiene products like genital deodorant, and a whole host of dietary and supplement options are based on this fear.

As companies maximize profits by shrinking costs, this process affects fat bodies in stark ways. The most common example is on airlines, where seats, bathrooms, and aisles are constantly on the size decline. This is because of economic pressures of competition between airlines, but it particularly affects people of size. There is no imperative to include fat bodies in their services with equal access, and instead they institute expensive and humiliating policies like forcing some passengers to buy an extra seat. In a world where body difference was an important concept, the allocations of resources would keep this in mind, instead of cutting costs at the expense of certain body types. In this context, fat bodies are seen as an exception to “normal” access and there is no reason that they should remodel their designs to allow bodies that are seen as voluntary creations of a person’s excess.

This fear and disgust over fat bodies is in the economic interest of not just a few marginal companies, but entire industries that play in concert to sell us back our anxieties and identities.

### **Thin Privilege?**

Thin privilege is the concept that in terms of weight, thinness, as the ideal, is ascribed certain benefits. This often takes the form of simply not having to think and deal with many things that fat people do. Clothes are accessible and normally priced. Your sexuality is not reduced to a fetish. Access to spaces is more universal. You are more likely to get a higher grade on a presentation in school, receive a promotion at work, or be seen by a partner as a candidate for a serious relationship. (6)

There is a very narrow margin of acceptable weight, especially for women. For women, there very rarely is any kind of body privilege. Being too skinny opens you up to ridicule for mental instability, temperament, and, again, appearance. Much of this is tied to the historical

treatment of eating disorders like Anorexia, which play on an ableist fear of mental illness as well as the notion of the “hysterical female.”

Body shaming is always a disgusting practice, but for fat people it is a particular social stigma and institutional form of oppression. Much of the difference here is about the centrality that fat oppression plays in the creation of a body meritocracy, though all types of bodies that do not fit into a general frame of “acceptability” are objects of shaming. In general, people who are not fat continue to be haunted by the possibility of *becoming* fat. This kind of fear can lock people into a perpetual cycle of self-hatred, where satisfaction with appearance is suppressed in favor of destructive criticism, perpetual panic, and an ingrained feeling of worthlessness.

### **Gendered Bodies**

Ashley spent most of the day carefully applying, removing, and re-applying make-up. She put most of her new outfit, an expensive pairing of a dress and necklace, on her credit card. She certainly couldn't afford it until her next payday. She was still shocked that someone like him could have asked her out, and she was going to do everything she could do to make this go just as she had dreamed. It was a honk of the car horn that called for her, rather than a knock at the door. She jumped into his car with a smile she couldn't hide, and he seemed happy to see her. As he began driving he started telling her just how much he got turned on by “fat chicks.” It was important, however, that she never tell anyone and that his family and friends never find out. He could never have anyone in his life know what he was doing with someone like her. She caught her reflection in the mirror, dressed in expensive clothes, manicured make-up, a smear in her mascara forming in the corner of her eye. She could see they were no longer going to the restaurant.

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Many of these issues were first raised in parallel to Third-Wave Feminism, often called “fat feminism.” This correlation between the two movements makes sense, with the key role that gender has in fat identity, and from the way value is ascribed to women in a hetero-patriarchal culture: through their bodies. Fat bodies are seen to have had their desirability plucked from them, and therefore fat female bodies are special objects of scorn because the value of the women is directly correlated to her ability to be a satisfactory sexual object.

Women's bodies are regulated by society in a number of ways, from shrinking access to abortion to the way that sexual assault is justified based on a woman's appearance, and the limitations placed on fat female bodies extends this a step further. The fear of fat is an incredibly motivating factor in women's lives because of the messages forced on them about the dangers of being desexualized by gaining weight. When a woman's body is deemed as fat it is then “fair game” for ridicule since she has failed to live up to her social role, and men then feel that their feelings of discomfort with fat bodies are justifiable.



