Fat Activism: A Queer Autoethnography

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Abstract

Fat Activism: A Queer Autoethnography
Charlotte Cooper

Over my 20 year involvement with the movement, I have come to notice that scant attention is paid to fat activism. Despite intensified interest in fat in 21st century Western culture, the richness of fat activism is not reflected in a somewhat meagre literature, and fat activists themselves have offered few reflective or analytic accounts that deal with the depth and breadth of what they do.

Fat activism offers tools with which marginalised people can adapt and develop agency, community and capital, and contribute to social change. It has the potential to transform obesity policy from that which further entrenches fat people's abjection expensively, to that which builds on resources more compassionately and dynamically. This research project, therefore, represents one such attempt to hasten its development and overturn the trend in which fat activism is routinely assumed, taken for granted, and dismissed by activists, researchers, and institutions.

I begin by situating the research within the existing literature and go on to clarify what fat activism is, to relate it to discourse, and to build on existing theoretical work. I argue against creating universal definitions of fat activism, and invite appreciation for its more ambiguous forms. I produce an assemblage of fat feminist origins and travels, arguing that as well as being an unlimited phenomenon, it is plural, hybrid and evolving, yet suffers from stagnation. I propose that, instead of reproducing collateral damage through discourse, queering fat activism includes many communities of interest, questions binaries, and welcomes multiple interventions.

I use a scavenged autoethnography, bringing myself and the communities of fat activists to which I belong, into this work. This methodology draws attention to standpoint in the construction of fat narratives, expresses my frustration at reproductions of fat people as lifeless and passive empirical subjects, and synthesises activism and research.
Declaration

I declare that the work I am submitting is entirely my own, is correctly referenced, conforms to the University of Limerick's guidance for a PhD thesis, and has not been published elsewhere.

Charlotte Cooper
Acknowledgments

Thank you to everybody who consented to be interviewed for this project.

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For giving me platforms to publish, show, develop and discuss my work, deepest thanks go to: The Association of Size Diversity and Health; Bad Art Collective; Big Bum Jumble; Bildwechsel Hamburg; Bird Club; Body & Peace Workshop; The British Film Institute; The British Sociological Association; Burger Queen; Canterbury Christ Church University; A Carnival of Feminist Cultural Activism; Club Milk; Coventry Peace Festival; Department of International Studies and Social Science, Coventry University; Department of Media, Music, Communication & Cultural Studies, Macquarie University; Entzaubert Queer DIY Film Fest; Economic and Social Research Council Fat Studies and Health at Every Size seminar series; Fat, Awesome and Queer; Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society; The Fat of the Land: A Queer Chub Harvest Festival; The Fattylympics; The Feminist Art Gallery; Gender Matters at King's College London; Goldsmith's University; Incite; Department of Sociology, Warwick University; Lesbisch Schwule Filmtage Hamburg; London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival; London Zine Symposium; My Mouth Your Ear; New York University Press; NOLOSE; National Portrait Gallery; Palgrave; Pop Culture Association/American Culture Association; Power Queers; Queer Images Edmonton; Raw Nerve Books; Rebel Bellies; Riots Not Diets; Ryerson University; Scumbag; Sister Spit; Sociology Compass; Soggettiva; Somatechnics; thirdsplace; Tate Modern; Theatre Royal Stratford East; Well Now; Vignette Press; Villa Magdalena K; the people who read and comment on Obesity Timebomb, my Livejournal and my Facebook.

This work is dedicated with love to the early fat feminists, who I admire very much, and especially to Aldebaran, also known as Vivian Mayer and Sara Bracha Golda Fishman.
## List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BAFL</td>
<td>Boston Fat Liberation, Boston Area Fat Feminist Liberation, Boston Area Fat Lesbians</td>
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<tr>
<td>BBW</td>
<td>Big Beautiful Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BFI</td>
<td>British Film Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>BMI</td>
<td>Body Mass Index</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIY</td>
<td>Do It Yourself</td>
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<td>FA</td>
<td>Fat Admirer</td>
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<tr>
<td>FACT</td>
<td>Fat Action Coming Together</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAT</td>
<td>Fat Activists Together</td>
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<tr>
<td>FIFI</td>
<td>Fat Is A Feminist Issue</td>
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<tr>
<td>FLAB</td>
<td>Fat is a Lesbian Issue, Fat Lesbian Action Brigade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FU</td>
<td>Fat Underground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLBT</td>
<td>Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAES</td>
<td>Health At Every Size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDD</td>
<td>International No Diet Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT</td>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAAFA</td>
<td>National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, formerly National Association to Aid Fat Americans</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAACP</td>
<td>National Association for the Advancement of Colored People</td>
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<tr>
<td>NHS</td>
<td>National Health Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOLOSE</td>
<td>National Organisation of Lesbians of Size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OA</td>
<td>Overeaters Anonymous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAR</td>
<td>Participant Action Research, Participatory Action Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCT</td>
<td>Primary Care Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSS</td>
<td>Rich Site Summary, Really Simple Syndication</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIG</td>
<td>Special Interest Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM</td>
<td>Sado-Masochism</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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Chapter One: Introduction

This study was originally proposed by my supervisors to the funding body as a piece of research about anti-fat discrimination in the dietetic clinic. It would add to an evidence base of anti-fat bias and stigma, and an emerging literature of critical dietetics (Solovay 2005, Wang 2008, Bacon and Aphramor 2011, Erdman Farrell 2011, von Liebenstein 2012). However, the proposal did not consider the possible effect on a fat researcher, such as I, of encountering relentless clinical discrimination over at least a four-year period. A different approach was required that reflected my experience and knowledge of fat embodiment, which built on my expertise as a fat activist, and enabled me to write myself into the research, and which posed less of a risk to my well-being. The proposal made a brief mention of resistance to clinical discrimination, and a short course on peace-building undertaken at the end of my first year of study, which included a module on community strategies for non-violence, convinced me that activism needed to be central to the study.

This change of focus produced a profound shift in the work. Instead of a study that reproduced fat people's helplessness and marginalisation, or reinforced medical hegemony, or the power of the expert, or reiterated claims about anti-fat discrimination that are already well-worn and deeply known to fat people, I was free to explore the agency and political imaginations of fat community. I could say something new. The work would not be governed by obesity, by which I mean a medicalised discourse of pathological fatness, discrimination, normativity, or health, the usual ways by which fat is framed, but could reflect other ways of embodied knowing. The thesis focused on fat people rather than professionals, on actions that take place in multiple contexts rather than in the clinic, on a wide range of social activity rather than that limited to health or food. Because I am a part of fat community as well as a researcher, it became a piece of work both of a group of people, and for them.

In the course of the thesis I will demonstrate that there are a number of tacit assumptions about what fat activism is, and where its concerns lie. My intention in laying out these implicit beliefs is to critique and develop them. I will show that they restrict rather than expand the repertoire of possible activist interventions; create
collateral damage in people who do not conform to their tenets, even though they may have legitimate claims on fat activism; and contribute to a false division between what constitutes 'real' activism, and what does not. Nevertheless, some comment about the current presumed goals of fat activism will help set the scene for this study, particularly for readers unfamiliar with the movement.

The fat activism which concerns me here has origins in the civil rights movement of the late 1960s in the United States and its first theorists framed fat activism as part of an anti-oppression discourse (Freespirit and Aldebaran 1973). Fat oppression in this context was constructed as a product of commercial exploitation through weight loss industries, and "mystified' science" which have devastating social effects (ibid. nd, (Schoenfielder and Wieser 1983, Bovey 1989, Cooper 1998, Brownell et al. 2005) Other industries and realms of public life collude with this exploitation and pseudoscience, including insurance, fashion, food and drugs, medicine and psychiatry. Fat oppression denies people equal rights in employment, education, and through access to services and healthcare. Thus fat activism is a project of identifying, articulating, communicating, fighting and ending the oppression embedded in these institutions. It was allied by Freespirit and Aldebaran with other forces of oppression, such as sexism, classism, racism, ageism, capitalism and imperialism, although these are not always central to fat activism in 21st century Western cultures.

A second rationale for fat activism concerns the transformation of internalised fatphobia in order to facilitate self-actualisation. People subjected to the fat oppression, stigma and discrimination produced by the social agencies and relations outlined above tend to develop self-images built on abjection, self-hatred and disgust. Fat activism is a means of challenging and altering these beliefs, of exposing them not as a 'natural' part of being fat, but as a social construction, a product of fatphobia (Wiley 1994, Erdman Farrell 2011, Gailey 2012). Self-acceptance strategies are a key part of this transformation of self and society.

A third justification for fat activism is that it is a means of acknowledging and celebrating fat subjectivity. Surviving, resisting and transforming oppression on a macro scale, and as it touches one's most private spaces, is a tough undertaking and worth honouring (Stein 1983, Jenkins and Farnham 1988, Barron 1994). Linked to this is the

A number of practises, priorities, goals and objectives are currently associated with fat activism, although it is my intention in this thesis to draw attention to more ambiguous, non-teleological forms of fat activism, and to argue for an unlimited repertoire of interests. However, health, discrimination, identity, consumerism and community are key areas around which action is being taken at present through tactics that encompass collective action and individual interventions, both material and, as I shall show, imagined. Goals currently focus on legislative and interpersonal change through proper and improper channels, for example in developing anti-size and weight discrimination law, through rational debate, direct action and prankishness. Fat activist objectives are centred on discourses of equality, rights, visibility and recognition, acceptance and self-actualising personhood.

I do not seek to privilege one form of activism over another, but to reflect a broad range of present and potential fat activist interventions. Political process activism has become the standard model or rationale for activism in the social science literature, and other forms of social action tend to be marginalised, if they are recognised at all. But 'the square stuff' is no more or less legitimate than more ambiguous fat activism. I use discussions of more commonplace fat activism to draw attention to lesser-known or articulated forms and to argue for their acknowledgment. My contention here is that fat activism is a social movement that encompasses interventions and strategies that are, perhaps, unlimited. It is my belief that fat activism encompasses a great many philosophical perspectives and strategies, that distinctions between them are usually vague or complex, and that the narrative bindings that currently construct and constrict them are in need of expansion.

**Simplicity, complexity and the killjoy**

It is unusual for fat people to be recognised as a constituency that exists outside the clinic or mediated through representations of Otherness. Understanding this different way of looking at fatness requires a bit of a leap if that is not one is used to. With this in
mind, I want to share a story that introduces some of the locations, debates, concepts, concerns and values that arise when fat activism is brought to the centre of attention, which will be explored in this thesis. These involve assumptions about fat activism, the claims of simplicity regarding it, the largely unacknowledged complexity of the phenomenon, and the tensions within the movement.

In May 2012 my partner Kay Hyatt and I attended a workshop in Berlin that aimed to bring together fat activists working in Europe for a week of learning on self-acceptance. The workshop was organised by one person under the name of a long-standing German fat activist group. It was fully-funded: our travel, accommodation and some meals were paid for by a European grant-making body for adult education. Approximately 15 delegates attended.

The central event at the workshop was a demonstration in support of International No Diet Day (INDD, see Glossary). This took place in Alexanderplatz, a public square in the middle of the city, for a couple of hours on Sunday 6 May. Press were invited to the demonstration, and to a previous session where delegates produced placards for the event. The workshop leader set up a table with leaflets and food, and delegates hung around and were photographed and interviewed for local newspapers. Passers-by were given flyers advocating self-acceptance and healthy living.

The unspoken assumption behind this action was that all fat activists share a common agenda; that health is a central organising factor; that fat activism is public, collective, and requires leadership; and that mainstream press coverage is important. It also tacitly assumed that fat activism seeks mass appeal, to speak to as many people as possible at once through a series of simple messages about embodiment and health. The workshop was organised as a place in which delegates could learn self-acceptance as fat people, presumably because this was something that they would have lacked. Yet despite the apparent simplicity of these messages, the INDD demonstration marked the point at which a number of fat activist conflicts and complexities converged.

There was a lack of transparency about the workshop's aims and objectives. Certain outcomes were required by the funders but these were not shared with the delegates by the organiser. Neither Kay nor I wanted to represent UK fat activism to the German
media for INDD, because we had negative experiences with the press in the past, and because we do not identify positively with 'Britishness,' yet we were pressured to do so with a subtle threat that we would be letting people down if we declined.

My own history with INDD is troubled. I attended the first event in 1992 and have witnessed its mythologising over the years. INDD rhetoric suggests that it was an ad-hoc picnic organised to protest diet culture and support a day in which women eat freely. However, the first INDD was a press conference that launched a bigger campaign by entrepreneur Mary Evans Young to attack the diet industry in the UK. Evans Young wanted to build a constituency for her publishing interests and proto-HAES (Health At Every Size, see Glossary) business franchise, which she attempted to sell to the unwitting people volunteering on INDD, including me. Following this, INDD is not an event that I support, but my involvement was assumed by the workshop because it has come to represent a particular touchstone moment in fat activism, and I was assumed not to have had a prior history with the event.

As the event unfolded, the workshop leader excluded Roma women and girls who work on Alexanderplatz, and who wanted to eat some of the food on display. The organiser put a lid over the hands of two Roma girls who were taking some sweets from a bowl, she shooed them away and said: "No, that's finished now, that's not for you, it's closed". The white people in the area, including white children, were not policed like this. When Kay spoke to her and said that these actions were racist, the organiser refused to consider that her behaviour was questionable. She offered a compromise that left-over food would be distributed to anybody who wanted it, but this did not transpire. These events happened in a context of intense hatred of, and racism against, Roma people in Germany, which continues despite this ethnic group's persecution during the Holocaust. The workshop delegates were universally white, and nobody within the group commented on the exclusion of the Roma women and girls.

The relationship between the workshop and Berlin's extant community of fat activists appeared strained. A night of performance organised by members of that community, to which I was a contributor, was not openly publicised in the workshop. The radical politics of the local group, its queerness and the diversity of its supporters were not reflected in the workshop and the possibility for productive coalition-building was not
explored. Few of the workshop participants knew that other fat activisms existed in Berlin. Local fat activists did not support the INDD demonstration.

Intra-group tensions emerged relating to the presence of some people within the group:

- A normatively-sized delegate whose preoccupations with food and body image could not be acknowledged within a group supposedly closely and compassionately engaged with these issues. This person was positioned by the organiser as an expert on embodiment, and thus assumed a leadership role in the group and the INDD event. One of the fatter delegates made public and derisive comments about this person's body.
- A married male fat fetishist delegate who took photographs of the fat women in the group, especially when eating, without first securing their consent.
- A normatively-sized film-maker and friend of the organiser, who patronised the group by saying authoritatively that she likes fat people because "they are warm-hearted".

The workshop presented fat activism as a limited repertoire of behaviours presumed to have universal value. Participants were pressured to conform to tacit assumptions about what constituted fat activism, or self-acceptance, whether or not they subscribed to those beliefs. I often felt as though we were supposed to recite a script. It was assumed, for example, that everybody at the workshop knew what fat activism meant, everyone agreed on the same points of interest, and that we were all working together to achieve a common goal. It was also assumed that racism was not present, and in any case had nothing to do with fat activism; that although the media reports were very mixed, and people were unfairly misrepresented, it was vital to have achieved coverage; and that fat activism represents a soft kind of identity politics not the 'extremist' radicalism built on the anarchism and queer politics of local fat activists in Berlin. Most workshop participants had little experience of doing fat activism differently, were isolated from other fat activists, or were new to the concept. This meant that it was difficult to evaluate the fat activism in the workshop. The ideological disconnection from other local fat activists compounded this sense of separation, the conflict between the political
conservatism of the workshop and the radicalism of local fat activists mirrored similar friction in the early part of the movement between feminists and anti-feminists.

Some delegates complained privately about the INDD demonstration but did not share their thoughts in public. Everybody else went along with these activities with scarce apparent reflection. Kay and I were the only people to voice any of these conflicts and complexities in the group and to the workshop organiser. We found that nobody wanted to acknowledge the range of issues that the workshop presented, or to negotiate alternative actions that more fully represented everybody's interests. In the life of the group it was more important to pretend that consensus prevailed, that there were no problems, and to fake a forced enthusiasm for INDD, principally in how the group was presented in the German media. Discomfitting conversations as a group about the discursive origins of INDD, body-policing (see Glossary), patronising normatively-sized people, using the media, or grey areas concerning the male gaze, fetishism and consent were repressed in various subtle ways, through facial expressions, 'joking', dismissal, 'disinterest', evasion and so on. Our concerns about INDD were surrounded by confusion and, without the benefit of dialogue, Kay and I were subtly labelled as obstructive trouble-makers who were sabotaging the demonstration and ruining group harmony. We were the killjoys.

Sarah Ahmed has produced the figure of the feminist, queer and migrant killjoy to represent the forced 'happiness' of phenomena that do not make allowances for pain, ambivalence, uneasiness, disruption and anger, or acknowledge oppression (Ahmed 2010). She argues that happiness is built on privilege, that it is those at the top of the pile who are the arbiters of what constitutes happiness, and those underneath expose that fiction through the role of the killjoy. The happy consensus exhibited by some of the participants in Berlin was coerced at the expense of queer, migrant, 'extremist', awkward voices, it was built on suppression of difference and dissent, hence it did not represent 'happy' at all. In this context, the killjoy is a figure of resistance and integrity and one I have embraced in relation to this study. Unlike the popular literature of fat activism, and the scholarly literature that has failed to interrogate it sufficiently, or the fat activists at the workshop in Berlin, I do not present fat activism as a happy endeavour of self-acceptance and healthy living; I do not sell it here as a cheery promise. The figure of the killjoy offers an opportunity to explore the phenomenon in-
depth, to reformulate it, to be critical. So, following this, I seek to demonstrate the complexities of fat activism, to engage with some of the sites where friction arises, and to do so in a way that is productive, ethical, and transparent.

**Why this study matters**

Grassroots critical engagement with obesity discourse, and the fat hatred entrenched within it, offers opportunities for transforming the material manifestations of inequality and oppression, and building capacity for well-being in people of all sizes. Fat activism enables people to consider fat through identity, culture, community, agency and politics, and this is an important step in fully reflecting and valuing fat personhood and challenging fatphobia. In addition, fat activism has the potential to improve social attitudes not only towards fatness, but also parts of human experience to which it has ties, such as embodiment more generally, normativity, gender, social justice, sexuality, social movements, research, class, health, policy, disability, race, age, and so forth.

Fat activism is a powerful experience even when, as with the Berlin workshop, there are significant limitations. But such shortcomings are not inevitable. The process of researching has enabled me to understand that fat activism does not have to reflect what was represented in Berlin and is often reiterated as fat activism elsewhere. I argue here that instead of a constrained repertoire of strategies, fat activism can be seen as limitless and context-specific, representing a wide range of political affiliations and styles. It cannot be assumed and it is therefore helpful to articulate its contexts and discursive leanings. Fat activism is sometimes a site for racism, body-policing (see Glossary), and other forms of oppression, and this requires attention. This research invites a re-evaluation of fat activism as an unrestricted, discursively-produced, uncontainable and preposterous phenomenon. In preposterousness I am invoking the queer, the absurd, the unreasonable and the eye-popping qualities of fat activism as sites for action that cannot be contained by obesity discourse. I seek to establish new sites for engagement, to un-stick what has become at times a stagnant and repressive discourse. This work invites scholars of all disciplines, but chiefly those in the social sciences, to commit to a praxis of research justice in relation to fat and fat activism. It proposes increased visibility for fat activism, its adoption by new constituencies of fat activists, and is a spur for the
imaginative possibilities and pleasures of the everyday embedding and customising of activism.

**Structure of the thesis**

I have explained how the study came to be, how it shifts discourse, and outlined some of its aims. In this final introductory section I will sketch out the thesis structure and describe how I meet those aims in the body of the work.

This introduction is followed by Chapter Two, a comprehensive literature review that locates and justifies the study more fully. I argue that there are significant knowledge gaps because authors writing about fat activism currently fail to critically interrogate the prevailing popular works, or consider the breadth or intricacy of the phenomena. It is dominated by scholars who are removed from the movement, or who do not fully claim researcher-activist identities relating to fat politics. Obesity literature rarely mentions fat activism, and the phenomenon is misrepresented and misrecognised. I claim that obesity is a poor frame for fat activism. Authors who have personal grievances against fat activism offer some critical insight, but their work is also overly dismissive.

Foucault's theories of power and resistance provide a basis from which to approach fat activism more productively, allowing me to conceptualise it as a social movement rather than simply an issue of health, and enabling me to adopt poststructural theory (Foucault 1977, Foucault 1980, Foucault and Gordon 1980, Foucault 1982). A particular genealogy of fat feminism is also illuminating, and segues with queer theory and Fat Studies, overlapping fields that currently provide the most helpful ways of theorising fat activism as a social movement. What I bring to a literature that is currently lacking in ethnographic evidence is research based on primary accounts, which is produced by somebody with strong connections to the field.

I move on to present my approach to methodology in Chapter Three. I offer autoethnography as a direct challenge to research, especially within but not limited to obesity discourse, which reproduces fat people as abject, anonymous, absent and Othered. It is my intention here to place fat people at the centre of the work as recognisable humans, with agency, community and culture, and to be accountable to
this group, to which I also belong. Autoethnography contests the supremacy of positivism in research about fat people and presents possibilities for bringing standpoint into the work and queerly scavenging methodology. The latter part of this chapter explains how I developed the project, and outlines some of its limitations.

Three subsequent chapters form the central arguments of the thesis and are built around the data. In each instance, individual participants appeared unable to offer concise answers to the project's central research questions yet, taken collectively, the data provide a rich source of analysis. I considered my interpretation of the data an act of noticing the absences produced by the participants, and building a work based on the answers that they also offered.