For women, sexual violence is a consistent feature of the modern world. For fat women, this risk is only amplified. Men often feel entitled to women's bodies broadly, but this is especially true for fat female bodies. There is a sense of logic that fat female bodies do not exist in the same world of rules and regulations because they are lower on the social hierarchy. With fat women especially, men may feel free from any social expectations to behave respectfully and can often treat their partners in humiliating and degrading ways.

While fat bodies are systemically desexualized, they are also *over* sexualized. Because fat bodies are considered "deviant," sex with them feels as though it is inherently kinky. Sex with fat bodies is often fetishized, stripped of its normal social function, and allowed to exist only as a sort of lurid objectification of a "strange" body type.

Heterosexual men maintain a special social position in relation to their partners as they are often judged by the perceived "quality" of those women, which is usually reduced to their sex appeal. If they have a fat partner this creates a crisis of presentation, one where they potentially receive less status. A fat partner may force them to be seen as a fetishist, and it is not uncommon for men to hide their attraction to fat bodies by using fetish-oriented language to prove they have no emotional investment in such a partner. Hogging, the practice of having sex with a woman one finds unappealing, is a disgusting show of male superiority, and yet is often a cover that men create to find socially acceptable outlets for the diversity of their sexual desires. (7)

Fatness allows men to alter their sexual narratives about a woman where the stereotypical ideas of "what a woman should be" are destroyed when that woman appears outside of those narrow body expectations. It is not uncommon to have women of a certain size accused of same-sex attraction or of being transgender. Fatness is seen as non-normative, a variation on what acceptable and proper bodies are, and therefore seen as a form of deviancy. The same is true for non-heteronormative sexual activity, whether same gender or gender fluid sexuality, and because they both share this sense of deviancy, many men in the dominant culture find both the marginalized body type and sexual activity as indistinguishable.

For trans and gender non-conforming people this equation adds a whole new layer of complexity when their bodies fail to meet the standard that is socially expected of their perceived gender. Interesting binaries begin to form here, where often the more masculine a trans person appears, then the less likely they are to be seen as "fat." Shifting gender presentation shifts not only the experience of gender oppression, but also the oppression related to size, as the size of men is not given the same consideration as the size of women. (8)

### **Intersections at the Love Handles**

Fat itself is unique as a form of oppression since it does not completely mirror any other form of oppression, nor is it just an adjunct to another form of victimization. What this means is

that it stands in intersection with oppressed identities as an individual plank of both marginalization and struggle: intersectional in purest form. It is through this position of intersectionality that we can start to build a movement that sees struggles as having complementary aspects, and who all share the goals of overthrowing a power structure that was not built with us in mind.



Domination based on body type is an important feature of stratified society. This is part of the way that society displays who is morally superior, who is of an implicit or explicit noble caste, and who has more sexual value. As mentioned before, this has not been universally centered on one body type, but today it is the fat body that makes up the center of this social hierarchy. To look at the way that body oppression plays itself out, it shares dynamics with other forms of oppression in that it has institutional aspects (the institutional and structural barriers that people of size face) and interpersonal ones (the anger and violence depicted towards fat people).

Naturally, we need to acknowledge that no form of oppression is “like another;” so we cannot cleanly compare body oppression with other kinds of victimization. The worry here is that to say “yes, it is like racism” will undermine the serious legacy and violence of white supremacy. Instead, we need to remember that having another point at which to challenge social hierarchy and oppression does not take away from the experience of other oppressed groups. It is also to say that yes, this is a distinctly oppressed group whose experience lies in a whole range of social systems and experiences, and it directly ties to other types of oppression. The existence of fat female bodies intersects body oppression with patriarchy in creating a wholly distinct narrative, as it does across the myriad of identities that society has never viewed as fully equal. The process of identifying a revolutionary body politic is in locating the actors in the struggle.