In Chapter Four I discuss the first research question, 'What is fat activism?'. I avoid the assumption, widely reproduced in the literature and my data, that everybody already knows what it is, in order to think about a wide range of practice and address the phenomena critically. The data presented four themes in fat activism that are not mutually exclusive: political process, community and culture-building, micro fat activism, and ambiguous fat activism. I argue that fat activism is a useful means of queering branches of social movement theory that reproduce the concept of social action as a collective endeavour that is always maintained in particular restrictive ways. I criticise hierarchies that position some forms of activism as more valuable or legitimate than others, and propose that there is no universal narrative for what constitutes fat activism.

Chapter Five addresses the second research question, 'What are the discursive roots of the sample's fat activism?' This begins with the belief that there are many fat activist genealogies instead of a universal narrative, some of which are absent in this study, for example Bear culture, or fat fetish communities, and others which are present. Fat feminism, including radical lesbian fat feminism and queer fat feminism, provides the most compelling discourses that bind the particular communities represented in my research sample, which is drawn from my own fat activist social networks. I discuss the origins and early praxis of the early fat feminists and show how this particular fat feminist activism has travelled. I relate some of the tensions that play out between transnational fat activist subjects. I argue for fat feminist activist praxis that upholds the
movement's founding anti-imperialist values. Finally, I claim that despite its dynamic travels, fat activist discourse has stagnated and requires further theorising in order to develop and grow.

Chapter Six considers the third research question, 'How can fat activism be theorised productively?' As an emerging interdisciplinary field, Fat Studies offers various theoretical approaches, from the positivism of health scientists deconstructing weight loss, to the development of queer theory through Kathleen LeBesco's ground-breaking work (Braziel and LeBesco 2001, LeBesco 2004). It is the latter that I choose to build upon here, explaining that queer can be thought of as a kind of identity that is well-represented in fat activism, and also a series of qualities that supports the movement. I use queer to theorise some of the conflicts in fat activism, through a discussion of difference and multiplicity, and assimilation. Here I argue for the opening and unfixing of fat activism, and propose that the distinctions between normativity and transgression be re-evaluated. I do this to challenge the reproduction of the restrictive categories and borders that have contributed to the movement's discursive inertia, and to invite new ways of developing fat activist praxis.

I include vignettes and excerpts from my research notebooks throughout the thesis and at the beginning of the chapters. I offer a little critical discussion of some of these stories, but include them as mood-setters that are rich with emotion and detail. The vignettes situate the work in my own praxis and experience, and help include me explicitly as a voice within the research.

I conclude the thesis with a brief summary of the study's findings, a reflective acknowledgment of the affective dimensions of the PhD, and consider how the research could be developed by the emotional objects of this work.
Chapter Two: Fat Activist Literature

Finding a literature of fat activism has not been straightforward, fat activists are not the primary subject of many studies, and the available work presents many shortcomings. I start this chapter with an autoethnographic scene depicting a fat activist moment that I instigated. I approached the literature hoping that it might help explain episodes like this. What I found are scattered bodies of work that have, so far, been unable to address fat activism as I understand it as a practitioner.

Nevertheless, there is a literature and I shall present it here. This chapter consists of three sections, the first of which explores a group of texts which seek to explain fat activism and take a generally positive and supportive stance. This includes a discussion of popular forms of fat activism, representations that are fragmented, work that obscures fat activism but has come to represent it, and research that seeks to explain fat activism but is disengaged from it. I then come to texts that are critical and dismissive of fat activism, including critical obesity literature where fat activism is ignored; texts that arise from threatened interests; papers that use obesity discourse to frame fat activism; and texts by people who have been failed by the movement. Lastly, I will use my research questions to locate the thesis, drawing attention to literature that offers a more expansive means of understanding fat activism.

Go Chub Crazy With The Chubsters!

It was early in the morning of 11 July 2004, in an air conditioned meeting room in a generic hotel off the Interstate in Mount Laurel, New Jersey. A small group of people gathered for a workshop presented by my partner Kay and I, with the assistance of our friend Max Airborne. Our workshop was called 'Go Chub Crazy with The Chubsters!' and was part of the NOLOSE conference, a semi-regular fat feminist gathering of queer women, trans people and allies (NOLOSE 2012). The Chubsters had existed for a year, and had achieved some notoriety by producing a photo story for Cheap Date, a fashion magazine to which I am an occasional contributor (Cooper 2005a). But this was the first time that I had used the concept as the basis of a workshop. Anybody attending the conference can propose and produce a workshop as long as it aligns with the
organisation's values. Here I had several aims: to have a focus for the conference, which was the first time that Kay and I had attended, and to meet people; to introduce The Chubsters; to recruit new international members; to generate new ideas about how we might do or imagine fat activism; and to have some fun together. At this point I did not consciously draw on any theoretical positioning for the workshop, although I had lived experience of feminism, anarchism, queerness, and had been doing fat activism for many years.

Kay, Max and I presented the workshop as our tough and weird gang girl alter egos, The Beefer, Butch Husky and Tubby. We introduced The Chubsters as a vicious fat girl gang where viciousness, girlhood, or fatness is not a prerequisite for inclusion. More recently I have added queer to the list of Chubster qualities and embraced its ambiguous characteristics by playing down the purpose of the group which, in 2004, was explained as a response to fatphobia. Because there had been some questions about glorifying gang violence from the NOLOSE board. I thought these were unnecessarily pedantic and chalked them up to 'cultural differences', but nevertheless we explained that this was something we satirised.

The main part of the workshop consisted of jumping-in, or initiating, new gang members. There is no standard jumping-in. Here, joining involved devising a Chubster alter ego; answering some questions in character so that I could create a humorous member profile on a web page; posing for a photograph whilst yelling "Up against the wall, motherfucker!"; choosing a badge; and having Butch Husky draw their picture on a membership card. People took to these tasks with gusto, posing fiercely, and high-kicking. There was a joyous atmosphere in the room as people watched and yelled encouragement, or suggested names for each other.

Whilst new Chubsters were being jumped-in, other participants worked on gang-related tasks in small groups. A call-and-response was devised, based on the word "Chub"; dirty fighting tactics were shared ("shoot low-carb fatphobes with potato guns"); a hand sign and secret Chubster greetings were developed; and a symbol was designed, The Screaming C, a fanged, wild-eyed, blood-dripping fat letter C.
By the end of the workshop, a kind of hysteria had taken over the room, people were jumping up and down, a very fat person turned cartwheels, there was screaming, a naked invasion from a body-painting workshop that was happening down the corridor, people were hollering "Chub chub chub chub chuujb!" and "Up against the wall, motherfucker!" at each other, it was mayhem. Much of the conference had been devoted to difficult discussions about fat oppression and the inclusion of trans people in a formerly women-only space, but this was a different kind of activism that, in 90 minutes or so, had created an immediate sense of euphoria, hope, play, freedom, possibility and togetherness.

I have produced other Chubster workshops since 2004, and I have come to see my task with this kind of activism as trying to develop an atmosphere of happy and creative pandemonium. People that have been to the workshops, heard about them, or just like the idea of The Chubsters have contributed to the concept in various ways, particularly in the crafting of various objects: stonemasonry, clothing, pictures, songs, a film, and through imitation. The Chubsters has become a platform for many activities.

This vignette offers a number of rich themes for sociological analysis, some of which I will consider in this thesis and others of which are beyond its scope. One might consider NOLOSE's organisational values, its roots in and relationship to radical lesbian and queer fat feminism, its role in developing and maintaining community, or international kinship networks between fat activists, for example. Or one could examine the qualities of play and fat activism, the uses of satire and revolutionary rhetoric, the symbolic use of hand made objects, embodied actions, and other signifiers, or activists' use of media production. There is much to be said here about subversion, irrationality and chaos as activist strategies and, as I write in my essay about another queer fat activist project, about how activist concepts are created, transform and travel, to name some of this moment's multi-layered themes (Cooper 2012b). But 'Go Chub Crazy With The Chubsters!' was produced without a conscious incorporation of theory, and with little self-reflection or analysis. As time has passed and the project has grown, I have sought to understand, locate and build on my fat activism more deliberately to develop a more rigorous praxis. Literature relating to fat, bodies and social movements has illuminated moments but has not necessarily enabled me to develop a purview, as I will now discuss.
Explanatory literature

The following group of writings acknowledge fat activism, consider it a worthwhile endeavour and seek to explain it, though fall short in various ways. The literature here consists of popular representations of fat activism; reflective texts that are disconnected from broader analyses; feminist proxies for fat activism, and overviews of fat activism that lack intimate connection to the movement.

Popular fat activism

The first group of texts are those that have been published primarily for a popular readership, though these works are often cited by scholars. The literature in this section has come to define fat activism because it is most widely read, accessible, and has been promoted by its authors through blogging and sub-cultural celebrity.

Marilyn Wann's book *Fat!So? Because you don't have to apologise for your size!* is the archetype for this body of literature (Wann 1998). Based on a zine (see Glossary) of the same name published in San Francisco in the mid-1990s, it is a joyful and embodied romp through the process of becoming a fat activist. Wann builds on her own experience and shows that fat activism is fun, rewarding and life-enhancing, encouraging everyone to disinvest in self-hatred and weight loss and develop critical approaches to those concepts. She sets out the appropriate use of language, debunks obesity science and presents amusing anecdotes, craft activities and quizzes. *Fat!So?* is visually arresting, and makes reference to Wann's lively and supportive fat activist community, some of whom are present in the book. The book has a persuasive and evangelical tone, the author is charismatic and has built a powerful celebrity fat activist persona through this text, and she is recognised as a leader, or *the* leader, by others in literature that I will discuss later. There is no doubt that *Fat!So?* is a landmark text, I will show that it is frequently cited by obesity critics as a proxy for fat activism everywhere. Its joyousness contrasts sharply with older fat feminist literature, for example *Shadow on a Tightrope*, which presents fat oppression and embodiment in more sobering terms (Schoenfielder and Wieser 1983). Instead, Wann makes fat activism a compelling and creative proposition.
Fat!So? was part of Samantha Murray's awakening into fat activism but, as one of the book's main critics, she argues that urging people to become fat activists through a process of self-acceptance is an act divorced from a social context, especially one where the experience of embodiment is frequently ambiguous and contradictory (Murray 2008). She describes the belief in this process as a reliance on self-authorship, which she argues arises from liberal humanist traditions that emphasise individualism and side-line the effects of social context. Murray claims that Wann makes scant provision for this and that the narrative of transformation from abjection to proud fat identity marginalises those, like herself, who struggle to fit such a model or who lack the resources to do so. Here fat activism mirrors diet culture with its tropes of transformation and happy endings.

Representations of fat activism as a fun, and perhaps obligatory, project of personal transformation form the basis of the largest and most accessible body of literature produced by charismatic fat activist community figures, often successful bloggers (Shanker 2005, Frater 2005, Harding and Kirby 2009). These works represent fat activism as an ahistorical women's self-help project, within a universalised, white, US, urban culture. Self-help reiterates body projects found within the individualism and neoliberalism that underscores Western political ideologies, where most documented fat activism is situated, and where social responsibility is privatised (Ilcan 2009). The concept of self-improvement within self-help literature is congruent with Foucauldian notions of productive and docile bodies (Rimke 2000). The goal of self-acceptance requires regimes and management, and liberation comes through the work of personal growth and development, self-knowledge and reflection (Barron 1994, Bosky 1994). There have been minor turns within this literature. Towards the mid-1990s, the focus shifted from emotional/internal to physical/external transformation. Initially, 'looking good' was presented as important as 'feeling great' in works that allude to feminine self-improvement projects (Roberts 1987, Nanfeldt 1996). Sometimes attention is more explicitly on health in books that anticipate the emergence of HAES, for example in Pat Lyons and Deb Burgard's fat fitness book which, unusually, suggests community-led, feminist initiatives as an activist response to health inequalities (Lyons and Burgard 1990, Jonas 1997). Later texts diversify into sexual and reproductive health (Blank 2000, van der Ziel and Tourville 2002). How-to guides are also part of this body of fat activist work: Lynn McAfee and Jean Soncrant's collaborative manual explains how fat
people might negotiate restrictive airline travel; McAfee and Miriam Berg outline the basic skills required for advocating for rights for fat people, and for making complaints; and my guide for fat cyclists documents my own cycling experience with the aim of encouraging others to follow suit (Soncrant and McAfee 2001, McAfee and Berg 2005, Cooper 2005b).

Fat activism is commonly positioned within a politics of identity, and this has been subject to a number of intersectional analyses (Bass 2001, Hill 2009, Harjunen 2010, Shuai et al. 2012). But Murray claims that fat activism following Fat!So? produces a fixed, innate or essentialist fat identity, and it follows that it also produces an essentialist fat activist identity, which is connected to Wann's own representation within and beyond the book, through citations and celebrity, as the quintessential fat activist, as though such an identity could exist. Fat!So? discusses fat hatred and obesity discourse, but it lacks critical self-reflection, there is no attempt to theorise fat activism, for example, or offer a discursive location for it, or even much of an analysis. This is not surprising, it is written as a popular book, but it has nevertheless been elevated, beyond its capacity and regardless of its limitations, as a proxy for fat activism everywhere by authors whose work I will come to shortly. Fat!So? makes reference to Wann's community of friends, but scarcely mentions communities of fat activists present in her native San Francisco Bay Area for some years preceding the book's publication. Even NAAFA (National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance), the oldest and most well-known fat activist organisation in the world, barely gets mentioned. This selective scope adds to the representation of Wann as the primary author and proponent of fat activism. Thus fat activists are just like Wann, sharing her preferences for certain types of language, and her belief that weight loss is incompatible with fat liberation, for example. Wann's model of fat activism is prescriptive, that is, it appears to be achievable by following a number of inflexible rules, rules which are deeply contextualised in Wann's cultural background and may not translate elsewhere so easily. Yet there are many fat activists who do not share these positions, and who experience marginalisation within fat activism because of the fixed nature of these presumed activist orthodoxies; Murray, who has written about her experience of weight loss surgery, being one of them (Cooper and Murray 2012).
This study supports the creative aspects of fat activism referenced in this literature, as well as the belief that fat activism can be personally transformative. It is preceded by other forms of activism, for example responding to the AIDS crisis, which developed cultural production as a strategy for social action (Schulman 1994, Garcia et al. 2012). However, I reject the ahistoricism and lack of critical reflection of these texts in favour of more discursively situated accounts that reject essentialism and address ambiguity and ambivalence within the movement. Whilst others may represent the movement as having leadership and universal goals, I recognise multiple ways of doing fat activism or being a fat activist. My research conceptualises fat activism not as a prescribed set of rules, beliefs and activities, but as free and contradictory.

**Fragmented fat activism**

The popular literature of fat activism is not broadly concerned with contextualising itself or adopting a stance of critical self-reflection. Meanwhile, a smaller group of texts emerging through Fat Studies and DIY (Do It Yourself, see Glossary) publishing offer more contemplative representations of fat activism.

Examples of such descriptive first person accounts of fat activism are Allyson Mitchell's chapter about the fat feminist performance group Pretty, Porky and Pissed Off; D. Lacey Asbill and Heather McAllister's reflections on their involvement with fat burlesque; and Dana Schuster and Lisa Tealer's story about the changing nature of a fat exercise class (Mitchell 2005, Asbill 2009, McAllister 2009, Schuster and Tealer 2009).

Creative and cultural expression forms a substantial part of fat activism and is important in terms of building fat activist community and culture, and there are a number of articles that address this phenomenon (Cusitar et al. 1999). Cultural production in fat activism encompasses art and photography that makes fat embodiment and fat activist community visible (Edison and Notkin 1994, Nimoy 2007, Jones 2007, Mitchell 2009). Susan Stinson identifies an activist sensibility in an essay that takes a broad view of fat and queer writers and journalists as cultural producers, many of whom know and appreciate each other as part of a queer fat activist community (S. Stinson 2004). In a later essay, Stinson argues that fiction is crucial for fat activists because it can deepen fat activist empathy, imagination and possibility (Stinson 2009). This can be seen in her


This work, which includes critical and reflective papers of some depth produced by fat activists, is generally neglected in studies of fat activism that take a wider perspective. This could be because it does not fit the idea of fat activism represented in the popular literature, or in the scholarly yet reductive literature that I discuss below. These works are also produced piecemeal and, in the case of zines, they are ephemeral; they reveal only specific moments within mostly US-based fat activism. Put together, they show that fat activism is a diverse endeavour, but it is beyond their scope to present an extensive examination of the movement, or to theorise it, as I will do here.

**Feminist proxies for fat activism**

Three decades after Orland and Susan Wooley and Sue Dyrenforth published their classic paper arguing that obesity is a neglected feminist topic, Fat Studies proponents continue to lobby for the inclusion of fat within a feminist scholarship (Wooley et al. 1979, Saguy 2012, Roehling 2012, Fikkan and Rothblum 2012a, Fikkan and Rothblum 2012b). This desire might be considered surprising considering that a popular body of work, spearheaded by Susie Orbach, Kim Chernin and Susan Bordo, has been in existence for some time (Orbach 1982, Orbach 1978, Orbach 2009, Chernin 1981, Chernin 1983, Chernin 1985, Bordo 1993, Bordo 1999, Bordo 2003). This work is so

These authors differ from the fat feminism to which I will turn my attention in this thesis because they have surfaced through the related but separate fields of eating disorders, primarily anorexia and bulimia, but also binge eating disorder; the politics of food; anti-dieting; beauty; body projects, including exercising and cosmetic surgery; and feminist media discourse, to become a discourse of body image. The work of Orbach, Chernin and Bordo is presumed to illuminate the experience of fat embodiment in liberationist feminist terms but it is more closely allied with dominant obesity discourse in abjecting fatness and making fat people passive, anonymous and abstract beings, devoid of agency or humanity in their own right. The authors speak for fat embodiment but submerge it within their specialist fields to the extent that fat becomes hidden, never really articulated unless in relation to phenomena (Diamond 1985). Hence fat becomes an element of binge eating, for example, the assumption being that fatness is always the product of an eating disorder. Fat is reproduced as pathology in these works, as a rectifiable faulty eating habit, failure to come to terms with sexuality or femininity or, at best, a misguided attempt to challenge patriarchal values (Cooper 1998).

Feminist proxies for fat activism are not the product of an unruly, autonomous mass movement, but instead are mediated by middle class, white, normatively-embodied professional feminist academics with mainstream aspirations, who have no apparent connection with fat activism. The dominance of their interpretation of fat feminist activism underscores bell hooks' claim that privileged people without a direct relationship to activist concepts obscure them through controlling how they are used and disseminated. This is what is happening here.
"Indeed, the privileged act of naming often affords those in power access to modes of communication and enables them to project an interpretation, a definition, a description of their work and actions, that may not be accurate, that may obscure what is really taking place." (hooks 1994, p.62)

Fatphobia also explains some of the reluctance of scholars building on this work, including feminists, to actively engage with fat and fat activism; to speak of 'fat' rather than the more anodyne 'weight,' 'diet' or 'body image'; or to resist the pathologising of fat people.

Fat feminists, including me, have offered criticisms of this literature. Cath Jackson argues that Orbach and Chernin reproduce and do not radically transform embodied normativity (Jackson 1985). Speaking of Orbach and Carol Munter, Susan Koppelman remarks:

"Both of these books brought broad attention to the issues of fat women, but neither suggested that it was all right to be fat, to stay fat, to like being fat, to pay no particular attention to the fact of one's fatness." (Koppelman 2003, p.249, Munter 1992)

Moran describes the destructive effects of this discourse, which is central to the 12-step binge eating recovery programme Overeaters Anonymous (OA), on the radical lesbian feminist cultures that incubated fat feminism, and in fat activist spaces, including historical locations for fat feminist activism such as The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival.

"There is nowhere in the lesbian community where fat lesbians are safe from the proselytising zealots of OA. They pester fat lesbians individually at lesbian events or publicly at parties, where it is especially humiliating as a fat lesbian to try and prove you do not compulsively overeat. They have broken up fat support groups in Oasis at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in 1984; the year before, at the same festival, they interrupted Fat Liberation workshops. Linda Tillery and Maxine Feldman have both spoken from the main stage at Michigan about how they look great now due to their amazing recoveries in OA. Lesbians have fought with the Michigan Festival for years to get good-looking festival t-shirts and sportswear in large sizes; some years there are one or two t-shirt styles, some years there is nothing. But you can count on six OA meetings a day and all the sprouts you can eat." (Moran 1992, p.110)

Chernin and Bordo have remained silent in the light of fat feminist critiques of their work, it is only Orbach who has defended her claims at length through vigorous public refutations and denials of wrong-doing (Orbach and Compulsive Eating Supervision
Study Group at The Women's Therapy Centre 1985, Diamond 1986, Jenkins and Smith 1987, Orbach 1987, Association for Size Diversity and Health 2009. Despite her apparent regret and public adoption of criticism, *Fat Is A Feminist Issue*, *Bodies* and the work she has produced during the decades between these bestsellers, have not been altered in subsequent editions to incorporate the criticisms with which she appears to agree (Orbach 2009). She appropriates the tropes of fat feminist activism whilst maintaining, promoting and profiting from fat hatred (Tomrley 2009).

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to argue the relative points of how fat is positioned in any detail within this body of literature, I simply want to make the point that these feminist proxies for fat activism, no matter how well-regarded, do not articulate fat activism as I understand it in this research. These works fail to explain fat embodiment, to situate it within a feminist social context, and to provide a rationale for fat feminist activism. Indeed they are the red herrings of fat activism.

**Disengaged fat activism**

The representation of a broader view of fat activism has fallen to a group of authors who do not necessarily present themselves as fat activists. Like the feminist proxies for fat activism, their attempts to provide a critical overview of the movement is hampered by their limited engagement with it and remove as researchers instead of activists, or hybrid researcher-activists.

Marcia Millman's ethnography, *Such A Pretty Face: Being Fat in America*, is remarkable because of the richness of the qualitative data offered by her fat women informants, the use of images, and the inclusion of the author's accounts of her own fatness (Millman 1980). Millman does not consider herself a fat activist, she is a researcher interested in studying how fat and obesity are framed by different organisations. The author may be fat but she remains otherwise removed from her informants and does not contest this stance. Millman's methodology is problematic, she insists without proof that her study is representative, relies on un-cited psychological speculation about fat identity, and is at times subtly racist and homophobic. But her book retains a powerful influence on authors who are similarly removed from the movement, who write about fat activism, for four reasons: she establishes the concept of
fat activism as primarily a response to stigma; identifies politicised fat people as critical subjects for ethnographers; locates fat activism in NAAFA; and uses frame analysis to compare the phenomenon to organisations concerned with obesity.

Millman's fat women are somewhat pitiable and appear beaten down by intense fatphobic stigma, which is only partly ameliorated by their membership of NAAFA and never fully reconciled by the informants. Another cluster of authors similarly treat fat activism primarily as a strategic response to stigma. The ethnography by Marissa Dickins et al. restricts the phenomenon of the Fatosphere (see Glossary) to a discussion of stigma, and although Abigail Saguy and Anna Ward approach a diverse group of activists, they too reduce fat activism to a strategy of stigma defiance (Dickins et al. 2011, Saguy and Ward 2011). Amy Erdman Farrell dwells on the abjection of fat people, as well as the use of fat hatred as a political tool of early feminism and of the present day United States government, and similarly presents fat activism as a reaction to stigma (Erdman Farrell 2011). Stigma is obviously an important part of fat subjectivity and it is appropriate to develop critical understandings of it in relation to fat activism. Erving Goffman's research into stigma influenced The Fat Underground's analysis of fat oppression, for example, and stigma is a common experience for fat people, as I explain in my book (Goffman 1963, Fishman 1998, Cooper 1998). But claiming that the primary goal of fat activism is to reduce stigma is too reductive.

*Such A Pretty Face* is significant because it shows that fat people with a critical grasp of their fatness, usually women, are rich ethnographic subjects, and compelling sites for ethnographers and researchers (Gimlin 2002, Lupton 2012, Tischner 2012). This raises methodological and ethical questions about the beneficiaries of such studies, particularly given that the expert, privileged (normatively-sized) researcher explaining the hyper-visible yet voiceless fat person is a common trope within obesity discourse. Fat people are not the owners of these studies, in many ways they are reproduced as fascinating specimens, and these works do not herald the subjects' welcome into the academy or other corridors of power, for example. Some studies have reproduced this power imbalance explicitly. Richard Klein's encounters with members of the *Fat GIRL* collective drip with his own unexamined privilege in relation to gender and class, for example (Klein 1996). Other ethnographies, especially those which make use of reflective autoethnographic techniques, are more mindful of the relationships between
the researcher and the researched. See, for example Rachel Colls' encounters with a club for fat women and men who have a sexual interest in them (Colls 2012).

Millman identifies NAAFA as a location for ethnographic data-gathering, her work makes NAAFA available to social scientists as a data source populated by compliant informants with a complicit management. Where NOLOSE, a comparable organisation, has gate-keeping strategies to protect its membership from exploitation by researchers and journalists, NAAFA does not. Erich Goode's sexual abuse of NAAFA members in the course of his ethnography of the organisation has not altered the organisation's open door policy, nor the willingness of researchers, including those who publicly criticised Goode, to use NAAFA as a study site (Goode and Preissler 1983, Bell 2002, Goode 2002, Saguy 2002). The availability of NAAFA as a repository of data should not be overlooked. The organisation has become the fat activism archetype, it is rhetorically reproduced in the literature as a proxy for all fat activism, the place where ethnographers can find participants, where fat activism happens. NAAFA is what fat activism looks like within this body of social science literature: a product of a formal organisation, a meat market, heterosexual, American, consisting of a membership of ambivalently fat women who do not represent the organisation's stated aims. It is almost too obvious to state that NAAFA does not represent the totality of fat activism, including activism that occurs outside the US, or in small moments, and that NAAFA is often contested within fat activism.

Such A Pretty Face is not primarily a study of fat activism, rather it is a comparison of obesity frames. Frame alignment is a means of analysing the motivations and values of a group, and has been developed by social movement theorists from Goffman's original study (Goffman 1974, Oliver and Johnston 2000). A group of social scientists have used frame analysis to investigate the values of fat activists, and variations on the method are also present in other comparison accounts of fat activism (Sobal and Maurer 1999a, Sobal and Maurer 1999b, Martin 2002, Sturmer et al. 2003, Saguy and Riley 2005, Brown 2005, Johnston and Taylor 2008, Kwan 2009). These publications attempt to provide a thorough explanation of how people make meaning and define social justice goals within fat activism and in comparison to other organisations. However, in the context of this research, these studies have numerous shortcomings which expose their limited use in analysing fat activism.
The emphasis on organisations as the core of fat activism is misleading given the scarcity of such organisations, and the evidence I will present later that most fat activism occurs outside organisations. As with Erdman Farrell, the 'natural' location of fat activism in the United States is not questioned, although some authors mention other groups, they are always 'elsewhere' and removed from analysis. Abigail Saguy and Kevin Riley and, in a separate study, Samantha Kwan refer to fat activist leadership, for example:

"[Marilyn] Wann is the current Activism Chair on the Board of Directors at NAAFA and her book is akin to a manifesto for the fat rights movement."

(Kwan 2009, p.31)

This is not to deny the influence of Wann's work, but the authors' claims about leadership are not substantiated, they reveal assumptions that fat activism is an authoritarian movement of formal organisations and tacit leaders, or that the movement is unified under a manifesto. My research shows that this is only a small part of what is going on, and that fat activism is a sprawling and disunited endeavour.

Frame analysis is based on the comparison of ideal types featuring clean boundaries. Saguy and Riley acknowledge that people will fall between categories but, unlike my study, they choose not to explore those ambiguous spaces. Instead, fat activism is reduced to a number of fixed concerns, based on NAAFA's policies, which presume an essentialist fat activist type and which remains tied to debates about health, stigma and beauty. Frame analysis is used to examine contested frames; thus the strategic and rhetorical tactics of NAAFA, as a proxy for fat activism, are compared to those of Weight Watchers, Overeaters Anonymous, and representatives of obesity research or food industry lobby groups. NAAFA is shown to share some ideological similarities to these other entities. But fat activism as I present it here, largely beyond organisational activism, cannot be compared and reduced in this way because its heterogeneity cannot be contained by the same frame as obesity. Contesting frames suggests that the tensions between organisations within debates about obesity are hierarchical and distinct, projecting a future where one explanatory frame dominates. But this is too simplistic and disregards the more likely development of hybrids, coalitions, and multiple discursive sites, as I will discuss.
I have restricted this section to literature that has a clear connection to Millman. However, beyond Millman, most studies of fat activism suffer from a similar disengagement with the phenomena under analysis, and I will discuss more work that suffers from these shortcomings below. Scholarly distance undermines the quality of the research; for example, in her study of fat shame Erdman Farrell appears unaware of high profile debates within the movement concerning the work of Orbach, and misnames prominent activists (Erdman Farrell 2011). Scholars in the field repeatedly try to minimise and reduce fat activism to a fixed set of concerns, people or places, and do not relate to the expansiveness of the movement, as I will do here. Indeed, attempts to contain fat activism resemble the ways in which obesity discourse seeks to contain and explain fat bodies. Such studies diminish fat activism, but they are scholarly, and thus cited, and they become part of its body of knowledge. Hence the on-going reproduction of Millman's problematic claims thirty years on, and the sense, within the small literature of fat activism, that the phenomena is trapped within a set of distorting mirrors. This has surely contributed to the movement's theoretical inertia that I will come to discuss presently. The explanatory texts cited above lack sufficient capacity to make sense of an event like 'Go Chub Crazy With The Chubsters!'. They do not have the ability to reflect critically on what such an activist space means, to contextualise it, particularly within the wider histories and cultures of fat activism, or to address ambiguity and multiplicity. Although that workshop is an unusual kind of fat activism, analyses of fat activism must be flexible enough to incorporate it and to help develop instead of suffocate or colonise fat activist praxis.

**Critical literature**

In using the term critical literature I am referring to a group of texts distinct from those above in that they regard fat activism as a phenomenon with little social value. Authors in this section either ignore fat activism, or offer critiques that are based on threatened interests, obesity discourse, and personal grievance. As with the disengaged literature cited above, I argue that these criticisms continue to be offered from weak, reductive and speculative positions and are largely disconnected with fat activism itself.
Marginalised fat activism

The explosion of global obesity epidemic rhetoric and policy in recent years has supercharged obesity discourse; finding a cure for obesity has raised the stakes in research, with considerable funding and exposure for anti-obesity projects. Whilst the post-millennial global recession has affected the financing of anti-obesity initiatives, fat remains a prominent political subject. A new critical literature is developing a powerful counter-discourse but, despite its potential for developing liveable lives or interrogating obesity, fat activism is ignored or given a cursory glance in work that upholds and undermines obesity, as well as hybrids of those positions.

It is not surprising that fat activism is absent from research that upholds obesity discourse; the clinic, the laboratory, the weight loss multinational, and the policy-maker's meeting are ill-equipped to recognise or welcome it. Obesity discourse reproduces the abjection of fatness: fat is attrition, it is the pathological and literal representation of slow death (Berlant 2007). Fat people are Othered, anonymous, an abstraction; 'The Obese'. Fat is a crisis brought about by a mismanagement of energy balance, it offers nothing of value other than a platform for intervention. Fat activism rudely disrupts these sites and is silenced through avoidance of it, and where mentioned it is devalued and written off. The Project Report for Foresight Tackling Obesities: Future Choices, upon which UK government obesity policy is founded, is unusual in that it mentions the existence of fat activism in a context that goes on to reiterate the severe health risks and social costs of obesity:

"One of the challenges for policy makers, public health practitioners and other stakeholders is that the public and the media often focus on excess weight as an appearance issue, rather than one that concerns health. Obesity has become stigmatised, triggering the appearance of 'fat and proud' movements in the USA, but at the same time overweight has become normalised." (Butland 2005, p.30)

This passage demonstrates how, even when a critical perspective is allowed to surface, it is instantly smothered by an obesity discourse that cannot account for it within an energy-balance model of fatness (see Glossary). Of interest to me is the use of 'fat and proud' in the UK as a shorthand for fat activism. This is not a term that people within the movement generally use to describe or name what they do or who they are.

Elsewhere it has been derided (Brooks 2002). Fat & Proud is also the title of my book.
Given this, I sometimes wonder if my work has come to represent an idea of fat activism to those who are invested in its marginalisation. Here, the mis-named 'fat and proud' movement is suggested as a response to a discourse of appearance, or an inexplicable normalising of the monstrous, and is situated only in the US. The citation is left hanging with no further examination and, of all the resources they could cite, a footnote offers a link to an obscure and out-dated website lacking any substance, which further implies that fat activism is of trifling consequence (www.Ringsurf.com 2003).

Popular debates emerging from the critical literature of obesity are concerned, for example, with more measured approaches to obesity science, biopower, moral discourses of obesity, and stigma and discrimination. These have been taken up by fat activists in various practical ways, but the figure of the fat activist, or direct accounts by fat activists, are generally absent from the texts. A critical literature of obesity discourse may have the potential to illuminate fat activism but it is no more likely to address the subject than that which lacks a critical edge. Kelly Brownell's work at Yale University's Rudd Centre for Food Policy and Obesity, and Patrick Basham et al. condemn obesity discourse in various ways but maintain support for weight management, rather than discuss fat activism as a viable and less risky public health strategy (Brownell et al. 2005, Basham et al. 2006). Paul Campos, Michael Gard and Jan Wright, Wright and Valerie Harwood, and Anna Kirkland reference fat activism, but do not include substantial contextualising information beyond their use of NAAFA as a proxy for the movement, for example (Campos 2004, Campos 2005, Gard and Wright 2005, Wright and Harwood 2008, Kirkland 2008, Gard 2011). It is only Gard and Wright here who attempt a wider discussion, but theirs, too, is inadequate. Fat activism is presented as a method for re-orientating fat subjectivity, of refuting claims about obesity and abjection, and of 'celebrating' fatness, yet what is being celebrated is unclear and unconvincing. Following Wann and other popular authors, activism is presented as an empowering, therapeutic endeavour, an individualist body-project of self-actualisation, which it may well be, but these claims are not critically discussed through close engagement with the movement, and the lack of context for them in this work makes them somewhat empty.

Critical obesity scholarship also reproduces the marginalisation of fatness to some extent. Fat people are represented as clients in the clinic, as patients under the
stewardship of health professionals, they are represented in studies as alienated, docile, voiceless, mediated research subjects in need of remedy, even when that research has noble fat liberation-oriented goals, see for example Linda Bacon's HAES study of dieters (Bacon et al. 2005). More progressively, Heather Sykes' qualitative study of gender, sexuality and fatness in physical education programmes proposes fat activism as a remedy for the fatphobia that radiates from those spaces, but this too misses the more extensive possibilities for fat activism (Sykes 2011). Critical work that emerged as a response to the acceleration of obesity discourse remains locked into its terms because it seeks to influence those terms and must be articulated within them. Fat subjectivity, and fat activism, is thus reduced to discourses on health, discrimination and stigma, and becomes appropriated by professionals in the clinic and in the academy. The emphasis is on problematising fat experience instead of finding answers within it, and fat activism is valuable or visible here only in its limited role in challenging prejudice or promoting health. Sites of radical knowledge production that extend beyond those boundaries are overlooked, especially those that relate to second wave feminism or queer subjectivity. Yet queer theorists propose that the ability to imagine other possibilities that draw on pleasure, beauty, the preposterous, and alternative ways of living, is crucial to the work of social change (Muñoz 2009). The absence of critical recognition of the movement, even where authors have some sympathy for fat activism, reads as an indirect snub; the phenomenon is presumed irrelevant.

The relegation of fat activism could be regarded as a type of misrecognition. Following Pierre Bourdieu and Nancy Fraser, Andrew Sayer identifies misrecognition as a refusal of the powerful to see, or recognise as valid, real, and worthy of attention, those who do not share their power (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Fraser 2009, Sayer 2011). Bourdieu attributes this to power and habitus, where capital means that the powerful can interpret social phenomena as they please, and where it is not in their interests to engage otherwise. This echoes my earlier quote from bell hooks, who identifies a similar process of (gendered, racialised, classed) power at play that obscures and appropriates phenomena (hooks 1994). Paolo Freire would argue that the powerful misrecognise because they are incapable of doing otherwise (Freire 1970). Bourdieu and Fraser acknowledge that misrecognition is a form of symbolic violence. In this way, fat activism is consistently misrecognised within dominant discourse.
This study shares the field with a critical literature influenced by obesity discourse and obesity epidemic rhetoric, but it also extends beyond those terms to consider fat activism as a subject in its own right worthy of close attention in academia and beyond. Here I acknowledge the agency of fat people, make use of direct accounts by fat activists, and demonstrate the usefulness of fat activism not only for interrogating obesity but also for the possibilities it presents beyond those boundaries.

The threat of fat activism

Fat activism is a threat to some parties because it upsets dominant discourse, around which there are many vested interests, including ones that reap great financial rewards, or whose power is exercised in other ways, perhaps through status and ideology. I have written about literature that is ill-equipped to explore fat activism because it is allied solely to the closed obesity paradigm of energy balance, even where it is critical of that model, and which ignores or dismisses fat activism through token citations. There are examples of other types of literature, by authors working for organisations that are also threatened by fat activism, who try to criticise the movement more openly.

Michael Fumento, an investigative reporter who has enjoyed financial support from the biotech corporation Monsanto, the tobacco multinational Philip Morris, and a number of right wing think tanks, attacks fat activism because it is based on 'bad science', whereas obesity discourse represents 'good science' and therefore 'truth' (Fumento 1997, Gard and Wright 2005). Michael Gard and Jan Wright point out that Fumento's claim on good science is undermined by his promotion of weight loss strategies based on 19th century quackery. But such contradictions are typical of obesity discourse that simultaneously demands weight loss whilst acknowledging that long-term maintenance is unlikely (NICE 2006). The contradictions also reflect the strategic, inconsistent and perhaps unscrupulous use of ethics by corporations to justify their actions, such as weight loss companies and the businesses for whom Fumento works.

Because Fumento's critique and Gard and Wright's counter-critique are based in obesity discourse, science and medicalisation, they do not consider other productive means of evaluation. For example, Fumento's disdain for fat activism could be regarded as neoconservative contempt for social movements concerned with identity politics, or
feminism, or the new social movements of the left. His rejection of fat activism is an attempt to hold back encroaching liberalism, especially given the fat activism in the United States that is orientated towards health reform. Fumento makes the usual oversimplified assumptions about fat activism but, if he had paid closer attention, he would have found allies in initiatives such as the Big Liberty RSS feed, which aggregates a number of libertarian fat activist blogs, or the work of Sandy Swarc, a blogger who is critical of the science of obesity as well as climate change (Big Liberty n.d., Swarc 2011).

Corporate ideology has underpinned a more recent tirade against fat activism. Weight loss is a key area of the Dole Food Company's corporate strategy (Dole Food Company inc 2012). Jennifer Grossman, director of Dole's Nutrition Institute, gives a sarcastic account of a visit to a NAAFA convention. From this one encounter she extrapolates that fat activism is insupportable because it undermines the possibility of overcoming obesity, with its significant economical, health and social drawbacks, through sustained weight loss (Grossman 2003). She makes no attempt to address critically her views on the relationship of health and weight, or to respond to evidence which brings critical attention to that relationship. Her account has no depth as a critical text concerning fat activism, it is merely another aspect of Dole's marketing of weight loss.

The flimsiness of Fumento and Grossman's analysis, together with the conflict of interest represented by their professional roles, is barely worth stating. Fumento and Grossman use fat activism to push their own organisational agendas covertly. Their criticisms of fat activism lack weight and make negligible revelations about the movement.

*Using obesity to explain fat activism*

Earlier I mentioned a group of authors who use frame analysis to explore how NAAFA and various obesity stakeholders share similar organisational rhetoric, even when they are ideologically opposed. Because none of the studies validate their findings by including negative cases in their analyses, it could be that the shared rhetoric relates more to 'organisation' than 'obesity'. However, what reinforces these studies is the assumption that obesity is the overarching discourse of fatness. I have already shown
that obesity discourse is not equipped to elucidate fat activism in literature that is supportive of, yet disengaged from, fat activism, and in critical literature that marginalises the phenomenon. Here I want to discuss the limitations of obesity as a model for fat activism in more depth by looking at two pieces of work that try to critique the movement but fail not only because of their scholarly remove and speculation, but also because of their commitment to obesity in framing their arguments.

In his exploration of the routes that sociological research into fat might take, Nick Crossley's rendering of obesity discourse is incomplete and contradictory; he understands obesity as a social construction but reiterates it as fact, as epidemic, as crisis and energy balance (Crossley 2004). Nevertheless, he includes a number of perplexing references to fat activism within his argument, almost hitting the mark by identifying that some fat activism has roots in feminism, and simultaneously challenging the argument, popularised by Orbach, that fat represents resistance to normativity and biopower. Crossley recognises that fat activism takes place through organisations and by the actions of individuals, but says without citing evidence that it is very limited in the UK. Some of his claims are understandable given the dearth of material available, for example that fat activism is concerned only with challenging stigma, that it is based in the US, or that Orbach represents fat feminism. But the rest of his discussion verges on the bizarre: the only people who support fat activism are fat; Mama Cass is an icon of the movement and invoking her name enables Crossley to digress randomly into a series of unrelated comments about class, habitus and exercise; 'Fat Underground' is referenced in parenthesis with no explanation as to what it means, or even that it was an organisation (p.248). Crossley mentions that he has unearthed evidence about fat activism but does not cite any of it, nevertheless he states authoritatively that the movement is "very limited" (p.248). Once again, the combination of obesity and scholarly remove, or even arrogance, barely illuminates fat activism.

Crossley is a sociologist concerned with the body, but his paper reflects the failure of the sociology of embodiment to develop fat activism. Prior to Crossley, Bryan Turner helpfully argues that the body is not a natural, discoverable fact, but socially constructed (Turner 1991, Turner 1992, Turner 1996, Turner 2000). Presumably this
applies not only to the medicalised construction of obesity that many fat activists refute, but to the construction of fat activist identities themselves, which I will discuss later in relation to weight loss. In queering fat activism Turner's claim strengthens critiques of essentialism, for example, particularly notions of the 'natural' fat activist body policed by some fat feminists in the past, and through anti-weight loss surgery rhetoric in the movement today. Turner also acknowledges the political qualities of bodies and conceptualises the body as both a micro and macro entity, whilst Chris Shilling notes that bodies have agency, and can therefore exercise power (Shilling 1993). But these contributions to a literature of fat activism are mitigated by their authors' on-going uncritical reiteration of obesity discourse. This is not a literature of social change, instead the upholding of dominant discourse in these texts position them as a literature of the establishment. Furthermore, fat is not addressed directly but marginalised through feminist proxies for fat activism such as 'body image', 'beauty', 'eating disorders', 'pro-ana culture', 'dieting', 'slimming', 'exercise', 'cosmetic surgery', 'slenderness', 'food' and 'appetite'. The field itself has been criticised for its reliance on theory, lack of empiricism or, ironically, embodiment, and the sheer diversity of bodies means broad theoretical generalisations about 'the body' do not explicate fat sufficiently, but it is for these other reasons that this body of work is not a foundation for this study (Nettleton and Watson 1998).