This means that fat itself needs to be a political identity, one whereby people experiencing this label have common interests. That is not to say that the interests of the intersecting identities that fat people may also hold are to be suppressed or devalued, but that in terms of fat identity there is a shared interest in overthrowing the interpersonal and structural degradation they face. This also erupts into a growing fat culture where a new social space has been opened up, which has been seen around fashion, food, health and fitness, and sex. This has also been matched with the radical wing of the fat acceptance movement acknowledging that they have a stake in the liberation of all oppressed people.(9)

The foundation of intersectionality in the anarchist context is that movements are only strengthened by the development of other movements that can “intersect” with them. These together make up a growing anarchist praxis, where one social struggle benefits from the analysis and organizing of another. Jen Rogue and Deric Shannon point out that it is important to see the liberation of all oppressed groups as relevant, and it is counter-productive to deny the necessity of one movement from inside another.

Proponents of intersectionality, then, argue that all struggles against domination are necessary components for the creation of a liberatory society. It is unnecessary to create a totem pole of importance out of social struggles and suggest that some are “primary” while others are “secondary” or “peripheral” because of the complete ways that they intersect and inform one another. Further, history has shown us that this method of ranking oppressions is divisive and unnecessary—and worse, it undermines solidarity. As well, when organizing and developing political practice, we can self-reflexively move the margins to the center of our analyses to avoid the biases of privilege that has historically led to so many divisions in feminism and the Left. (10)

Body liberation is deeply intertwined with ableism and how bodies are expected to function and appear. Gender plays a critical role in the way that women’s oppression intertwines with their physical appearance, as does race and the experience of Eurocentric beauty and cultural standards. As we move through the ways that a hierarchical, capitalist society denigrates “the other,” you can see how body image moves in and out as an ever present aspect of each form of oppression while also standing out as something on its own.

### **What About Radical Spaces?**

We wondered why Tracey was always already there when we got to the meeting. When asked she always gave a different answer. Traffic gets bad. She gets out of class about that time so she just comes early. It’s a good time to read her book. It took months for her to tell me, in hushed tones, that it was actually the desks. We met in a Sunday school room where little chairs were attached to desks. Most were uniform, but there were a couple others that were a bit larger. She knew that she would never be able to fit into the smaller ones and so she got there early to

make sure that she would have a comfortable seat. I began to mention that she could just ask someone to move if she needed to, and I was stopped by a strong glance. She didn't want to have to suffer the humiliation of telling someone, in front of an entire meeting, that she was too large to fit in the regular chairs and that they would need to move.

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Inside radical spaces, it is debatable whether the crowds of the “enlightened” are any less oppressive than the world around them. It is true that even inside spaces filled with self-identified “radicals” the rates of things like domestic abuse and sexual assault are pretty in line with the rest of the general public. What is notably worse in these spaces, however, is the treatment of body diversity.

Food and behavior shaming has become a staple inside radical spheres. This kind of food policing has become especially prevalent in vegan spaces, around radical environmental, anti-GMO, anti-consumerist politics and in animal rights circles. This kind of policing mirrors the conservative narratives about personal responsibility and body size, which is the kind of bigotry that would be openly admonished if it was addressed to issues of race, class, or gender. It is common to criticize, often to the point of personal violation, the eating of certain types of foods or artificial sweeteners without any understanding about how these food choices might play into weight management. The critique often borders on the conspiratorial, where a general mistrust of corporate health and food systems leads to an anti-rationalism. (For a person of size, sugar-based calories may be much higher of a health concern than artificial sweeteners, and it is certainly not for a thin food activist to decide for them.) A person's decision to eat foods with artificial components or preservatives may leave them open to personal insult, where the possibility of health results from toxic food sources are immediately blamed on the person suffering from the illness. This is bigotry disguised as politics, where the discomfort and implicit anger someone has about the existence of a fat body is assigned a political rationale. The reality is that these feelings of disgust come from implicit stereotyping and bigoted bias that has been internalized just as much in radical circles as in the general culture, and therefore they simply repackage the victimization of the fat body in guilt associated with political ideas about food production, commercial medicine, and animal rights. The issue here is that people's individual choices are not always equally able to be put through a political lens, and people's personal situation and experiences leaves them with mixed ability to actually participate in lifestyle politics. To use their body type as a way of identifying them as failures within a political practice is monstrous and a way to separate marginalized people further from radical political community.