In a similar vein, Elspeth Probyn condemns fat activism without a basic understanding of the subject (Probyn 2008). Oddly, she shares much in common with Grossman, arguing that fat activism keeps people fat and therefore unhealthy, that the global obesity epidemic is an imperative for feminists to do something about the problem of obesity, and that fat activism represents some kind of cult. Probyn retreats within obesity discourse tropes of food poverty, energy balance, agribusiness and the catastrophic consumption of "cheap and bad products" (p.402). She does not cite Antronette Yancey et al., but their paper of two years previously makes similar claims in the name of feminism (Yancey et al. 2006). Probyn complains that fat activism misreads Foucauldian theory, ignoring the contributions of contemporaries John Evans et al. or Jan Wright and Valerie Harwood to discussions of biopower and surveillance that have been very helpful to fat activists (Evans et al. 2008, Wright and Harwood 2008). She is selective in the fat activism that she references, and criticises it for poor media literacy, whilst failing to reflect on phenomena such as fat zine-making, the
Fatosphere, or the complex ways that fat activists have been using and creating media for the past 40 years. By stating that feminists are not engaging with fatness, Probyn unwittingly echoes Susan and Orland Wooley's influential argument three decades previously that fat is a neglected feminist topic, and Heather Smith's call to radical feminists to create a fat politics of appearance, which appeared ten years later, as well as a rich body of fat feminist theory that I will discuss in Chapter Five (Wooley et al. 1979, Smith 1989). Probyn's own analysis is too narrow and offers practically nothing to advance the feminist understanding of the topic other than to provide another piece of blowhard academia that has failed to come to grips with fat activism.

Crossley and Probyn demonstrate that fat activism cannot be explained within obesity discourse, or bodies of sociological knowledge that do not critically interrogate obesity, because it exists beyond its limits. Authors who draw on obesity discourse to interrogate fat activism from a scholarly distance quickly become unstuck. More expansive ways of understanding fat activism are required in order to engage productively with the subject, which this study will explore.

**Fat activism that fails**

I wish to conclude this section by discussing critical work by fat, or previously fat, authors who have denounced fat activism after having some involvement with the movement.

Shelley Bovey and Samantha Murray do not identify themselves in their works as fat activists, but to varying extents they both present critical views of obesity that are connected to their lived experience as fat women, they are both critically engaged with fat activism, and they both draw upon incidents in their work that could be categorised as fat activism, for example the act of interrogating clothing that does not fit (Bovey 1989, Bovey 1994, Murray 2005b, Murray 2012). Both Bovey and Murray have lost weight since first encountering fat activism, Bovey through a commercial dieting group and Murray via a gastric band. Both authors maintain critical accounts of what weight loss entails, including its maintenance, and the management of other people's reactions (Bovey 2001, Murray 2009a, Murray 2009b).
Bovey sets forth a long account of fat hatred and its effects on fat people in Being Fat Is Not A Sin, a book that was renamed and revised in a later edition (Bovey 1989, Bovey 1994). She lingers on the sheer misery of fat hatred and provides examples of its many manifestations. Being Fat is not a Sin was part of a British awakening to fat feminism in the late 1980s, which was recognised in mainstream culture through television programmes featuring Nancy Roberts and The London Fat Women's Group, with whom Bovey had some contact (Roberts 1987, BBC 1989a, Smith 1989). But there is little of that epistemology of fat in her work, like other mainstreamers of fat activism in the UK in the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as the magazines Extra Special, Pretty Big and Yes!, Bovey sits uncomfortably at the crossroads of radicalism and conservatism in fat activism, neither of which can be reconciled with the other. For example, Bovey regards fat activism as having potential to counter fat hatred, but does not develop this argument. Although the London Fat Women's Group were directly influenced by the fat feminism generated by radical lesbian feminists in the US, this fat activist genealogy would not have been regarded as appropriate content for the mainstream readership to whom Bovey's work was marketed at that time because of homophobia and anti-feminism (Faludi 1992). This explains some of the absence of fat activism in her work, but a sentiment of anti-fat feminism emerged later. In an anthology edited by Bovey, contributors actively distance themselves from an idea of fat activism that is named as 'Fat and Proud,' perhaps referencing my work, which is more overtly based in fat feminist activism. Janice Bhend, who edited Yes!, provides a typical statement:

"All the time we were pushing the boundaries out, little by little, towards size acceptance. In order not to 'frighten the horses' I felt the best way forward was to make people think and present them with reasonable argument for change. We never subscribed to the Fat and Proud movement, believing instead that size, in an ideal world, should be quite simply irrelevant, although to try and achieve that goal we did have to bang on about it quite a lot!" (Bhend 2000, p.168)

Before she started publishing books about fat women, Bovey – like Bhend – worked as a journalist, primarily for mainstream women's magazines. If Bovey had a grounding in activism, it was not apparent in her writing and would likely not have been encouraged in the outlets that published her at that time. Instead she brought a mainstream conservative sensibility to fat feminism, a centre-right journalist's voice, and an intolerance for radicalism, which is how fat activism is positioned in her work. In the fat activist rhetoric of that period, public and unrepentant weight loss by a figure like
Bovey who previously appeared supportive of the movement would have inspired outrage, and such actions remain contentious (Meleo-Erwin 2011). Yet Bovey does not sugar-coat her weight loss, she explains her depressing weight management regime explicitly and describes it as the best strategy for her. Nevertheless, she maintains a disdain for fat activism, arguing that it does not address the pain of being fat, or, perhaps, her pain, and in one interview she compares fat activists to fascists (Brooks 2002).

Murray's scholarly articles on fat embodiment began to be published around the same time that she underwent gastric banding in 2005. This action would have been coded at that time within a fat activism that is critical of weight loss surgery as a rejection of the movement (Murray 2004, Murray 2005a, Murray 2005b, Murray 2007, Murray 2008). Later publications and presentations make autoethnographic use of her experience as rejected and rejecter (Murray 2009a, Murray 2009b, Murray 2011). Like Bovey, Murray's encounters with fat activism, as a reader of fat activist texts, prompted her to dismiss the movement because of its perceived inability to make sense of her experiences of pain and ambivalence. This analysis of fat activism appears based primarily on her reading of Wann, whose work and milieu are taken as a representation of fat activism more generally, although this is ambiguous, contradicted in her texts at times, and not critically addressed, in references to a small number of organisations (Wann 1998). Murray does not abandon fat activism completely, however, but her determinist argument that autonomy and agency are not possible because people are constrained by social forces leaves her stuck, and her claims that fat activism is useful or helpful are left hanging. Unlike Bovey, Murray maintains an on-going relationship to fat activism through her scholarship, locating post-banding autoethnographic accounts in Fat Studies, organising a Fat Studies conference, and re-engaging to some extent with fat activist community (Cooper and Murray 2012).

Both Bovey and Murray base their claims about fat activism in their books on peevish encounters with the movement. Their difficulty in finding helpful strategies or developing supportive alliances within fat activism is taken as evidence of its universal lack of substance or validity. Neither Bovey nor Murray describes sustained involvement in collective activity, Bovey notes the London Fat Women's Group and NAAFA briefly, and references media personalities who buck fat stereotypes, but there
is little examination of community or evidence of other activisms beyond this. They are alone as fat women, without evidence in their work of wider political or cultural engagement that might help make sense of fat activism. They both describe coming to fat activism in order to find solace from unbearable ambivalence and self-hatred and they both articulate disappointment and anger when the movement is unable to provide them with what they need. For Bovey this intersects with a politics intolerant of a radical re-imagining of fat personhood. Fat activism is perceived as a replacement for self-hatred and the cultural imperative to lose weight yet, as Murray's critique of self-authorship demonstrates, it cannot operate successfully on the same liberal humanist terms as the rhetoric of transformative weight loss, because it is different. I return to my claim that obesity discourse cannot explain the depth or range of fat activism because the latter lies beyond the boundaries of the former.

Lily Rygh Glen is another critic of fat activism who has been disappointed by the movement. Her allegations that people with eating disorders face rejection from fat activism have some basis (Rygh Glen 2008). For example, my book, *Fat & Proud*, is consciously distanced from earlier feminist work on eating disorders because of the ways in which that discourse had pathologised fat people (Cooper 1998). LeBesco also notes the ‘will to innocence’ within fat activism, the idea that fat people are not responsible for their weight, a politically strategic position but one which re-pathologises those whose eating habits contribute to their fatness, including people like Rygh Glen who has an eating disorder (LeBesco 2004). Indeed, Rygh Glen's article was attacked when it was published, adding to her case that the relationship between fat activism and feminist eating disorder discourse is fraught. But Rygh Glen's critique is ultimately too narrow, as with other critics she presents a limited picture of fat activism, and she does not take into account work that combines fat activism and feminist eating disorder discourse, for example by Allyson Mitchell (Mitchell 2005).

Although I contest these authors' claims about the value of fat activism, they remain important because they provide rare critical accounts of the phenomenon by authors who have at least some direct connection to the movement. Whilst I experience some of the tensions that Bovey, Murray and Rygh Glen voice, I do not reject fat activism as they do, instead I seek productive and critical discussion amongst fat activists and academics. These critical texts reiterate that obesity is an inadequate frame for fat
activism, or for making sense of a moment such as 'Go Chub Crazy With The Chubsters!'. As with the explanatory texts I presented at the beginning of this literature review, the critical literature is unable to locate an event such as the NOLOSE workshop within a broader context of fat activism, or to consider the multiplicity and ambiguity within fat activism. A different approach is required.

**Locating the thesis**

I have shown and discussed the places where fat activism is present in the literature and outlined a number of problems. Literature associated with fat activism currently lacks the capacity to critically analyse the movement that extends beyond a rigid and confined definition. Furthermore, the literature generally fails to situate fat activism within discourse beyond obesity or stigma. Cultural production, and the qualities of community are absent, for example. Texts exploring fat activism tend to be speculative and are produced by people who have minimal direct contact with the movement, which has led to the reproduction of certain claims about what constitutes fat activism. The literature of fat activism suffers from major weaknesses: it lacks critical rigour, it is fragmented and does not provide a bigger context for itself, and it marginalises fat activism as insignificant without proper analysis or reflection.

A central aim of this study is to make fat activism present within research literature, and to develop critical thought about the movement based on direct and sustained involvement. There are places within the literature that support my ideas but, because the body of published work on fat activism is relatively skimpy, I have also had to rely on strategies of lateral thinking and theoretical bricolage as a basis for my arguments. Lateral thinking means resolving problems and gaps by way of left field tactics. In this case this entails evaluating the means through which fat people are currently theorised yet absent, and building on elements of that work. Bricolage is a technique employed by postmodern cultural producers which involves creating new forms through the careful assemblage of objects. It is integrative, aimed at producing hybrids and synthesising interdisciplinary objects. Locating fat activism productively in the available literature entails a strategic bricolage of overlapping bodies of work where elements of fat activism are already present. In this next section I will use my research questions to frame a discussion of literature that offers a more productive analysis of fat activism.
What is fat activism?

My data show that fat activists have difficulty in conceptualising what they do, and definitions of fat activism vary greatly. Given the confusion about what fat activism consists of in the literature discussed above, it is useful to ask the elementary question: what is fat activism?

I have begun with the broad assumption that fat activism is about power and agency. Michel Foucault's work on governmentality is a common theoretical device in critical studies of obesity, the sociology of embodiment, and in corporeal feminism which examines its gendered implications (Foucault 1977, Bartky 1988, Turner 1992, Grosz 1994, Bordo 1999, Gatens 1999). Theorising bodies that are socially controlled, stratified, surveilled, regimented, patrolled, and self-governing helps makes sense of, for example, school measurement programmes, compulsory physical education, or cultural imperatives to lose weight (Evans et al. 2008, Evans and Colls 2009, Pauly Morgan 2011, Sykes 2011). Although governmentality accounts for the conditions from which fat activism might arise, it does not explain what it is that fat activists do. Indeed, by focusing on governmentality to the exclusion of other ideas about the uses of power that Foucault helpfully provides, the discourse of fat, including critical discourse, remains one of helplessness in the face of overwhelming social control.

A different reading of Foucault reveals that governmentality is a truncated analysis of power, it reveals the subtlety of power but it does not fully support the possibility of active resistance as a response to and as a kind of power in its own right. In The History of Sexuality, and elsewhere, power is not enshrined within authorities feeding down to the lowliest subject, it is a dynamic field in which everyone is implicated (Foucault 1980, Foucault and Gordon 1980, Foucault 1981, Foucault 1982). Power is a form of relating, it is productive rather than simply repressive, and it is exercised. Power exists in all social relations, including the smallest interactions, and it is used in strategic ways. Resistance is always present because the relations of power generate numerous sites for action, so that a plurality of action occurs in relation to power. This reading of Foucault is productive here because it recognises that fat people are present and active in a field of power, which could be named 'obesity' or 'fat,' and which shares turf with other fields of power. It brings attention not only to those presumed to exercise
authority, but also to other players who can no longer be discounted as an anonymous population that is merely 'done to'.

In this context, it is appropriate to draw on a sociological literature that considers not just the social meanings of bodies and their social positioning, but those 'other players' and the things that they do, to look at how and why people resist and generate social change through a sociology of social movements.

Social movements are typically represented in the sociological literature within fixed definitions of shared phenomena: they are collective, they challenge elites from the ground up through sustained activity, they are organisations of members who share a common purpose (Tarrow 1994, Scott and Marshall 2005, Snow et al. 2007). Jürgen Habermas' theorising of social action within the public sphere, and Nancy Fraser's feminist development of that theory to encompass subaltern counterpublics also rely on hierarchical categories, and an idea of activism as collective and dialectic (Habermas 1989, Fraser 1990). Typologies of activism are common, and scientific rationality underpins the debate.

It is tempting to ally with these explanations because they are stated with an attractive conviction, a confidence of certainty, they contain and make knowable an otherwise bewildering range of messy human behaviour. In applying them to fat activism, however, much is left out, not least, as my data show, that fat activism is not always a collective endeavour, that it happens within institutions as well as outside of them, that it is multiple, that it is not necessarily held in a dyadic power struggle, that it can be ambiguous. There is not much that is tidy about fat activism. I want to keep in mind that a central quality of fatness, especially the queer fatness that concerns me most, is that it does not fit: fat activism does not fit within dominant obesity discourse other than as a dismissal.

In seeking a sociological rationale for this study I take a sideways look beyond the obvious scholars to social movement literature that addresses the messy qualities of fat activism. This is a scattered literature loosely bound within the social sciences and presented through feminist, postcolonial and poststructural lenses (Wieviorka 2005, Bobel 2007, Isin 2009). My contribution here is to continue to unfix social movement
theory, and to consider how fat activism extends how social movements are understood in the social sciences and beyond.

**Where is my fat activism discursively located?**

My research data suggest that fat activists operate with minimal critical reflection about the discursive locations of their activities, which are frequently produced within assumed and unexamined theoretical frameworks. With this in mind, I have chosen to pay attention to the question of where my fat activism comes from, a fat activism that is also shared by the sample, and to consider how it has been historically and culturally informed. It is my belief that exploring fat activist discourse has the potential to reveal new sites for action and areas for critical enquiry. Although my fat activism is supported by a number of different epistemologies, it is fat feminism that provides its most convincing context.

Foucault proposes and uses genealogy as a method of locating subjects within discourse over time and place. Here, I wish to show how the fat activists in the study sample have been discursively constructed through a number of social processes, through theory as well as in material spaces (Foucault 1993). Following Foucault, I mark out a painstaking genealogy of fat feminism based on fragmented and local knowledge gleaned from the archive and through the interviews for this project. This is a genealogy of specificity rather than grand narrative. I consider genealogy a means of tracing and interpreting connections between subjects from a position, that is, my identity as a queer fat activist researcher, that is also constructed by and saturated with discourse.

Instead of depending on the literature generated by feminist proxies for fat activism that I discussed earlier, I present a different fat feminist genealogy and explore how fat feminist activist epistemology has travelled, and the effects of some of those travels. This follows the work of Kathy Davis, whose own study of a travelling feminist activist project is located in transnational and postcolonial feminisms (Davis 2007). The literature of this different genealogy relates to radical lesbian feminist fat activism in the West from the early 1970s through to the late 1980s. *Shadow On A Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* is the standard text for this body of work (Schoenfielder and Wieser 1983). An anthology of first-person essays from the US, it represents fat
subjectivity through a number of intersections, including race, sexuality, age and class (Steff and Deb 1983, thunder 1983, Nelson 1983). Fat activism is presented as an everyday activity in contributions by Judy Freespirit, Judith Stein and Elana Dykewomon, and unquestioningly part of a feminist consciousness of the personal and the political (Freespirit 1983, Stein 1983, Dykewomon 1983). Vivian Mayer's foreword locates fat feminism culturally and historically within the work of The Fat Underground, of which she was a founding member (Mayer 1983).

Beyond Schoenfielder and Wieser, the literature is more obscure and can be found in articles located in journals of the period that articulated radical lesbian feminism. For example, both Sinister Wisdom and Common Lives/Lesbian Lives were based in the US, and had explicit editorial guidelines inviting submissions from underrepresented groups, including fat women. Freespirit's critical account of appearing on a television talk show, and Susan Stinson's poetry, which explores fat activist subjectivity, are typical of the rich and eclectic material to be found here, which communicate fat feminist community sensibilities of that time (Freespirit 1986, Stinson 1988). Such values include autonomy, collective action, separatism, and the centrality of cultural production in pioneering new alternatives to damaging and restrictive mainstream ideals. In the UK, later in the 1980s, a flurry of articles relating to the work of the London Fat Women's Group can be found in the feminist journals and magazines including Gossip, Spare Rib, and Trouble and Strife (Hayman 1986, Jenkins and Smith 1987, Bean et al. 1987, Jenkins and Farnham 1988, Smith 1989). This work is critical not just of the mainstream but of fatphobia within radical politics, including feminism. I have used these resources to provide a sketch of fat feminist origins.

Fat feminist texts are also present in archival objects, such as the online archive of fat feminism, hosted by Largesse, which contains scanned copies of original Fat Underground documents and Fat Liberator Publications, and Freespirit's collection of papers at the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Historical Society in San Francisco. These primary sources depict creative, lively and productive early fat feminist culture taking place in various kinds of organisation, and through relationships and friendships. They show that fat activism was a part of certain feminist communities through the community spaces described by Greta Rensenbrink in her essay about fat feminism in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early 1970s (Rensenbrink 2010). Her
essay is useful in plotting the ways that feminism supported and undermined fat activism in that time and place. I have drawn upon this work and expanded it to consider fat feminist locations beyond the Bay Area, to discuss how fat feminism has travelled, and some of the limitations of its journeys.

Fat feminism pre-dates the emergence of queer theory, and aspects of second wave feminism, within which it is based, such as gender essentialism and transphobia, have been strongly criticised by third wave feminists, whose work I use less explicitly and take somewhat for granted (Findlen 2001, Mitchell et al. 2001, Stasko 2008). But changes and shifts in fat activist community, represented by the sample and, for example, through the developing policies of NOLOSE, suggest that there are continuities and that these bodies of work are compatible. Whilst I locate the development of my social network's fat activism in fat feminism, I turn to queer theory for additional clarification.

**How can fat activism be theorised productively?**

Having explored what fat activism is and where it might be discursively located, I raise the research question of how it might be theorised productively in order to consider concepts like purpose, strategy or development. I have shown that theories that seek to contain and limit fat activism within concepts like stigma or health are inadequate. Instead, I utilise a literature that augments the study data, which reveals both enthusiasm for queering fat activism, and many ways in which queer identities and values infuse the fat activism of the sample. Whilst there is generally a paucity of theorising within fat activism, queer theory offers the most compelling premise for it within the literature and, following hooks, it is both relevant and liberatory, so it is upon this that I wish to build (hooks 1994).

By queer theory I mean a diverse body of work associated with poststructural thought, critical theory, identity and sexuality. It is difficult to pinpoint the origins of queer theory because it came out of a number of places and contexts, inside and beyond the academy. The term is attributed to Teresa de Lauretis, who published a special edition of *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* in 1991, but by this point 'queer,' previously a slur, had already been reclaimed by activists on the street (Anonymous 1990, de
Lauretis 1991). AIDS activism was pivotal in developing queer theory; focusing on inclusive coalitions and categories of behaviour rather than identity (Schulman 1994). Michel Foucault's influence is undeniable, by placing sexuality in discourse he also questioned the essentialist construction of sexuality (Foucault 1981). Authors including Gayle Rubin and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick build on his theory of sexuality and power to question hierarchies of sexual behaviour, separate and expand possibilities for understanding gender and sexuality (Rubin 1984, Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990). The potential for transgressing assimilation and normativity developed via contributions from Judith Butler and social movements such as queercore, with its growing disaffection with lesbian and gay community leadership (Butler 2004, du Plessis and Chapman 1997). Queer theory has become a key to redefining gender, by trans theorists such as Kate Bornstein and Patrick Califia (Bornstein 1994, Califia 2000).

More recently, queer readings of feminism and postcolonialism have emerged, developing concepts around the political uses of queer identity, and the role of the archive in queer life (Cvetkovitch 2003, Puar 2007, Ahmed 2010). I use queer here as a means of understanding the affective experience of the archive, of managing disaporic queer fat feminist community, of making sense of discord and ambiguity, and as identity. Following Noreen Giffney, I think of queer as a series of fairly elusive qualities rather than a fixed phenomenon (Giffney 2009).

Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick are perhaps the first to apply queer theory to fat. They propose a queered understanding of fatness and make reference to a fat liberation movement that exists within this rubric (Moon and Kosofsky Sedgwick 1994). The pair recognise the potential for fat people branded as stigmatised and abject to turn the gun around, metaphorically speaking, and use these slurs as a source of strength in the same way that queer is a defiant reclaiming of a concept that has also been used to threaten and disgust. Moon and Kosofsky Sedgwick are primarily interested scholars in relation to fat, they stick closely to the more familiar territory of queer and, generally speaking, do not veer far when they dare to give voice to thoughts about fat, making remarks about dieting and medicalisation that, by now, are well-worn. Moon's speculation is loaded with errors but he also sees in fat liberation the same questioning of categorisation as is central to queer sexuality and, following this, supports demands for new forms of fat embodiment, community and culture that reject
medical essentialism. They articulate a potential for power within fat subjectivity, and acknowledge that this cannot be contained within obesity discourse.

Where Moon and Sedgwick's analysis is rough and provisional, LeBesco offers a more thorough rendering of fat activism and queer theory. In their introduction, LeBesco and her co-author Jana Evans Braziel develop Moon and Sedgwick's speculations that queer theory reconfigures fatness, unpacks obesity discourse and presents other possibilities for understanding fatness amidst intersectional identity (Braziel and LeBesco 2001). They go further to say that fat is not static and should not be universalised through ahistorical interpretations that omit discourse. In her own chapter within the collection, LeBesco plays on the term 'revolting', noting fat bodies are positioned as revolting, as in repellent, but that there is a double meaning of revolting, which she envisages as fully embodied resistance, and where revoltingness is an important source of power (LeBesco 2001). In subsequent work LeBesco goes on to deprecate "a rhetoric of innocence which seeks to relieve [fat people] of responsibility for their much maligned condition" (LeBesco 2004, p.112). Whilst she maintains that the will to innocence is a strategic response to fatphobia, LeBesco treats it as a denial of 'revolting' as a more useful and politically sound strategy.

Revoluting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity sees LeBesco returning to an exploration of essentialism and possibilities for expanding and resignifying fat embodiment through activism (LeBesco 2004). The author never fully answers the question of whether or not fat activism relies on an essentialist reading of fat, and contradicts herself in several places, which could itself be seen as a queering of the argument. The evidence that I present in this thesis, that fat feminism emerged through radical lesbian feminist constructions of essentialist fatness and gender, might suggest a modification of LeBesco's claim that fat politics are anti-essentialist. I will go on to explain later that these essentialist constructions of fat activist identity remain popular and cause significant damage. She also argues that fat activists' attempts to resignify fat, as beautiful for example, depends on an essentialist rather than social constructionist understanding of the self and beauty. At the same time, LeBesco considers fat to be innately queer, reiterating Hanne Blank's assertion that all fat sex is queer sex, presumably regardless of context, which hints at an essentialist fat activist rendering of identity (Blank 2000). LeBesco's analysis of fat activism and essentialism is more
thoroughly queered when she takes up the question of how people within the movement are challenging the shortcomings of identity politics.

"What I find most compelling about this is the move away from organisation based on shared essential traits, towards affinities of action. While there is still some identity-based core, the new emphasis is on working with others to achieve similar goals." (LeBesco 2004, p.107)

This is less a statement of what fat people are, reflecting the inconclusiveness of the essentialism debate, and more about what they do, a question at the heart of this study. Indeed, this statement reflects the ways in which I currently undertake collective organising in my own fat activism, for example, working from project to project with people who have diverse claims to fat activism, sometimes none. It is here in LeBesco's work where I build my discussions of the boundedness of fat activism and her use of assimilationist and liberationist concepts.

LeBesco's approach to resignifying fatness is similarly open-ended; she maintains:

"Butler's work suggests to me that we just might be able to talk our way out of anything, even seemingly entrenched fat oppression, because speaking builds subjects." (LeBesco 2001, p.77)

But Samantha Murray responds that speaking does not build subjects, that it is an empty exercise because fat embodiment is undeniable. She argues that fat activists have misinterpreted Judith Butler's theories of resignification, and claims that fat activism is a futile endeavour of "overcoming the body" (Butler 2006, Murray 2008, p.6). While Butler argues that self-authoring is not possible, Murray proposes that fat activists are invested in it and that attempts to resignify fat abjection, through performance for example, merely reproduce it. Murray's argument here is not convincing, predominantly because the literature of fat activism includes many references to embodiment, and also because there are errors in the examples she offers, for example it is not true that Pretty, Porky and Pissed-Off performed only to fat audiences. Whether or not fat activism is essentialist or resignifies fat is perhaps not the issue. Queer theory would allow for both: the diversity of fat activism supports identities that are and are not built on essentialism, or may be something else; resignification may be possible through fat activism in some instances and not others, depending on the context. In this research I
try to maintain a queered both/and sensibility with regards to these questions, allowing for multiple ways of experiencing fat activism.

Queer theory offers a literature that is at ease with the ambiguity of the fat activism of my own practice, and the activities of the study sample, as well as its multiplicity. It fits with trends in other productive bodies of literature mentioned above that lean towards postmodernism and poststructuralism in explaining fat activism. It is LeBesco's 'revolting' fat activism that interests me, social action that moves beyond political process social movement models, and which explores messier terrain. Where LeBesco's fat activism has rational roots, I explore queered action that embraces irrationality, as well as integrating queer fat activisms with fat feminism and Fat Studies. Queer theory sheds light on essentialism, resignification and transgression, as discussed by Moon and Sedgwick, LeBesco, and Murray. It has other qualities that have been developed in articles and chapters by a group of authors working within Fat Studies, some of whom identify themselves as fat activists, to develop strong theoretical analyses of fat activism. Joyce Huff's account of fat activists protesting restrictive airline policies uses queer corporeal and disability theory to consider the allocation of public space to normalised bodies, incorporating Sedgwick's theories of minoritising and universalising identity politics issues as activist strategies (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990, Huff 2009).

Stefanie Snider builds on LeBesco's use of queer as 'revolting' to consider how fat activists use DIY visual imagery to construct themselves as legitimate subjects, echoing Butler's liveable lives concept, also pertinent to this study (Butler 2004b, Snider 2009). Francis Ray White develops the themes of liveable lives, transgression and the anti-social to theorise The Chubsters as symbols of the future-negating Death Drive (White 2012). Zoë Meleo-Erwin uses Foucault's concepts of biopower and 'the confession' to consider fat activists who present accounts of their weight loss online (Foucault 1981, Meleo-Erwin 2011). These authors employ discourse analysis of secondary data, unlike my study, which is based on primary autoethnographic research, but they operate within similar discursive boundaries of queer theory and fat feminism and have positioned their work productively in the sociological branches of Fat Studies, as I too will do. It is in these spaces that fat activism can be explored expansively.

I would like to add a brief note that queer here reflects fat feminist genealogy and does not denote a gay discourse of Bear culture. Chris Vargas and Greg Youmans present a
trans man's account of Bear identity informed by his community history with fat feminisms and fat activism (Vargas and Youmans 2010). But other accounts demonstrate that Bears have little claim to fat feminist activism: Ron Suresha's Bear history both patronises and belittles fat feminism; Alex Robertson Textor points out that the Big Men's Movement is not feminist, and is at times anti-feminist; Laurence Brown, a normatively-sized man who fetishises fat Bears, argues that what makes fat men sexually appealing to him might be stigma and discrimination; and Lawrence D. Mass, a physician who is also active in Bear community in the US, criticises the cultural imperative for slenderness, yet also denounces NAAFA for encouraging self-acceptance in fat people (Suresha 1997, Robertson Textor 1999, Mass 2001, Brown 2001). Further works highlight more ambiguity. Nathaniel Pyle and Michael Loewy present a detailed analysis of Bear culture within Fat Studies but deny claims that Bears are an activist movement, pointing to the conservatism of its constituency, and claiming that the group is social, as though the social is not also political (Pyle and Loewy 2009). Brendan Gough and Gareth Flanders locate Bears within a social movement that celebrates fatness, yet the authors problematise obesity and look to Bear culture as a site for weight loss interventions (Gough and Flanders 2009). Although I have enjoyed encounters with men associated with Bear culture who are also engaged with fat feminism, I have yet to find literature that reflects this position, therefore I have omitted discussion of Bears and fat activism as queering agents from this research.

Fat Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field, which also currently encompasses work within humanities, psychology and health science. Two key anthologies map the field, but continue a trajectory of earlier critical analysis in the work of Hillel Schwartz and in collections edited by Evans Braziel and LeBesco, and Don Kulick and Anne Meneley (Schwartz 1986, Braziel and LeBesco 2001, Kulick and Meneley 2005, Rothblum and Solovay 2009, Tomrley and Kaloski Naylor 2009). In the UK, a series of Economic and Social Research Council seminars helped establish the field between 2010-2011. Fat Studies conferences have taken place in the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and 2012 marked the publication of the first issue of Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society.

As a new field, Fat Studies has yet to develop theory of its own beyond those areas of interest I have described above. It has clear theoretical connections to Disability
Studies, although remains barely present within that field despite my work to develop the social model of disability to incorporate fat. This has been discussed by other academics, and authors unconnected to my work have recognised that fat and disability have common features, particularly in terms of a rights discourse (Cooper 1997, Cooper 1998, Solovay 2000, Herndon 2002, Harjunen 2004, Kirkland 2008, Aphramor 2009). Despite its relationship with disability, I think of fat as a distinct field of inquiry and not only an adjunct to Disability Studies.

I place this study most squarely in Fat Studies because it is a field that puts fat in the middle of discourse. The need to justify fat as an area for critical enquiry is absent because fat is already central, it is not obscured through obesity or proxies, nor treated as its adjunct. Fat Studies offers a less restrictive means of understanding fat, it does not limit discussion to the obesity epidemic, or medicalisation, for example, although those concepts are often present within the field. There is space to consider fat as a platform for many modes of enquiry, which makes it appropriate as a basis from which to consider the multiplicity of fat activism. Fat people are active and visible as contributors to Fat Studies, not passive and anonymous research subjects. Researcher-activists and contributors outside the academy are also present, praxis is supported as part of a disciplinary commitment to social transformation. It could be argued that Fat Studies represents a type of activism in itself because it acknowledges the political nature of the field where fat is always already submerged in ideology.

**Conclusion: my contribution to the literature**

I began this literature review with a vignette illustrating some of the complexities with which a literature of fat activism should connect. I have shown how the literature frequently fails to make such connections and have argued for the use of more productive strategies, especially those that develop fat activism beyond the concerns of obesity discourse, as 'Go Chub Crazy With The Chubsters!' represents. I have presented a critical discussion of explanatory texts, including popular works, fragmented scholarly work, feminist proxies for fat activism, and research about the movement by people with little direct involvement with it. I have gone on to discuss critical literature, including attempts to frame fat activism through obesity, and accounts offered by people who have rejected the movement at various times.
What I will do here is present a study that fills some of the gaps in the field and makes use of a bricolage of texts, including poststructuralist work, social movement theory, feminism, queer theory and Fat Studies. This work is based not only on theory but the primary evidence provided by several generations of diverse fat activists. It critically investigates fat activism, foregrounds fat culture and community, which are generally absent from the literature, and provides evidence of activist forms that are not currently recognised. It pays attention to fat activist discourse, by providing an extensive fat feminist historical assemblage, as well as tensions within the movement. Unlike literature that treats fat activism as a North American phenomenon, I take a broader view and include accounts from other countries. I regard this study as a piece of work that not only resists obesity discourse and exposes its discursive construction, but also develops a critical response to it and beyond it, queering what is presented as fat activism as well as the fixity of much social movement praxis. This is the first time that such a broad and in-depth ethnography of fat activists by a fat activist-researcher has taken place, and it represents one of the rare occasions in which agentic fat people are positioned at the centre of the work, as narrators of their own lives. I acknowledge the importance of fat activism as a phenomenon that can enable people to build satisfying lives as someone deeply embedded within the movement and for whom it continues to be a powerful force.
Chapter Three: Fat Activist Methodology

"Cat asked a great question today on her blog: who is allowed to know about fat? I love how she upsets the idea that obesity discourse is natural with this question. It's not just about who is allowed to know but also about who produces that knowledge, and who maintains it.

When I think of this the people who spring to mind are the panellists and audience at a University College of London talk on the obesity epidemic that I went to a few years ago. It was a packed room of several hundred people. How to describe them? White, universally thin, upper-middle to upper class, Brompton bike-riding, suit-wearing, entitled, 'expert', professional, polite, rational, self-important, serious, civil service-looking. David Cameron-esque people. People with a lot of access and privilege that they protect by massaging the myth that they are doing something good about and for fat people. A closed shop of sorts. I remember the ignorant, stereotypical things they said about fat people ("they never take public transport," "they don't know how to feed themselves"). It was clear from the presentations and discussions that the only fat people the people in the room knew were people on the telly, their patients and cleaners.

Here's who isn't allowed to know about fat: fat people like me. If we know, if we can share what we know with any authority, we will expose what the people in charge don't know. We'll reveal the giant and expensive mess they're making, and that cannot be allowed to happen. Cat makes good points about how grassroots knowledge about fat is ridiculed and diminished and is basically saying that obesity epistemology is used to prop up crappy power systems. She's right.

Thinking about this brings me back to Nothing About Us Without Us yet again, a brilliant and obvious concept, yet overlooked all the time. How are marginalised fat people ever going to seize space to generate our own fat knowledge whilst the glorified realm in which obesity science sits orchestrates our exclusion? Something About Us With and By Us! It's nearly unimaginable."

(Research Notebook)

In the previous chapter I raised some of the complexities associated with fat activism and explained how the literature frequently fails to address them. I argued that more productive means of analysis are required. This chapter outlines my approach to methodology within this research project. Again, it is not only obesity discourse that is problematic in relation to methodology. Critical studies, including those emerging through Fat Studies, have yet to provide thorough methodological strategies for researching fat activism. What exists tends to rely on secondary sources, or is speculative. Nevertheless, there are clues for developing research that is accountable to its fat participants.
I begin this chapter with a discussion that contextualises methodology and fat activism, acknowledges current methodological gaps, and proposes scavenging methodology in order to build accountable research (Halberstam 1998). By scavenging I am referring to the act of customising a range of existing qualitative strategies instead of aiming for methodological purity. I then move into a reflective account of myself in relation to the research, and argue that standpoint matters. From here I consider methodologies that make use of my subjectivity, and reflect my interests as an activist-researcher invested in research justice. I continue by considering how the field is constructed in this study and discuss my relationship to it. The latter part of the chapter describes the practicalities of how I went about producing a queered and scavenged methodology, and I end by acknowledging the methodological limitations of this piece of research.

**Contextualising fat activist research**

There are very few methodological signposts for researching fat activism, shedding light on the subject thus requires some creativity. In order to understand the methodological choices I have made in this thesis, I begin with some of the contexts in which fat people and fat activists tend to be researched, and explain why alternative approaches are necessary.

**Researching obesity**

Most research about fat is discursively produced through obesity: it is situated within the rhetoric of public health and medical science, problematises fat and advocates the remedy of weight loss or normalisation. It is beyond the scope of this work to document and discuss such research in any detail, suffice to say that this model is so ubiquitous that it is frequently considered natural, unquestionable, or simply 'the way things are.' Research that is framed by and reproduces obesity discourse lacks the capacity to engage with fat activism because it does not recognise fat identity, or fat people as agentic community members associated with a rich and diverse social movement. Instead, fat people are positioned as failed subjects, an awkward and intractable problem, whose subjectivity is typically constructed as absent, abstract, abject, anonymous and Othered, and who are represented as passive patient-consumers in need of expert intervention.
Methodologically, fat people, including activists, do not always enjoy the benefits of rigorous methods or sound ethics in research. Lucy Aphramor claims that the seemingly incontestable values supporting obesity research have led to the rise of dangerous methodological and ethical conventions, where researchers operate beyond the bounds of sound practice, including a complete lack of methodology in some peer-reviewed journal articles. She proposes: "It could be said that weight loss enjoys special immunity from accepted standards in clinical practice and publishing ethics" (Aphramor 2010, p.1). Working with Linda Bacon, she goes on to argue that such research values fail fundamental ethical considerations of beneficence and non-maleficence (Bacon and Aphramor 2011). Other critical works have pointed out further methodological problems including a reliance on poor quantitative data, sampling issues, failure to consider important social factors that impact on fat people, such as discrimination, and research produced by those with financial interests in the outcomes, which happen at all levels, including research that which is highly mandated and well-resourced (Oliver 2006, Bacon 2008). These methodologies, or lack of them, as well as various sources of 'bias', which extend to social science research, marginalise fat people by reproducing problematic claims about fatness, and thus contribute to this group's social stigmatisation.

Research methodology based on obesity discourse is unlikely to be experienced by fat people, including activists, as emancipatory. My own emotional response to such work encompasses feelings of powerlessness, anger that ranges from disgruntlement to rage, bewilderment at the flattening of the complexities of my lived embodiment, which is corroborated by a field of experts who appear to know little about people like me. Physiological effects are congruent with stress: shallow breathing, a tight chest, a sinking feeling. These are encounters with systemic sanctioned hatred. Reading this work as a fat person requires a certain steeliness, it can be physically and emotionally depleting.

**Who is allowed to know about fat?**

Cat Pausé's blog post, *The Epistemology of Fatness*, referred to in my Research Notebook, critiques the production of obesity knowledge by asking: who is allowed to know about fat? (Pausé 2012a). Pausé argues that fat epistemology is granted to obesity
experts who are far removed from fat embodiment, whilst fat people's knowledge-sharing about their own bodies and lives is ignored or ridiculed. This maintains obesity 'expertise' and the power enshrined within it. Pausé maintains, as I do, the imperative that epistemology derived from fat people's own experience must be taken seriously in order to develop a rigorous understanding of what it is to be fat. But at present there is a gap. The literature of fat activism by fat activists, as I have shown, has yet to develop rigorous methodologies. Fat Studies has the potential to develop rich interdisciplinary fat methodologies because it relates directly to fat experience and community, but trends have yet to emerge because of its relative newness. Research within the field that foregrounds fat activism has not fully engaged with fat activism more broadly; the use of secondary sources and discourse analysis predominates; autoethnography is circumspect in its relationship to fat activism; and white, middle class America is frequently universalised. Where researchers are sympathetic to fat activism, in the ethnographies of NAAFA cited in the previous chapter, for example, fat activists are frequently positioned as what Zoë Meleo-Erwin describes as "repositories of data, data that ultimately is believed to be the property of the researcher" (Meleo-Erwin 2010, p.337).

Meleo-Erwin steps into this methodological void with a helpful theoretical discussion about the forms that her own research into fat activism as a fat activist-researcher might take in the light of Participant Action Research (PAR, also known as Participatory Action Research) (Meleo-Erwin 2010). The author is projecting the future rather than documenting a past, and her paper lacks some of the complexities that real-world interaction with research participants inevitably present. However, she makes a strong case for adapting and developing methodology to fit fat activism. PAR is a useful model for fat activist-researchers conducting fat activist community research because of its commitment to ethical engagement and harm minimisation, and because it invites critical reflection on the privilege, power and obligations of the researcher. I will discuss this further in my comments about research justice. PAR research design, data analysis, and the dissemination of results are typically collaborative and reflect participant expertise. Meleo-Erwin points out that such collaborative participant accounts can undermine dominant discourse, echoing Pausé's call for fat people as producers and owners of knowledge.
But Meleo-Erwin's proposed research is not collaborative, and does not perform PAR by the book. Instead she adapts it, and in doing so gives permission for others to create methodological adaptations and to bend the rules, to be creative, to construct, and to disregard methodological purity. These are the values that underscore scavenger methodology. She regards PAR as an epistemology, not only a methodology, and uses it to develop an accountable research project that supports fat social justice. In effect, she places accountability towards fat activists, including herself, at the centre of her research design, demonstrating that accountability towards fat research participants, so often absent in obesity research, is what is most important.

**Research justice**

In June 2012 I attended the Allied Media Conference in Detroit, an annual gathering of activists using DIY media and methods to develop social change strategies (Allied Media Conference 2012). At each conference there are special themed session tracks, this year one of these tracks was devoted to research justice. I had been aware of other uses of justice in activism, social justice, food justice, healing justice are emerging concepts, the latter especially in radical Left communities of people of colour in the US, but research justice was new to me. DataCenter, an organisation that has pioneered research justice in Oakland, and which co-ordinated the Allied Media Conference track, defines the concept:

"Research justice is a strategic framework that seeks to transform structural inequities in research. It centralises community voices and leadership in an effort to facilitate genuine, lasting social change." (DataCenter 2009a)

Research justice is rooted in the ethical responsibilities of researchers, especially those conducting medical studies, or researching vulnerable groups. But it extends the discourse beyond ethics, consent and doing no harm to encompass accountability and social change, and it allies research more closely with activism (Kahn et al. 1998). Thus, research justice supports people's capacity to influence social policy and social change by developing confidence and skills in generating community-based knowledge. This enables people to leverage power and negotiate with mainstream knowledge producers.
According to evidence presented during the Research Justice Track at the 2012 Allied Media Conference and by DataCenter, research justice advocates the use of various tactics (DataCenter 2009b). They seek to make mainstream research more accessible to those directly affected by it through the circulation of fact sheets, for example, or translations, or by establishing and supporting open source repositories for data and publications, and through training in research methods. In this way, people relegated to the sidelines of institutional knowledge production can make use of pre-existing bodies of research.

Advocates for research justice seek to legitimise knowledge emerging from community experience, memory, and direct lived accounts. This contrasts with mainstream research knowledge that is primarily located in institutions and is largely inaccessible to people not affiliated to those institutions. Research justice recognises the expertise and knowledge production methods of people in communities, for example through conversation and oral testimonies, and it acknowledges the political nature of research.