Often these interpersonal criticisms are divorced from the body experience of the comrade. A common practice in radical subcultures is to advocate shopping at second-hand clothing stores or to look down on clothing purchased from certain major retailers. For people of a certain size

it can be almost impossible to furnish a wardrobe through second-hand stores. We buy the clothes we can fit in and maintain a basic modicum of fashionability, and thin privilege is laid bare in situations where this social pressure cannot fathom the complex reasons that people may choose the kind of clothing they do. Likewise, it takes more work to “pass” as normal in most circles with a fat body, which means we need every tool at our disposal. For more idealized bodies, clothing and beauty regimens may often become secondary, but ask a fat person what it means to skip a shower or to dress in less than optimum fashion.

The physical spaces themselves are often difficult for large bodied people, often failing at accessibility, having fat-friendly seating, and generally being spaces that accommodate different shapes. This, again, comes from a general lack of resources in movement space, where people often make do with substandard equipment. However, it can create a large problem when size is just not a part of the equation of how to make the social climate accessible.

With a person who experiences the most vile body shaming on a daily basis, what would happen if they had to sit on a chair that could not support their weight and it snapped in front of an entire meeting? That would be the last time that person would be involved, as this is one of the most deeply humiliating situations that could occur for someone that already has had the messages of their unworthiness shoved down their throat. What if the collective decides they want to sit out in the park on a sunny day, yet sitting on the ground like this is difficult for a person of a certain size? They are then forced to confess that their “fatness” has prevented them from joining the group, or they will sit in discomforted silence.

The issue for fat bodied people in these spaces does not only come as open hostility, but often with seemingly friendly acts that just do not take into account the lived experience of fat people. One thing that has often occurred in radical social spaces is a freer acceptance of nudity. This is common in community activities, especially when the surrounding city is accommodating in some ways. There is often a sort of pressure to participate so as to not be left behind. For people with fat bodies, exposing your flesh can be an incredibly difficult prospect that brings up deep feelings of learned shame. Likewise, it comes from a profound place of privilege for people to suggest that wherever this activity is to take place is certainly going to be a “safe space.” Safe spaces themselves are more of an idea than a reality, and outside of close confines it is impossible to promise fat bodied people that they will be safe and respected while nude. That does not mean that people with fat bodies should be sheltered from activities such as these, quite the opposite, but there needs to be an understanding about what experiences they may hold that others in the community do not.

The dialogue about fat bodies often shifts solely into the ways that capitalism affects the crafting of these bodies. The idea that consumptive behavior, food deserts, high calorie-low nutrition foods are a product of an industrialized capitalism that transforms consumers into economic units is true, yet it would be an offensive falsehood to reduce the existence of fat

bodies directly to this. To do this would assume that in any and all cases it is poor eating habits that lead to fat bodies, which, for most people, has very little consequence on their general size beyond a few extra pounds. The elimination of capitalism in a fury of permanent revolution would not eliminate the existence of fat bodies, even if it would provide more options for living a healthy and controlled physical life. And why would we want it to if we see them as equally beautiful and equally worthy?



### **Culture of Cruelty, Culture of Care**

I stared in cold outrage as she told me the story, where Johnnie was shopping at the grocery store and someone came by, pulled something out of her cart, and told her abruptly, “You don’t need it.” She looked back with a bit of wonder. “Something like this happens at least once a month.” Maybe a stranger stops her on a fun day at the river to tell her that she shouldn’t be parading herself in a swimsuit like that. She’s just going to embarrass herself. A stranger on the street tells her that she is too pretty to be so fat. Doesn’t she know how disgusting and unhealthy that is? She usually just smiles and walks on. If she protests, then the victimization that disguised itself as caring turns to explicit cruelty, where she is torn apart in the most devastating ways. Her appearance, of course, means that anyone should be able to stop her and tell her about what a successful life looks like. And it’s not her.