Research justice tries to ensure that marginalised communities benefit from the studies conducted about them and that research and researchers are held accountable. Participant or Participatory Action Research is an important methodology within the concept, but research justice can also be part of studies in which research subjects do not have direct control of the study's design, or are involved elsewhere. This can happen through Community Ethics Committees, consisting of community members working in conjunction with educational institutions, which grant access to research populations, or advise on ethical matters, or act as funding gatekeepers.

Most research into fatness reproduces and is discursively produced through obesity. This is problematic because it pathologises fat, marginalises fat people, and upholds unequal power relations. It is important that research strategies are developed that support fat embodiment and epistemology, yet whilst methodological critiques of obesity are emerging, new models for researching fat people, including fat activists, have yet to be established. I therefore add my voice to Meleo-Erwin's proposal that fat activist-researchers scavenge and adapt existing methodologies to develop research strategies that are accountable to fat people and fat activist communities, and engage productively with research justice concepts and practise. This is what I have tried to do.
with this study. It marks a shift in the ways that fat people are positioned in obesity research: from passive, abjected objects, to active roles as reflective researchers, as knowing research participants, and as activist-researcher-participants.

**Reflexivity and accountability**

Following Meleo-Erwin, I would like to discuss my methodological rationale for this study. To be an accountable researcher requires being open about who I am, and what influences me, so I shall begin by locating myself within the study and explaining why this is important. I will then look at qualitative methodological traditions which privilege accountability, make use of the researcher's presence, and offer appropriate means for studying fat activism.

**Who am I to do this work?**

Knowing who I am in relation to the research is important. Pierre Bourdieu speaks of the necessity of reflexive practice within sociology, giving attention to the impact of the researcher on the researched (Bourdieu 1992). I consider reflective practice a process of self-awareness which does not only manifest in encounters between the researcher and the researched, it includes the life-work of self-knowledge, self-examination and on-going critical consciousness that does not begin or end when one adopts or discards the title of researcher. Critical self-reflection in research enables one to pay close attention to research ethics, representation and interpretation, for example, and to manage the research project effectively. Reflectively locating the research within discourse then gives readers and onlookers more information with which to make their own interpretations.

Yet I am somebody who is quite difficult to read. This is partly because I am queer and, as Judith/Jack Halberstam notes, the patterns of queer subcultural life are often baffling to straight people, whose life-stages are different (Halberstam 2005). My unreadability also relates to life experiences that include a strange sort of childhood, abuse, atheism, bereavement, class, colonialism, disability, education, enfreakment, institutionalisation, the Internet, participation in various other subcultures and hidden economies, gentrification, poverty, precariousness, public life, race, and relationships to name but a
few of the constantly shifting elements that contribute to my being. This is to say that I bring many identities and experiences to this study and feel unable to fix myself within it as a mono-dimensional entity.

I cannot offer accountability based on my knowability, but I can offer a group of epistemologies that shape some of how I understand the world, and which I bring to my activism and to this study through my biography. In no particular order, these can be named as: fat, queer, feminist and punk. An epistemology of fat might include particular kinds of embodiment and social positioning, the qualities of being unmanageable, outsized, of not fitting, and the concepts, histories and cultures that constitute the fat liberation movement. I understand queer as an epistemology of multiplicity, ambiguousness, difference and impropriety. Queer means that I reject the essentialism of the women's liberation movement whilst appreciating its heterogeneity and the assertion that public and private are a false binary. To me, feminist epistemology is congruent with social justice activism, and of giving voice, my own feminism is part of a genealogy of the Left. A punk theory of knowing might relate to energy, creativity, prankishness, anti-authoritarianism and anarchism supporting praxis and cultural production that eschews traditional notions of expertise and refinement, and an aesthetic that is raw and immediate, unconventional and imaginative.

Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty write about the privileging of scholar over activist, and the false binary between the two (Alexander and Talpade Mohanty 2010). Indeed, the space between scholarship and activism can offer new areas for enquiry and, for me, what has come from this balancing act over the course of the PhD is a synthesis of these identities (Halfacree 2004). I consider myself an activist-researcher in this work: somebody bound by the constraints of producing a thesis and working within a university, as well as a person with politics, histories and communities of my own. Like Ian Maxey, I have found that this synthesis enables me to think beyond the more obvious sociological boundaries of what constitutes a social movement and to think of activism more inclusively (Maxey 1999).

My identity as a researcher could therefore be described as a balancing act maintaining the philosophical and epistemological spaces in which I feel most at home, the expectations of the institution that is funding me to produce this research, and my
doubts about my role in, membership of, and relationship to the academy. I am aware that the values of academic administrators and funders for this project, who have interests in influencing social policy, may not be entirely consistent with mine. Although I am producing this thesis with the aim of contributing to academic knowledge, and hope that this may influence policy, one of my key concerns with this research is to make something that is of direct use to me and people like me, I do not regard this as a lack of vision or ambition, it is a practical response to systemic marginalisation. Rather than consider this a work of public sociology, which remains a discourse of the academy, the expert and the policy-maker, which is not a concept I have encountered at street level, I ally the work more closely with research justice, which is more closely related to queer grassroots organising (Clawson et al. 2007).

**Why who I am matters**

Feminist standpoint theory pays attention to power and knowledge production, maintaining that all knowledge is situated, that voice matters, and that research should support social justice (Smith 1974, Hartsock 1983, Haraway 1991, Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002, Harding 2004). Standpoint theory has been accused both of supporting essentialist constructions of 'woman' and glossing over the diversity of women's experience, as well as lauded as a strategy for managing fragmented and manifold postmodern identities (McCann and Kim 2002). Given my support of epistemologies where speaking for oneself is part of the bedrock, I think standpoint is worth considering here despite its contradictions. Who I am matters in the context of this work.

In very blunt terms it is clear that research produced through the lens of obesity discourse will differ from that which engages as a participant in fat activism. But in more subtle configurations the importance of standpoint is less clear. Hannele Harjunen says that being fat gives one access to certain kinds of knowing, which she identifies as "the fat experience" (Harjunen 2010, p.44). Being fat, a fat activist, and someone reflecting on and researching the movement are significant parts of my identity in the production of this study, even though I also have other identities that complicate my relationship to fat activism, for example my British nationality. My fatness and fat activism confer a close connection to the subject, perhaps more so than a normatively-
sized person researching the movement, and influence how I understand it. Within this, however, my experience of fat will likely differ from that of someone who is much fatter or much smaller than me, for example, or who has other intersecting identities to mine. I am wary of constructing universalised fat identity, and wish to acknowledge the diversity of fat people and the multiplicity of my own experience. But standpoint remains a concern in developing accountable fat activist methodology within a broader critical body of work on fat that remains dominated by normatively-sized researchers who do not have their own histories of fat activism or community ties.

The production of critical knowledge about fat by people who are not or have never been fat, or who actively avoid being fat, could be regarded as a queering of fatness, confirmation that anyone can be 'fat enough,' and a rejection of 'fat' and 'thin' as rigid and unchanging. It could imply a level playing field, a fantasy of colour-blindness, where alleged trivialities like one's embodiment should not really matter. It is painful to talk about these differences within Fat Studies research communities where there are many normatively-embodied practitioners, and where mutual support has been hard won within a wider context that has not yet come to grips with the field. Speaking up exposes uncomfortable power relationships, it begs questions about privilege, authenticity and authority, it may reveal instances where normative embodiment does negatively affect research. Where critical work on fat is dominated by people who do not see themselves as fat, it risks making fat researchers more invisible and marginal in communities where, at last, there is a chance to be heard.

An authorial position of self-identified fatness is not necessarily a requirement for activism, although this has sometimes been contested within the movement historically, neither is it necessary for producing convincing research. Body types should not confer privilege. However, the sheer paucity of work grounded in fat activism, produced by those with direct experience of activism and of being fat marks a serious knowledge gap. Research produced by fat activists who do not harbour desires to lose weight, present accounts of their own weight loss, or profess an intolerance of their own bodies, and who represent, even in part, the self-acceptance that is at the heart of fat political movements is still rare. Authors who have written about fat, proxies for fat, and fat activism including Shelley Bovey, Susan Bordo, Paul Campos and Samantha Murray have all talked about their fat bodies on a spectrum that stretches from deep horror to
ambivalence, without addressing more positive fat embodiment (Bovey 2001, Bordo 2003, Campos 2005, Murray 2009b). Carol Wiley's edited collection of interviews is often overlooked because of its methodological limitations, yet it may be the only example of first person fat activist community ethnographic representation that broaches authorial embodiment beyond internalised loathing (Wiley 1994). Because of this, I regard my fatness and experience of fat activism as fundamental to the accountable production of this study. Again, this is not to say that only certain types of idealised self-loving fat people should research fat activism, or that embodiment is always straightforwardly 'positive' or 'negative'. Instead, it is a comment on the scarcity of work about fat activism by people who represent the possibility that fat embodiment does not always mean self-hatred.

**Customising qualitative methodology**

As a qualitative study, this work supports the assumption that reality is subjective and socially constructed and calls attention to context, relationship, subject position, process and interpretation. There are many kinds of qualitative methodologies and this study is a particular kind of ethnography, described here by Beverley Skeggs:

"It usually combines certain features in specific ways: fieldwork that will be conducted over a prolonged period of time; utilising different research techniques; conducted within the settings of the participants, with an understanding of how the context informs the action; involving the researcher in participation and observation; involving an account of the development of relationships between the researcher and the researched and focusing on how experience and practice are part of wider processes." (Skeggs 2001, p.426)

Skeggs' definition has informed what I have done in this study, but I have not produced a straight ethnographic account. Instead, like Meleo-Erwin's approach to PAR, I have used and customised emergent ethnographic practice, namely critical ethnography and autoethnography, to produce a queered hybrid scavenger autoethnography with the aim of pursuing research justice.

**Critical ethnography**

Critical ethnography enables researchers to adopt poststructural and postmodern strategies in research concerning fat. Here critical attention is paid to obesity research
methods embedded within objectivist-positivist and epidemiological paradigms, which pathologise fat unquestioningly and seek social facts and cause-solution models (Sobal and Maurer 1999b, Sobal and Maurer 1999a). Doubt is cast on the existence of "universal patterns of meaning and culture" (Appelrouth and Desfor Edles 2008, p.635).

Ben Agger adds:

"Postmodernism holds that there is no supreme vantage point, outside of history and beyond time and place, from which we can see and write about the world in a totally objective way." (Agger 2007, p.444)

Agger goes on to suggest that methods are rhetorical devices which advocate for the work in question, he states: "Methods make the reader believe that she is reading science and not fiction, but it is all fiction anyway" (Agger 2007, p.454). Certainly, studies that correlate obesity with epidemiological hysteria and climate change read like fiction (Campos et al. 2006, White 2009). But Agger's provocative statement urges all researchers to consider how they are constructing knowledge through methodology. Treating research as activism means that I too should be willing to consider how my own version of events have come into being. The methods I have chosen suit the things that I want to explore about fat activism. They do not represent the best claim on how to represent 'the truth' of the situation, the knowledge produced here is contextual. Where the notion of an overarching truth is destabilised, specificity, contingency, the local, multiplicity and fragmentation are brought to the foreground. Thus, in this research I am presenting a particular group of people and ideas from a very specific time, place and genealogy, and who represent a series of politically charged relationships and embodied experiences which could not be replicated by another researcher.

Gayle Letherby explains that methodology's epistemological underpinnings influence and reproduce power relationships through those who produce research knowledge, and the methods they choose (Letherby 2003). This also has implications for how knowledge is constructed through critical ethnography. Certain kinds of knowledge production are privileged over others, for example there are "tensions between authorised and experiential knowledge" (p.25). This affects the types of knowledge that are coded as legitimate or illegitimate, and it reiterates Pausé's comments earlier in this chapter about who is allowed to know about fat. In the previous chapter I showed some of the ways in which fat activism, as an alternative fat discourse, is marginalised within
the dominant literature. I use critical ethnography here to consider and counter such power relationships in obesity epistemology.

Critical ethnography seeks not only to reflect but to address existing inequalities, and could be construed as a type of activism (Chari and Donner 2010). In this way, I have approached this study as a kind of activism because of how it highlights the enactment of power through the political construction of obesity, that is, it questions who usually gets to build knowledge about fat and obesity, how that knowledge is produced, disseminated and consumed, and who benefits from it. It is a form of activism to assert that there is value in the places that are disregarded by obesity discourse and to use this research to demand that respectful attention is paid to the Others. As with my fat activism, the activism in this work is not only a reflection of inequalities but also an attempt to reflect and build fat activist culture.

**Autoethnography**

Critical ethnography has offered me tools with which to conduct research, but I prefer to ally this project with autoethnography. Autobiography and ethnography make good partners because, as Amanda Coffey points out, the self is always present in the work (Coffey 1999). In 1997 Deborah Reed-Danahay defined autoethnography very simply as "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (Reed-Danahay 1997, p.9). Since then other sociologists, including Carolyn Ellis, whose work on the subject is foundational, and Heewon Chang, have expanded autoethnography to include many possible methods, yet the process of self-narrative and analysis within a social context remains central to this methodology (Ellis 2004, Chang 2008). But autoethnography is not just the ethical practice of a reflective ethnographer, Ellis demonstrates that it is "a creative analytical practice" (p.194), a kind of "radical empiricism" (p.48). Tami Spry situates it as a postmodern branch of critical ethnography that presents a "radical reaction to realist agendas in ethnography" (p.186) and queers the representation of research subjects by drawing attention to the researcher; she calls it "academic heresy" (Spry 2006, p.186). Spry argues that autoethnography is powerful because it can destabilise researcher privilege, bring marginal experience to the centre, and provide "a mechanism for extending ethnography
beyond the academy," a quality that has the potential to bring it in line with research justice (Spry 2006, p.68).

I chose autoethnography for this study because it supports my intention to write myself directly into the text and to reflect my own contexts as an activist-researcher. It fits closely with how I do activism, which tends to involve writing about or presenting myself in some way. Using autoethnography to bring myself into the work enables me to question the role of ethnographer as what Amanda Coffey calls the "naïve stranger" (Coffey 1999, p.19). She explains:

"The ethnographer embarks on a progression from ignorant stranger to wise scholar, treading a path through self-alienation to self-enlightenment." (Coffey 1999, p.21)

Coffey suggests that the problematising of familiarity within ethnography is because estrangement to the field is epistemologically necessary for the construction of data that might be deemed "scientific" (p.21). I am not a naïve stranger in relation to fat activism, I have been a part of the movement for many years. I see this connection as part of the PhD's work in unravelling a realist agenda in obesity discourse, and in critical accounts of fat to some extent. Positivism, empirical proof, the rational, or the scientific, are not the driving forces for this study. Instead I want to make space for more queer, irrational, ambiguous and multiple ways of knowing fat, which is how I experience my own fatness. Autoethnography emphasises the queer fluidity of the researcher's identity and draws on humanising narratives, it supports Norman Denzin's concept of the researcher as an "interacting individual" within qualitative studies (Denzin 1994, p.575). Autoethnography similarly queerly troubles restrictive binary categories of insider/outsider and researcher/subject (Chang 2008). Reed-Danahay argues that autoethnography enables these productive boundary transgressions to occur because traditional research categories "are constructs too simplistic for an adequate understanding of the processes of representation and power", and that it allows for a "postmodern/postcolonial conception of self and society" which "is one of a multiplicity of identities, of cultural displacement, and of shifting axes of power" (Reed-Danahay 1997, pp.2-4). Autoethnography in this study relates to the values and sensibilities I bring as an activist-researcher with my own complex biography, it supports the use of the first person, and it enables me to incorporate autobiographical fragments and affect.
In addition, it is a creative methodology which offers parallels to my own background in punk and DIY culture. It constitutes research as something that is within one's own capacity to produce rather than separate, Other, or confined to the realm of experts. Indeed, Chang refers to autoethnographers as "cultural agents," which mirrors my identity as a cultural producer within fat activism; here research is a radically imaginative act (Chang 2008, p.21). Autoethnographers use many means of interpreting and presenting their work, including ethnographic novels, poetry and performance (Ellis 2004, Holman Jones 2008, Gingras 2009). I have chosen not to risk bringing such experimental formats to this formal PhD thesis, which is being produced within an academic context that I experience as conservative. However, the fat activism that I have undertaken during this period of study reflects many different forms of knowledge production and dissemination, including film- and zine-making, music, online conversations, alternative forms of academic presentation, to name but a few. I have not offered a formal analysis of them because the volume of material is too great, but they are present in the background work of this research.

Paul Atkinson et al. patronise autoethnography as "radical chic" and express concern that it disrupts methodological purity and might make older methodologies redundant (Atkinson et al. 2003, p.10). I reject this argument because there will inevitably be contextual variations in the application of methodologies and methods. It is a mistake to attempt to keep a lid on autoethnography, engaging with it enables new methodological fusions to develop, and allows for a greater repertoire of possible methods.

Where Atkinson and his co-authors do have a case against autoethnography, however, is in their warning against "romanticising the self" (Atkinson et al. 2003, p.66). To this I would respond that even where this authorial voice is romanticised, its inclusion as a flawed self-representation is still illuminating, valuable and humanising. Both Ellis and Gingras, for example, present carefully constructed images of themselves in their respective texts (Ellis 2004, Gingras 2009). Whilst it is true that they encounter and explore tricky ethical and personal problems, these are neatly discussed and lack an everyday messiness. Where Ellis writes about an ethically disastrous ethnography she undertook previously, she still represents herself as right-thinking, competent, a nice person who has processed her mistakes fully. Of course authors must look good when they have privileged university careers, where their professionalism and authority must
be upheld, they cannot risk producing autoethnographies which expose current incompetence or ethical malpractice. These representations of self speak to changing business models of education where the pressure to present cool expertise is paramount and risk-taking is minimised. One might be tempted to assert that Erich Goode's sexual abuse of women during his ethnography of NAAFA, and afterwards, as well as his breezy account of having done so, would not be possible today, but it did not result in the end of his career (Goode and Preissler 1983, Goode 2002). Given this, it could be argued that Ellis' guarded self-representation relates to the pressures of sexism in academia. My own representation in this thesis is a mixture of cautiousness and risk-taking. I must conform to the requirements of the PhD but I am not seeking to protect a nascent career, so I feel relatively free to give voice to, for example, doubt, vulnerability, or regret, and I include challenging experience here in this study where appropriate.

I have one other reservation about autoethnography and this relates to the aesthetic quality of its presentation. Stacy Holman Jones states "autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement" and her text certainly bears that out as a collection of disjointed and baffling statements, citations, and anecdotes that lack clear navigation for her readers (Holman Jones 2008, p.207). Similarly, Ellis maintains the necessity for a high standard of writing in autoethnographic accounts, and her standard of methodology and analysis is indeed high, but the prose is sometimes flat and unconvincing. The importance of aesthetic quality in autoethnography is up for debate; polished and refined work is both a pleasure to read or experience, and suggests research integrity. However, there is a case to be made in favour of an amateurish, imperfect, clumsy or raw aesthetic; in punk and DIY culture this is regarded as a mark of authenticity and humanity, it is not necessarily a hindrance. In this study I have tried to be true to my authorial voice, to pay attention to its aesthetic and consider where that voice comes from: making zines, journalism, performance, or in writing my novel, for example (Cooper 2002). In practise this means using language that comes easily to me, speaking directly, and avoiding jargon where possible.
Queering and scavenging autoethnography

Given that autoethnography is clearly situated within poststructuralism, which emphasises multiple meanings and interpretations, it is surprising how some autoethnographic theorists seek to pin it down. Although they offer many different examples of autoethnographic method, Ellis and Chang make definitive statements about what autoethnographic practice is and is not (Ellis 2004, Chang 2008). Both draw on traditional ethnographic notions of the field, and entering or leaving a field as a researcher, which in my case is problematic, as I will discuss below. Yet these concepts remain fairly rigid. In addition, Chang states the necessity of keeping systematic personal journals in order to develop rigorous autoethnographic data. My lifelong habit of keeping notebooks and journals has been maintained through this study, but I did not write systematically about the fieldwork since the field is my everyday life and it cannot be methodically organised. This lead me to wonder why systematic journal-writing had been posited as a necessity of autoethnography. I understand the importance of self-reflection, but Chang's pronouncement appears unnecessarily dogmatic in this instance, a rule that when broken risks methodological integrity. I admit that I did not follow autoethnographic rules to the letter; I adapted and customised them and used autoethnography as general guidance, which I understand as a queering of methodology.

Halberstam's comments about queer methodology being a type of scavenger methodology are appropriate here:

"A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour. The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion towards disciplinary coherence." (Halberstam 1998, p.13)

In producing a queer work about subjects who embody fatness and sexuality queerly, it makes sense to draw upon this idea of a queer scavenger methodology that troubles disciplinary coherence and objectivism and creates platforms where different kinds of knowledge can emerge. As with Meleo-Erwin's use of PAR, scavenging is a queer engagement with methodology, at ease with ambiguity, the fluidity of categories, and
the uncontainable qualities of identity, including fat identity. At the same time, it is a means of customising methodology and methods to fit a particular group of people who might not otherwise be easily accommodated.

Tony Adams and Stacy Holman Jones offer clues for the queering of autoethnography, and the development of it as a scavenger methodology, they state: "Making autobiography a queer method offers a way to trade in the debates about legitimacy, value and worth and for conversation around practicality, necessity, and movement" (Adams and Holman Jones 2008, p.386). Thus the researcher is encouraged to question orthodoxy and adopt methods that are fluid, messy, explicitly political and which "borrow, refashion, retell" in ways that make sense to the research project and its populations (p.379). They offer a rallying call for queer autoethnographers: "We encourage you to twist autoethnography from its prior usages, whether diminishing or valorising, and put it to use for altogether new and other political purposes" (p386). This is the kind of customised methodology that underpins this study, it comes from a particular sociological tradition but is not constrained by it.