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Certainly some of you reading this are already beginning to feel overwhelmed and angry, and this is something that should be empathized with. The idea that we are adding just “another oppression” to the alphabet soup of intersectional identities we already have seems disheartening, if not a little frightening for those fearing making a misstep. This is not an adequate reason, of course, to deny body oppression a place in the discussion about intersectionality. We could try to develop a dictionary of appropriate terms, guidebooks for accessibility, and a whole interpersonal set of principles to abide by, but that would not fundamentally dethrone the bigotry. Instead, we need to be willing to hear folks make mistakes, to say the wrong thing, to attempt and fail. We also need to develop a caring culture where we can really hear comrades who mention how interpersonal behavior affected them without a toxic “callout culture” that shuts down discussion and raises defenses. This is not an easy proposition as this issue affects us all deeply, and emotionally.

I do not want a comrade who knows the correct qualifiers for my body, but one that is open to listening and learning when something oppressive seeps through the cracks. Because it will. We are trained from the start to adopt the bigotries and hierarchies that the system is founded on, so it would be impossible for even the most invested of us to memorize the script and recite it on cue.

What this means is that caring, between us, is going to be paramount for actually hoping that the ideas of body liberation can be adopted.

This is the caring we lack as a society, and it is the Culture of Cruelty that allows for some of the more vicious moments of fatphobia. A culture has developed that attempts to focus on blame and how to shift it towards those suffering. This was the narrative that drove much of the delayed homophobic response to the AIDS crisis of the early 1980s, where President George H. W. Bush said publicly that the people dying were at part to blame for their condition. The same rhetoric is applied to anyone that has negative health outcomes that could have some connection to a behavior, whereby we absolve ourselves of the collective need to care for that person by saying that they “did it to themselves.”

It is here that fat bodies see one of the last vestiges of connection to caring stripped from them as any health complications are reduced to their weight, and the social cruelty they face is again seen as a product of their own behavior. This atomization is one of the most critical stages of human disconnection, where the logic of Social Darwinism implicit to capitalism is allowed to reign. A revolutionary movement that sees this as inhumane needs to keep care at the center because only true community bonds will be able to provide an alternative. Though it is reminiscent of the Old Left “unite to fight” idea, we need to see that these barriers are to be stripped away if we are ever to prioritize the mutual aid and solidarity that is needed to confront massive systems of wealth and military power. We cannot victimize each other for the

most human of behaviors, whether it is having unprotected sex or eating too many processed sugars. These are pliable aspects of the human experiences; ones that show our fallibility and the need to embrace each other if we are to survive.

### **Revolution From the Body Up**

The goal here is not just to free fat bodies from the thick sludge of shame and repression, but also to lift the shackles off bodies altogether. We cannot gain solidarity through the re-victimization of other bodies, or by targeting simply one body above all others, but to say that we need to see all of these issues as ones that everyone has a stake in. As body liberation organizer Sarah Mae Richens says, it is important to note that body oppression is an ingrained part of the stratification that makes up late capitalism:

We see this push in capitalist society for the ideal body and what is deemed acceptable by standards set by those in power. Standards of beauty play an integral role in perpetuating inequalities. But because they are so taken for granted, the *standards* themselves are not always noticed as the source of many people's collective pain and anxiety. Regardless of gender, race or class, the body is policed and also labeled as either "right" or "wrong." Corporations are making money off our bodies, whether it is from our labor or spending/wasting our time trying to achieve an unattainable image that has been manufactured for us to idealize. While anarchists are not devoid of talking about bodies, it is largely from the aspect of gender and not size. Rethinking the way that capitalism has created a space of not only self-hatred, shame, oppression and inequality but also how it perpetuates these oppressions on a daily basis for us, as fat people, is very similar to the ways in which it oppresses us in all of the classical ways anarchists study—as laborers, through a gendered and racialized perspective and of course, a class perspective. Fat acceptance is intertwined with class struggle. (11)

Just as in other critical approaches to oppression, there are some groups that have a more central role in overthrowing body victimization: those who have the most targeted and marginalized body types. The strict limitations on acceptable bodies, the victimization of those outside of those boundaries, and the way that it has interplay with other forms of oppression are important for everyone across the board as it is these items that divide us and weaken our collective strength.

We must also use this concept as a reminder that anti-oppression revolutionary politics are ones that are always adapting. This means that the project of revolution is not just a matter of one momentary confrontation and a shift in political program, but the ongoing evolution of the people and in the heart. We take collective action to challenge these oppressions, and in doing so we more clearly see the way that a dominating class has warped our perceptions of each other. This will lead to myriad ways to understand oppression and identity. But this



should not overwhelm us and take away from the ongoing solidarity needed to transform the world into the beautiful dream that it could become.

The shift that needs to happen today is away from the liberal identity politics that have defined the fat acceptance movement and instead focus on on-the-ground organizing and movement building. Here, much of the focus has been on ways of de-stigmatizing fat by focusing on “health at every size” arguments and focusing on interpersonal and consumer reforms to the portrayal of fat images. Criticisms against fat acceptance and body positivity movements should keep in mind the work that has already been done and its huge impact on the discourse, and the shift we are talking about here is simply one to add dimension and see how it can fit into an anarchist project that sees mass action as essential to really undermining systems of monstrous power.

We need to reclaim “fat” as a political identity, something we can declare ourselves to be publicly. For those on the outside this seems like an incredibly easy thing to do, and yet it is frightening to those it affects. Just as with organizing people going through foreclosure, low-wage workers, houseless people, and medical patients, it is hard to stand up and say that this thing is a part of who you are. Just deciding to publicly state that you are fat can be an emotional blow. It can also be a freeing process, a way of robbing words of power, and finding allegiance in others. If we can see fat as acceptable and beautiful we can finally find power in our communities in direct opposition to a coordinated system intent on putting us back in our place.

To develop real movements we need to see fat politics as something that is worthy of the same practical organizing as struggles that we have been historically more familiar with. That means seeing the intersectional relevance of body liberation to existing social struggles, and linking it up with organized labor, housing justice, healthcare reform, anti-patriarchy struggle, and the battle to smash white supremacy. Workplace discrimination for people of size is real, and will not dissipate on its own even if we learn to love ourselves. Different bodies are not getting the kind of healthcare that they need to have equal survival, and we will only get there through struggle. We need to see movements around body identity occur, which are goal oriented and focused on tangible gains. We need material gains and collective action, while also building relationships where the value of our lives and physical forms means something different. It is through this fight that we can reclaim the words that have been used to rob us of dignity.

### **Necessity**

What choice do we have? To live in unbelievable agony, pushed further and further to the edges of society? Justifying our bodies, showing why they really are acceptable, begging to be treated like the people we know ourselves to be? It is not just our understanding of body liberation as a social idea that drives this choice, but a burning rage that comes from the heart.

We can't bear to be on the outside anymore, to be told, for no other reason than tradition and hatred, that we are broken vessels. If we have to blow open access to the world like social guerrillas.

The discussion about radical body liberation is new, and let's make it not just what it could be but what we need it to be. To work towards total freedom from shame, persecution, and violation. The only way we can find the situation bearable is in the arms of each other, and this is the only way that we can ever actually reshape the ugliness of this world into the beauty we see in the moments of radical compassion. This will only happen by going forward into the thick of it, by deciding that things must be different, and accepting nothing less.

We know that there is something here, that we can survive and make something new. Something humane, something built in our image. We know that these experiences are not just "par for the course," but the heartbeat of a life lived on the margins and a sign that things have to change.

We know that a new future is here because we are here. And we can build it.

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## Notes

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 #Anarchism, #Fat, #FatLiberation, #Fatphobia, #shaneburley, #Strategy

**I thought on "Towards a Fatter Insurrection:  
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