The Field

The field is central to much qualitative research, including ethnography, critical ethnography and autoethnography. It is the place of exploration to which one goes, it is most often a physical place but can also be online. The field is typically constructed as a place that can be entered and left by ethnographers, and as Matthew Sparke points out: "Research fields are often seen as 'elsewhere,' 'there' rather than 'here'" (Sparke 1996, p.134). I want to put aside the issue of 'going native,' which seems irrelevant to me as I am already a native, to consider instead what the field means to somebody for whom it is not separate to everyday life.

Given the scarcity of research on fat activism produced by fat people with significant bonds to the movement, it has not mattered to me greatly that I cannot step outside the field, although I have wondered what the field might mean to someone like me. I have already mentioned how autoethnography helps me contest the subject position binary of insider/outsider, which is relevant when thinking about the field, but I want to add more to that discussion here. Amanda Coffey claims: "Ethnographers are not outsiders
looking in. They have to be reflective insiders, negotiating roles and subjectivities, looking out" (Coffey 1999, p.57). What strikes me about this definition is not Coffey's call for reflective practice, but the presumed fixed identities of 'outsider' and 'insider'. I may be an 'insider' but I frequently inhabit fat activist spaces where, for reasons of culture, class or other qualifiers, I am socially positioned as an outsider; in other instances I am closer to the heart of a fat activist moment; it varies. Jodie Taylor argues that not only do they permeate boundaries, insider or outsider can never be totally representative, and that insider perspectives are as multiple and contingent as outsider (Taylor 2011). Queering these concepts enables me to think of such labels in less fixed terms, for example activist-researcher is more meaningful to me than insider/outsider.

In thinking about the field, I have taken Carolyn Ellis' autoethnographic definition of what one might do in the field as a model for my research.

"Ethnographic fieldwork includes everything you do to gather information in a setting, especially hanging around, making conversation, and asking questions, but also formal interviewing and other information gathering." (Ellis 2004, p.26)

Her definition reformulates the field as a series of potential spaces rather than a fixed location, and she avoids making the field simply a place that is entered and left. The looseness of this definition has enabled me to be less defensive about my position as a stakeholder in relation to my research and think more carefully about what the field might mean to me. In this way, the field as a bounded place has not been so helpful, instead I have thought about the places where I have done my research as less tightly defined. I have scavenged a meaning of the field for myself. It is not helpful to think of it as a physical space, or of myself purely as an unattached researcher invested in producing facts about a mysterious Other. However, there are elements of the research, such as my use of archives, that have operated as a more bounded kind of field, one that I have been more able to enter and leave.

*The archive as autoethnographic field*

I sought out archives that had holdings of historical fat activist material during the period in which I was generating data. I did this because I wanted to root fat activism within historical contexts and needed primary material that is generally hard to find because of a lack of secondary documentation. In addition, I wanted to be able to ask
questions that were informed and relevant for older fat activists and which might spark
the imagination of younger people, and I wanted to map the genealogy of my own fat
activism. My interest in archives could be said to be a part of what Kate Eichhorn calls
the 'archival turn' in feminism, where the archive becomes a site where hidden forms of
knowledge and activism become visible (Eichhorn 2010). The archives were not only
physical or online spaces but represented an affective cultural relationship between me,
as its user, and the material I found there, as articulated by Halberstam:

"An archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a
construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity. In
order for the archive to function it requires users, interpreters, and cultural
historians to wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of
queer history in the making." (Halberstam 2005, p.170)

Given this relationship, Ann Cvetkovich points out that archives are potent spaces for
queer activists because they highlight the public importance of private lives, the
ephemeral is afforded some permanency, and there is potential for transforming the
trauma of marginalisation (Cvetkovich 2003). During the course of this study the
archives became places of refuge and affirmation for me, they were places to visit and
withdraw from thoughtfully, a kind of field where I could gather information for
evaluation later on.

I travelled to three archives in the US, three in the UK, one in Germany, and sifted
through a handful of online archives. I searched for grassroots cultural production
relating to fat activism in autonomous feminist and anarchist spaces in the UK and
Australia, particularly those that had zine libraries. Working in the archive was not only
illuminating with regard to gathering historical materials, it was a very emotional and
inspiring experience. It felt as though I was visiting a faraway yet familiar place, it put
me in touch with past lives, people I knew vaguely, and past instances of my own
activism. I was able to watch a rare video of fat activists in the early 1970s, to see
people moving and talking onscreen whom I had only previously been able to read
about and who were heroic to me. I read Judy Freespirit's diaries. From time to time I
would come across my own work that either I, or others, had donated. The Women's
Library in London, for example, has a shelf full of books about fat that I had given to
them years previously and forgotten; The Feminist Library had a copy of my Master's
dissertation; The GLBT (Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender) Historical Society in San
Francisco had a set of my zines. I felt very much that I was part of something bigger than myself, and this enabled me to think of fat feminism and fat activism as entities that travel and shift over space and time.

To summarise the discussion so far, briefly: following Bourdieu's instruction for reflexive research practice that supports accountability, I have suggested that a fixed representation of myself within this study is not possible, but that I can offer a handful of epistemologies, rooted in my biography, that help locate me. I have argued that bringing myself into the work is a balancing act, a synthesis of different selves that have enabled me to think of myself in relation to the project as an activist-researcher and my interest in research justice. From this position I have offered some thoughts about who the research benefits. I have argued that, despite the contradictions of standpoint theory and my scepticism about essentialism and identity, who I am in this study matters at the moment because of the current lack of work produced on fat activism by fat people involved within it.

I have gone on to offer a rationale for using qualitative methodology to develop a study that is accountable to fat activists and which includes my voice as a participant within fat activist communities. This is a scavenged and queered amalgamation of critical ethnography and autoethnography where research is understood as a form of activism that interrogates power and builds on postmodern and poststructural strategies to engage with the specificities of the sample and the potential for numerous narratives. I understand autoethnography as a radical critique of empiricism that fits with how I do activism, and that queering and scavenging it enables me to build methodology that fits fat activism more closely. In the next section I will describe the practicalities of how I constructed my own queer scavenger autoethnography.

**Doing queered and scavenged autoethnography**

I have offered a theoretical rationale for choosing a queered autoethnography as the methodology for this project, and now I will explain how this translated into practise. This involved immersing myself in fat activism, interviewing people within my social network of fat activists, analysing the interview data and synthesising it during the writing-up process, and keeping notebooks to record my own thoughts. As discussed
earlier, I visited a handful of archives where I was able to look at primary documents, these visits historicised and helped situate some of the interviews. In the following paragraphs I will discuss my processes regarding activism, generating data, ethics and methodological limitations.

**Being an activist**

I have spent my adult life living in various states of precarity: on state benefits long term, as an unsecured contract worker, as freelance, within unstable industries and black and grey economies (Fudge and Owens 2006). The scholarship for this four-year PhD is the first time that I have had the stability of knowing that I would be paid regularly for a period of years. Precarity has not prevented me from undertaking activism, but the privilege of an unbroken income coupled with a relatively unscheduled and lengthy period of time, and the financial and cultural support of an institution, has enabled me to focus more closely on this work and for it to blossom.

I have tended to consider basic survival and paid employment a side project to the real work of activism and cultural production, from which it is unlikely that I will ever earn a living wage. This has entailed a certain amount of sneakiness, for example I have had to misrepresent my priorities in order to convince employers of my value as a human asset. As an academic I have felt pressured to privilege ‘researcher’ above ‘activist,’ despite the latter constituting a much bigger part of my life than the former, and have been careful in how I present this work in conservative academic contexts. I understand activism as an activity that is seen amongst my funders and administrators in the university as somewhat marginal, and it is only now as I write up my work that I realise how crucial it was for me to do this work in the context of this PhD. Bringing a critical awareness to my activism has enabled me to recognise that it is part of my daily consciousness and identity. Having the resources to experiment with different forms of fat activism has broadened my understanding of how I approach it, it has enabled me to develop my networks, community and praxis.

It could be argued that fat activism was how I entered the field, but that would be too limiting, because I have neither entered nor left the field, I have already been here for a
long time and have no intention of leaving. I explain the everyday nature of my activism in a profile in the Finnish queer magazine *NormiHomoLehti*:

"My fat activism is pretty integrated into my life, it's not something that I need to put on a special outfit to perform or go to a particular place, so this means that it's just what I do every day. I can give some examples. Typically it might involve answering emails, lately I've been involved in a long and difficult exchange with an acquaintance who is on a diet and who got really angry when I wrote a blog post criticising the company to which she is giving her time, energy and money. I'm writing a piece for a friend's zine about DIY activism, and the fat consciousness we've both brought to that scene, and I'm also writing a Chubsters workshop plan for an event in March. The Chubsters is my semi-fictitious platform for all kinds of peculiar fat activism, and at this workshop we'll be learning how to behave in an anti-social way, learning how to spit accurately and to shoot spud guns! I'll also show a film I made about the gang and talk about its history. I'll make plans to attend a Fat Studies seminar later in the spring. I'll probably update my blog later today with some thoughts about hybridity and fat activist community belonging, though I'll try and make it sound less dry. I'll exchange quips on Facebook with other friends doing similar work, there's a fatshion (fat + fashion) blogger gathering at the weekend for example that's been organised online, maybe I'll Skype with a fat pal in California. I'll book a plane ticket to Hamburg, where I will be an Artist in Residence in a couple of months, making a zine out of a Fat and Queer Trans Timeline that I helped build and facilitate at a workshop last year, and finding out more about fat activism in Germany. I'll dance around my flat a bit, and I may go swimming. I'll post a cassette back to some older Jewish lesbian fat activists in Boston, they lent me a recording of two radio shows they produced in 1984 and 1985, my boyfriend digitised them and we are hoping to make them publicly available again, they are spectacular. I'll chat about some fat stuff I've been thinking about with my loves. I'll eat something good I've made and do some reading, I'm taking part in a reading series called Race Revolt, a kind of queer, anarchist activism on race and racism in the UK, and I'm interested in broadening my fat activism to include some of these ideas. Oh, and I'll do some work!" (Harjunen 2011)

This quote demonstrates how my fat activism takes many forms, it is dynamic, complex, it crosses borders, leaps between communities, is both embodied and material as well as virtual, and moves backwards and forwards in time. Public and private collide, large-scale works such as the timeline project that I developed in Hamburg intermingle with smaller conversations through organisations and individuals, friends and strangers. The blog becomes a public platform where I can test ideas, treat it as an outward-facing journal, a useful tool for autoethnographic reflection and discussion (Ellis 2004). Following Chang, I have considered my activism as the anchor to the study and have included other people's contributions as corroborators, sounding boards, collaborators, and as complimentary and critical components (Chang 2008). Thus the
PhD is located within a larger body of fat activist work and community, and cannot be separated from who I am and what I do.

**Generating data**

I am using the term 'generating' here instead of 'collecting' to emphasise the collaborative nature of the data. This follows Barbara Sherman Heyl, who refers to ethnographic interviewing as a process of co-creation (Sherman Heyl 2001). Data generation took place through unstructured interviews with 31 people. Participant observation is common practice in ethnography and autoethnography but, this being a scavenger autoethnography, I decided to foreground interviews as the main data generating method, and leave aside participant observation as much as I could, even as part of the interview. I did this because, in being so much a part of the group I am studying, and bearing in mind my earlier discussion of the difficulty of using the 'the field' in this work, the filtering of relevant information was too overwhelming a task, so interviewing was a method of formalising people's open participation. I felt discomfort in adopting a participant observer role, perhaps in response to previous ethnographies of fat activism, and I did not want to reproduce research of that kind. I reflected:

"I still don't think of what I'm doing as participant observation, which to me is about entering and leaving a field, a kind of separation, especially in terms of gaze, which veers too closely to a kind of sneaky surveillance for my comfort. I don't want that for this project. Being reflective, yes, which to me is about contextualising the work. But deliberately separating myself from my – somewhat fragile – community, even in subtle ways, no, that is not what I want at all. I see this as a direct challenge to the wider context of research on 'the obese,' which reproduces the 'expert outsider'." (Research Notebook)

I regarded my rejection of participant observation as a comment on the way that fat people are reduced to fascinating objects within obesity research, as well as some prominent studies within the critical literature explored in the previous chapter. I used interviews because participants would be more likely to be focused and present, not caught unawares, my process would be transparent, and there would be opportunities for co-constructing knowledge conversationally and openly.

In her discussion of PAR, Meleo-Erwin debates the method of inviting participants to reflect on the research at different stages to build accountability within the study.
(Meleo-Erwin 2010). This enables all parties to negotiate solutions together when problems arise. Had the sample been smaller I would have done this but I did not feel that I could cope with the potential of 31 on-going conversations about the research as I was producing the study. I did not invite such discussions but was happy to talk about the work if participants raised it with me. On reflection, it would have been helpful to send transcripts to interviewees for comments and corrections. Meanwhile, I made myself available to talk about the research and engaged in conversations as they arose. What was formally agreed was that I would send each participant a copy of the final thesis so that longer-term conversations could continue.

In practical terms, not being able to leave the field helped safeguard accountability to the research participants because I am invested in continuing relationships with them beyond the boundaries of the study, and I want to continue participating in fat activism myself. This does not mean that I resisted speaking up in order to maintain politeness or avoid critical engagement with fat activism. There are places in this study where I have criticised my friends' work, for example, which I have chosen to do because I believe that their work deserves critical attention. This has not been easy, and being part of the field has demanded that I negotiate the delicate balance, with mixed results, of friendship, accountability, ethics, and my research when some relationships inevitably changed over the course of the PhD. What was more challenging was that being friends and comrades with the sample exposed me to private knowledge about them, for example intimate details of working lives, relationships, health and so on. Taylor explains:

"As a researcher, it can be awkward when you know that what is divulged – although valuable to your work – may damage the informant’s public-face or the social reputation of someone else. To date, none of my subjects have responded negatively to my work; however, I feel that it has more to do with what I have omitted than with what I have said." (Taylor 2011, p.14)

Like Taylor, I have excluded private details and, when speaking about people whose private business I know, and have used only what participants told me in the interview, or in public and published sources. I was explicit in the written consent form about what I would and would not share and was as clear as I could be about my intentions for the research.
Access

My public profile within fat activism offered advantages and disadvantages in terms of accessing people who wanted to participate in the project. Having a track record of activism demonstrated my integrity as a fat activist and researcher; I understood the culture, language and concerns of fat activism, and I clearly had direct personal experience of the subject. Some of the interview sample told me they were proud of my role as an academic and were very excited about the work I would produce. This led me to feel a great responsibility to the participants, to do my best not to misrepresent or exploit them. Some people remarked upon my 'celebrity' in fat activism, that is, my public life as a writer and speaker. I feel dehumanised when people try to position me as a celebrity, the values of celebrity are not my own, and I felt awkward when it was raised by participants. I understood that my presumed celebrity would have been appealing to those who mentioned it, and I asked questions about what it meant to the people who raised it so that they could talk about their assumptions about the project.

I approached people in person or via email, with information about the project, and gave them time to respond when they were ready. Everybody I approached agreed to participate, although scheduling conflicts prevented interviews with two prospective participants. It would have been helpful for me formalise the question of why people agreed to be interviewed. Some offered their own reasons, unasked, such as wanting to support fat activism, or wanting to help me because we are friends, or wanting to talk about fat activism with me, but the issue of reciprocity was not always explicit. I would add that fat bodies are public bodies; fat people are talked about in media, research, and in their most private and intimate spaces, it is common for fat people to talk about their bodies. It was thus not necessary for me to field any questions about why fat activism might be a suitable subject for research, or the act of embodied reflection by fat people; the participants understood.

Despite this convivial sample it would be a mistake to sidestep the question of who this work serves. Skeggs writes about her guilt and alienation as a working class woman developing a career as an academic and gathering data from peers who have not had their work rewarded in the same way (Skeggs 1997). My feelings are not as sharp, but there are similar tensions in considering who my work is for. Like Skeggs, my research
is likely to bring me more social capital and is based on data that people have given for
free. I own my work and am proud of it, yet within this is an allegiance to the people
and communities that I am a part of, and which I am studying, which is the result of
many years of unpaid and far less recognised activism. Although this research serves
me, it is a product of community work, and it is my hope that it will go on to benefit
those same communities.

Sampling

I used a combination of sampling strategies to draw on people I already knew or knew
of through my social networks. By social network I mean people related to me through
friendship and political, social and sexual kinship. These networks are often maintained
through online communication, for example through social media platforms like
LiveJournal and Facebook, and applications such as Skype. The relationships within
this social network sample varied: some participants knew each other, some were
intimates of mine and of each other, some were more distant and isolated. I met two
contributors for the first time during the interviewing period, and another is an
acquaintance I have yet to meet offline.

I approached participants based on my knowledge of them as people who do what I
consider fat activism, and who I thought might want to share their experiences. I used
my fat activism as a model for what I understand as fat activism, as well as examples
from the literature and archival material, and knowledge of participants' own practice.
During the sampling stage I defined 'fat activist' as people who do a broad range of
activities that address fatness with a critical edge, who bring a consciousness to those
activities, and who see themselves as part of a movement. I was particularly interested
in queer and trans fat activists because of the ideas I was developing about genealogies
of the movement. This could be considered a form of theory-based sampling, where
primary data were used to build a profile of fat activist identity. In addition to this I
relied on opportunistic sampling, looking for intensity rich cases, and sequential
sampling, a quality assurance strategy to expand the sampling frame and address issues
and themes that arose during the data gathering period. Despite their extensive
knowledge and experience of fat activism, there were some people I did not approach to
interview because I frequently experience their behaviour as antisocial. This omission
highlights some of the hostilities that exist within fat activism, it exposes the myth of convivial homogeneity that I will explore later in this thesis.

I included one participant who did not regard themselves as a fat activist as a disconfirming case regarding fat activist identity in the sample. I wanted to consider if whether or not one calls oneself a fat activist mattered; I wondered if what one does could be called fat activism if one does not identify as an activist. Can only self-identified fat activists call what they do fat activism? According to this disconfirming case it does not matter. During the interview the participant and I talked about this, we reflected that some of her work could be regarded as activism, and she experimented in calling herself a fat activist. This person did not fit the pattern in the sample but her inclusion in the sample enriched 'fat activist' and 'fat activism'. This has implications for developing and queering these two concepts, which I will discuss in the body of this thesis. Some forms of activism are well-represented in this sample, and some less so, for example many participants referenced NOLOSE but few mentioned BBW (Big Beautiful Woman see Glossary) subcultures because these do not tend to attract a queer constituency, and nobody mentioned Bear culture because, although queer, it comes from a different genealogy to the fat feminism that discursively underpins this sample. This applied to other representatives of fat identity and culture, for example feeders and fat fetishists, but they too overlap with fat activist networks.

I conducted eight interviews in the San Francisco Bay Area in June 2010 as a pilot study. I ended up with more narrative data in these interviews than I wanted, but they helped me clarify the particular kind of critical self-reflection that I was looking for in later interviews. I have included material from this pilot research in the final thesis where relevant.

I completed a total of 31 interviews with fat activists for this study, between June 2010 and January 2011. This breaks down as 22 face-to-face and Skype interviews, the eight pilot face-to-face pilot interviews, and one email interview. I travelled around the UK, US, to Germany and Australia to gather data, but it was not always possible to interview people in person. A trip to Canada had to be cancelled, for example, and so I used Skype to interview people in places to which I could not go. Although this method was inferior to an offline face-to-face encounter, I felt that it was good enough for my
purposes and relevant in that I often use it to keep in touch with fat activist friends. As seasoned users of this technology, we were able to handle its technical limitations (Hanna 2012).

The sample was located in the UK, US, Canada, and Australia. One participant is from Finland but was interviewed outside their native country. The youngest participant was in their twenties, the oldest was close to seventy years old, with a mean age of 35. The sample identified mostly as women, and also included five people who describe themselves as genderqueer (see Glossary). The majority of the sample is queer, with two currently in relationships with men. Five consider themselves disabled, two self-define as people of colour, and another nine are members of minority ethnic groups, with significant Jewish representation. A number of class subject positions are represented in the sample. Two are bilingual, and one does not have English as a first language. Size-wise, the sample ranged from smaller-fat to supersize. Some of the sample are new to the movement and some have many years experience of fat activism. The sample was limited to my network, and reflects a bias towards Western Anglophone subcultures, however this study is unusual in presenting and acknowledging such a diverse group of fat activist participants in qualitative research. Seeking out a mixture of fat activist identities was an attempt to destabilise the idea of a unified or universal fat activist voice as well as to decentre my experience within the study.

Interviewing

The process of interviewing people was by far the most enjoyable part of the research project. I relished the opportunity to reconnect with people, some of whom I have known for many years, and whose work I admire, many of whom are geographically distant to me. Talking together about fat activism supported our identities and histories as fat activists, and I came to understand it as a type of activism in itself.

Data were generated in a conversation where I asked questions and responded to the participant's answers. The only consistent question I asked throughout was: "What is fat activism?" Sometimes the answer to this question formed the whole of the interview, which I limited to an hour or thereabouts so that I would be able to manage transcription
within the available time, and to maintain focus on the subject at hand. The data were formed from the transcribed text, which included speech-sounds such as laughter and groans. I asked people to introduce themselves in the interview but I did not include this biographical detail in the data or writing-up because I felt it compromised participants' anonymity. I did not include other observations in the data, I felt that the texts were sufficient.

At the time of the interviews I did not feel that there were questions I could not ask but there were moments when I sensed that the interviewee was reluctant to expound on a subject and I did my best to respect their boundaries and privacy. I felt supported by the formal boundaries of the interview, including the process of negotiating consent between the interviewees and I. My training, skills and experience as a journalist, and as a counsellor/psychotherapist, enabled me to feel confident and open during the conversation. I felt that people were generally comfortable talking, and that they trusted me because they knew me and were able to share and withhold what they wanted with ease. Psychoanalytic processes of transference and counter-transference are unavoidable in dyadic encounters such as a research interview, each party will harbour fantasies and projections of the other, but they can be acknowledged as part of the exchange. For example it is likely that people were orientated variously to our mutual identities as fat activists, which could have included feelings of pleasure, intimidation, shame and judgement; I tried to name these and raise them gently in the course of the discussion. Yet these were rarely conversations between strangers, all of the participants knew me, or had intimate connections to people who are close to me, and we came to the interview with an understanding of at least some of each other's complexities and quirks.

There was a long period after the interviewing ended and the production of the thesis. Relationships shift over time and in their shifting, and my development during the course of the project, I became aware of issues and themes that it would have been prudent to raise during the interviews. I decided not to revise or re-interview people because there was not enough time to do this and transcribe new material, and because I felt it was acceptable for the interviews to be 'snapshots in time.'
**Data analysis**

I took a pragmatic approach to data analysis in this study, which perhaps could be considered a continuation of the queered scavenger methodology, used here with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). My fragmented use of grounded theory was because I did not want to build the thesis solely on the interview data, I wanted to include autobiography, and to use the data strategically to corroborate and interrogate theory from already existing literature.

I transcribed my audio recordings of the interviews and loaded this as textual data into HyperRESEARCH, a qualitative analysis application. Markku Lonkila and Amanda Coffey et al. have criticised the ubiquitous nature of qualitative analysis software, arguing that it has led to the dominance of grounded theory at the expense of other data analysis methods (Lonkila 1995, Coffey et al. 1996). Again, my choice in using this method was pragmatic and based on the ease with which I could code, cross-reference, group into categories and write memos within this application, according to the grounded theory process described by Kathy Charmaz (Charmaz 2006). Where I differed from Charmaz was in repeated coding and re-coding of data, and re-sampling mid-way through the data analysis; I felt that I had enough material from the initial coding to build conceptual categories, and there was not enough time to approach a new sample and conduct new interviews at that point. I differed from Glaser and Strauss in that by the time I conducted the research interviews I had already completed drafts of literature reviews for the thesis, and thus had already compromised the purity of the data analysis by developing my own ideas and theories on the subject. I rationalised that it would be difficult for me to approach the data without any preconceptions anyway, since I am immersed in the field from which it comes. This echoes Charmaz, who challenges the idea that researchers can remain unaffected by their previous ideas and experiences when constructing grounded theory in ethnographies (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001).

**Ethics and Quality**

The University of Limerick Research Ethics Committee approved this study on the basis of it doing no harm, offering as much informed consent as possible,
confidentiality procedures and data protection. The Chair of The Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee suggested that I might want to offer participants the option of waiving their right to anonymity given the type of project I was undertaking. However, according to the committee, offering participants the choice of using their real names would have involved re-submitting the ethics application, which would not have passed before the first of my pilot interviews. Following a discussion with my supervisors, I decided that I would use pseudonyms and preserve the participants' anonymity by changing some background details, but that I would also talk about the possibility of using real names at the time of interview. Nobody requested this, probably because at the time of interview participants would not have known how their quotes would be used in context. I remained open to discussion about names and identities throughout, however, and considered consent to be an on-going negotiation during the research.

In order to maintain the quality of the research, I kept my supervisors informed of the research as it progressed and solicited feedback from them, as well as from peers. I reflected on my work daily and made myself available to talk to participants about the work.

**Methodological limitations**

This study cannot be all things to all people, I have made strategic decisions about what can and what cannot be included. There are a number of methodological limitations to the research, not least its focus on Western Anglophone fat activism, and its lack of methodological purity. Whilst I have presented the latter as a virtue, and argued that experimenting is necessary in a field where what already exists is scant, I acknowledge that this is debateable. Other researchers have produced studies that go by the book within health sciences, it would be interesting to see more orthodox qualitative studies that place fat people and fat activists at the centre of the work.

I have produced this research as a PhD student at the University of Limerick, supported by the Irish Social Sciences Platform, yet there is little within it that reflects fat activism in Ireland because, despite making enquiries through my social networks, I have no contact or on-going relationships with fat activists in that country. I could have appealed
for participants elsewhere, but social networks take time to develop and I did not want to
tokenise Irish participants in the study by approaching people who were not part of
my pre-existing networks. This is not to say that Irish fat activism does not exist or goes
unrecognised, my blog metrics reveal that there is a small readership in Ireland. Yet as
somebody of English heritage, albeit one who experiences that identity ambivalently,
living in the UK, I felt that I did not have enough of an understanding of Irish fat
activism to be able to engage with it respectfully.

I have considered online fat activism within the text where it is relevant, but have not
produced substantive work on this kind of activism as a distinct category. This is for
three reasons: first, online activism and the evolution of the Fatosphere could fill several
theses by itself, and there are a number of Fat Studies scholars who are already
producing work in this area. Secondly, there are currently a limited number of RSS
feeds, a system of gathering blog content, which makes it difficult to map the extent of
the Fatosphere. Feeds, such as Notes From the Fatosphere and Fat Chat, reflect the
tastes of their curators and tend to lean towards health, popular culture and fatshion (see
Glossary) from writers based in the US, with hardly any material that extends beyond
these popular discourses. This represents a fraction of online activity relating to fat
activism, which has rich cultures on social networking platforms, through micro-
blogging sites, other forms of creative social networks, or specialist networks, which are
beyond the reach of RSS. Thirdly, the online activism could be regarded as a discrete
category, but the internet is embedded in the daily lives of the sample. With this in
mind, I have chosen to treat online activism as another kind of activity rather than a
special case. This fits with my own approach to activism, as an everyday activity that
does not require special equipment, and which is drawn from the resources at hand.

There were many more people that I wanted to interview than I could manage. On
reflection, I could have sampled more participants with direct experience of weight loss
surgery; experience of fat activism in New York in the 1990s, where there was an active
scene; early fat activism. It would have been interesting to include material from Bears
to bring in a different kind of non-feminist queer fat culture. I omitted other parties who
are implicated in fat activism, for example people constructed as 'allies'. Talking to a
sample of people who do fat activism says little about those who witness it, or about the
reception or understanding of fat activism amongst non-activists. Exploring those
broader areas of engagement are beyond the scope of this present research but could be developed later.

Conclusion: research activism

In making methodological choices for this study I began by considering the usual research contexts for obesity. I showed these to be problematic because they maintain epistemologies that marginalise, absent and abject fat people, largely fail to illuminate fat activism, and are not experienced as emancipatory by the group under discussion. In this research project I wanted to produce a study where fat activists, including myself, are central, vocal, and agentic. I wanted to be accountable to the people in my fat activist communities.

Accountable fat activist methodology has necessitated reflection on the question of who I am to do this work, and how my methods impact on the people I am studying. I have argued that standpoint matters in a context where research about fat is not often produced by fat people. In addition, I have taken an experimental approach because the research literature of fat activism is comparatively sparse. In this study I have used a mixture of critical ethnography and autoethnography, but I have not been entirely faithful to their methods, choosing instead to scavenge and customise them as a strategy of queering research into fat people. Queering methodology has enabled me to think of the ethnographic field in less fixed terms; I have discussed the limitations for me of the field as a place to which one enters and leaves as a researcher, and proposed instead that the field in my case took the form of the archive.

I have offered a detailed explanation of how I applied the methodology to the practical work of doing the study. Activism was an important part of the process, reflecting on what I do enabled me to think about activism beyond the usual boundaries and include quiet everyday spaces. Data were collectively generated rather than gathered from a diverse sample of people from my fat activist social networks. There were advantages and disadvantages relating to my status and relationships within fat activism and within the sample, some of which were addressed after the pilot study was completed in 2010. I have described how I analysed the data and some of the work's limitations.
Revisiting the question of who is allowed to know about fat, I want fat people to be prime instigators of fat epistemology and to be respected as such. I see part of the activism of this study in its methodology, which proposes ways of knowing – tentative, unorthodox, creative, emotive – that are a direct challenge to those that predominate in obesity discourse.
Chapter Four: What is Fat Activism?

"I was telling this guy about the Fattylympics last night. He has a fancy job in the NHS [National Health Service], and of course we were panellists at the bloody [upper class, establishment, cultural venue] so he felt right at home, and he told me that I was doing it all wrong and that I should make it about appealing to the PCT in East London [Primary Care Trust, local commissioning divisions of the National Health Service in the UK] and getting them to sponsor sport for fat people because this is what improves people's health. These are laudable actions, but basically he didn't understand what I was talking about at all, he assumed that lobbying authority is what my activism should be about because that's what it's always about, looking up and hoping they'll notice you and do the right thing. And of course fat is always about improving public health. You have to play their game, keep to their limited frames of reference, and do it nicely. Hello, I'm a queer feminist punk so why would I want to do that? And he was so patronising, ugh. It's happened a few times, people tell me I'm doing it all wrong and try to bully me into doing it their way, the 'proper' way. Typically it's the Americans who do this, but I've also had it from various mansplainers like this guy, people expressing certain kinds of imperial and patriarchal power. They act as though they are the arbiters of what fat activism is and what it isn't. But nobody knows, nobody knows what fat activism is because the lit is so crap, people rarely reflect on it, there's a whole barrel of assumptions going on, and as far as I know no one apart from me has sat down with a bunch of fat activists from all over to ask them about it. So people end up thinking it has to be one thing – the thing that the people who think they're in charge say it is – and anything that doesn't fit that brief isn't worth bothering with. If nobody knows, it can be anything, including the weird stuff that I do, including the Fattylympics, which is not just about fat but also the hell of the Olympics, and about people looking at these intersections in their own ways. This is allowed. Really, the rest of them can all sod off." (Research Notebook)

My literature review established that fat activism is invariably constructed as American, as something produced by organisations and invested in leadership, as an activity concerned with speaking to power, as a shared series of interventions produced for the purpose of securing rights. Much of the literature reproduces this taken-for-granted view without much critical attention. Therefore, it felt imperative to ask the sample: What is fat activism? I wanted to explore this question because I felt that looking closely at what people do as fat activism would help clarify what it is and could be, make it visible and available for deeper analysis.

I anticipated that there would be different responses based on people's varying political interests, but I was surprised by how people actually responded. Some participants could not answer, others took much of the interview to answer it, others came back to it towards the end of the interview to reconsider their earlier responses. Of the people who
answered, there were overlaps in what they said, which I will discuss in the course of this chapter, but no two gave the same response, there were no consistent definitions. I noticed that, although I had approached participants as a fat activist explicitly looking for other fat activists, that is, the sample self-identified as fat activists either before the interview or as a part of the interview process, people were stumped by the question of what fat activism might be. Some people thought that it was a trick question. As with the literature of fat activism, a basic assumption that people already knew and had agreed on a definition of the concept without previous discussion, reflection or critical investigation.

Here I present four themes that attempt to clarify what fat activism means to the sample: political process, communities and cultures, micro fat activism, and ambiguous fat activism. The first two terms are grounded in social movement theory, whereas I have invented micro and ambiguous fat activism in response to the data. My labels might not be meaningful, or even helpful, to those whose activities I have categorised thus, but I offer them for discussion cautiously here as a means of understanding a wide range of actions that may otherwise be bewildering. I may be articulating only a tiny fraction of the activities that could be thought of as fat activism, but I hint at the unlimited methods through which people do fat activism by presenting a wider range of activity than is currently represented in the literature.

The categories I have set out are not mutually exclusive, instead the boundaries between them are permeable, and fat activists cross borders effortlessly. For example, Leora is a fat activist who works across different genres of activism including serving as a board member for a small organisation; performing; and doing anti-racism and HAES organising. Of her varied fat activism she says:

"Um, I would say my fat activism has really run the gamut for a lot of different areas of life for me, so I feel like it's been everything from having frank discussions with my nieces and my family, just as treating it as a normal thing, which is difficult work to do, on-going work, and I think that I did not, it took a long time to learn how to deal with that really, and raise it, to, I've done a lot of vandalism over the years. On International No Diet Day I would say I've definitely broken some laws to be disruptive, and vandalised diet centres."

(Leora)
It is clear from the outset that, even within a small sample of people with shared social networks, fat activism is more than one thing. Within this study, responses to the question of what fat activism is range over time and place, and homogeneity should not be assumed. One might be better off describing fat activism as fat *activisms* plural, but for the sake of readability I will stick to the singular, whilst acknowledging its multiple qualities.

**Political Process**

The literature of fat activism is a literature that currently assumes only one mode of activism. Doug McAdam et al. name this model as 'political process,' although it is described more colloquially by study participant Barbra as "the square stuff" (McAdam et al. 2001). Here I will define and discuss this model in relation to fat activism, and consider its appeal and limitations.

**Defining**

Political process activism follows a theory of public engagement with power proposed by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1989). Habermas theorises that the bourgeois public is a citizenship active within a realm of rational-critical debate, operating in a variety of venues, through which collective influence is exerted.

In this way, political process fat activism is concerned with speaking to power within a framework of rights, using the tools and processes of state power to attract attention, win support through rational debate, and influence social change through policy. This type of activism is respectable and law-abiding in a context where public protest in the West is increasingly criminalised (Welch 2000, Earl 2011). The rights discourse of political process fat activism stems from a genealogy of civil rights activism in the United States and the Amerocentrism of the constitutional concerns of US-based social justice, which currently dominate the social construction of fat activism (Cooper 2009b). Tools and processes might take the form of legal frameworks, they might require specialist knowledge and connections, as with Sondra Solovay's account of
creating anti-fat discrimination legislation in San Francisco, or they might manifest through more prosaic means, such as letter-writing (Solovay 2000).

"In April, 1976, I wrote a letter to the [local council]. My action resulted in the council's voting to remove the 'weight loss' label from a summer movement programme it was offering. Because of my letter, the council expressly endorsed the right of fat women to participate in movement/exercises classes without fear of ridicule or harassment." (Dana)

Political process fat activism makes strategic use of existing structures and institutions. Eve's sub-group, for example, exerts influence through its visibility, and uses the power of the larger organisation to leverage its interests:

"I don't think of myself as getting much done as a lone voice so what I try to do is create little subcultures wherever I am, so for example the [national organisation], we created the Health At Every Size Special Interest Group because you can create special interest groups, it's fantastic. So we got our HAES SIG and we show up there at all the conferences with some sort of programming, we show up at other conferences with programming, we are on the main listserv for the [national organisation], which is a really cool thing and actually there's a lot of discussion about clinical stuff and social forces and political things and all sorts of things, and it's a global community so it's really great because it's not just the US. And we're a big time presence there." (Eve)

Organisations are one of the main sites where political process fat activism takes place, people in the sample referred to NAAFA, ASDAH and NOLOSE as current activist organisations. Sydney Tarrow argues that people within social movements have "common purposes and solidarity," and thus fat activist organisations, theoretically at least, offer opportunities for people with shared interests to lobby collectively for power elsewhere (Tarrow 1994, p.4). Institutional and professionalised, such organisations produce forms of activism within them, such as fundraising and administrative work.

"Our goal [in this organisation] is to make as much money as we can so that people who want to be fat activists can participate [by being funded to come to our event when previously they could not afford to] and create community." (Liz)

"I'm on the board. I help to work on [a particular programme], and I'm the Secretary of the board right now, which is interesting, so I try to keep, I try to keep a sense of momentum in the stuff that we're doing, I remind all of us, you know, of our different deadlines and projects that we're working on." (Paz)

Political process fat activism seeks to win mass support through logic and sound evidence, it is didactic and charismatic because one of its central resources is the
mobilisation of people. In this context, fat activist rhetoric underscores the imperative to connect with others and to rally large groups of people because this kind of activism cannot be undertaken alone. Daniah lists the outreach projects that are central to their activism:

"Um, we've done, I've done workshops in so many different kinds of spaces: schools, community events, LadyFests, queer events, rush weeks, oh my god, like mostly for young like university age, high school age, and younger, I've done a lot of work with young, like, high school age girls. We have a bunch of conferences that exist in [the city] for queer high school students, and so it's spaces like that, Women's Studies, I've gone to classrooms and lectured, stuff like that. So I've done workshops and I've done lectures." (Daniah)

Public speaking forms a large part of this activism, and engaging with various media is regarded as especially important because it reaches a mass audience. Impi expresses the difficulties of performing activism in this context, she says of a colleague and herself:

"We have been both very active in the media, in that sense we have given those, sometimes those horrible statements about to journalists who are clearly just basically idiots who don't really know what they're talking about or writing about but just trying to get your message across. If they want to know something about this, I try to say something positive in this horrible magazine!" (Impi)

Despite the problems inherent for fat activists in engaging mainstream media that is already sceptical and mediated by journalists and editors, this remains a key strategy of political process activism.

**The appeal of political process**

Political process fat activism represents a series of clearly defined interests, aims and objectives. For example, fat feminist activist communities in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1980s had distinctive interests which, according to Maria, were primarily concerned with anti-diet discourse and fat pride which were part of the essentialist identity politics of the period. She explains:

"There was also a very clear anti-dieting kind of rhetoric that was part of it, that we will not participate in this act which is dangerous to us. So it was much more about, I think, at the time, it was much more about, 'We are not going to do these injurious things, we will not participate and collude in our own destruction.' And then there was a group that was more about 'Fat is great!' you know, 'Fat is
"I think of fat activism as being a response to the negative shit about fat. Challenging discourse, protesting stereotypes, countering fat hate, refusing to accept things, speaking truth to power, rejecting moral discourse concerning fatness, repudiating injustice." (Billy)

Here resistance is clear-cut and does not take into account complicity, or the uncertain territory of the borderlands between oppressor and oppressed, for example. Resistance as an organising trait also requires fat activism to always be relative to the more familiar dominant obesity discourse rather than formulated as an activity in its own right; it purports to dismantle fat hatred but paradoxically it may also reproduce it (Diamond 1985). The payoff is that being unambiguous and knowable confers some cultural visibility on political process fat activism, not least amongst sociologists concerned with social movements. For example, it is easy to place this type of fat activism within the universalised and fixed definition of social movements offered by David Snow et al.:

"Collectivities acting with some degree of organisation and continuity outside of institutional or organisational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organisation, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part."
(Snow et al. 2007, p.11)

These certain, universal and knowable qualities are appealing because they create a model of fat activism that is identifiable by dominant interests, the tools of which it uses (Lorde 1984). When 'everyone, everywhere' knows that this is what fat activism is, it can be replicated and recognised, ensuring its prominence, and further establishing its presence and legitimacy within a public sphere.
Limitations

One of the central drawbacks of political process fat activism is that it has become the standard, yet it is only one model for activism and cannot be regarded as generic. As this chapter unfolds I will discuss other forms of fat activism, some of which are marginalised by political process fat activism, especially that which takes place in organisations strategising through conformity, agreement, sameness and compromise.

Political Process fat activism looks upwards, hopefully, towards leadership, and relies on notions of fairness, rationality, and liberal democracy. Although he refines his argument in later works, Habermas initially proposes that the idealised Public Sphere is built on a principle of universal access, of civilised debate. Nancy Fraser points out that this is naïve. The bourgeois public sphere disregards the pre-existing social inequality that would prevent citizens from participating as equals; it therefore reproduces hegemonic power. She suggests that the people who participate in political process fat activism are those who already have privilege and resources (Fraser 1990). Fraser's social inequalities are built on exploitation, and speaking to power does not guarantee that the ruling strata will want to act against that exploitation. For example, Paul McAleer documents instances in which weight loss corporations have appropriated fat activist concepts; merely knowing and recognising fat activism does not ensure that dominant interests will play fair (McAleer 2007). Furthermore, the binary concepts of 'public' and 'private' delineate what is believed to be valid and relevant, and what is not. According to Fraser, this is gendered since women tend to be associated with the private. Hence only certain kinds of subjects and presentations are permissible or legitimate within a public sphere.

The assumed universality of justice and the centrality of rights in political process fat activism is similarly troubling. 'Justice' has become a suffix in present day alternative progressive politics in the US, where food justice, health justice, and indeed research justice overlap with fat activism.

"Well, activism is about creating justice, right, it's about working to create a world where there is justice for fat people as well as everyone else." (Elliot)
Justice is an attempt to engender accountability, but it is also associated with authoritarian judgment, punishment, and social control. Rights discourses are problematic for other reasons, as Anne Mulhall notes, they presume a modernist progression from savage primitivism to urban sophistication and can invoke the same troubling Western notions of imperialism and hegemony in 'progress' (Mulhall 2007). The linear construction of progress is also perplexing and does not allow for the complications and messiness of human behaviour in social movements, where collective process is often hard won (Vannucci and Singer 2010). This is reiterated by Jamie, who critiques the progressive future narrative of rights-based fat activism:

"Yeah, well obviously any kind of politics oriented towards a progressive future by its very nature, and what else can it be about, in a sense, but it's about creating a different future, but then obviously there are critiques to the progress narrative in that it's, I don't know, reproduces various kinds of structures and subjects, and so on and so forth, and how to try and engage in activism which is aware of that, or which doesn't fall into those traps, which I'm still struggling to work out how that might happen and what that might be, but I think, you know, the kind of fat activism that might be oriented towards, either towards loving your curves or towards 'I want a law that recognises me' is more on that sort of progress narrative trajectory than some of the other kinds, perhaps." (Jamie)

Here, Jamie is wondering how fat activists might build different kinds of futures without reiterating a naïve futurity based on a flimsy progress narrative.

Whilst I sympathise with Jamie's doubts about these narratives of and rationales for fat activism, their comments also strike me as representative of a kind of stuckness relating to intellectual remove from the phenomenon, or a desire for methodological purity in activism. They represent a divide between thinking about and doing activism, which does not quite satisfy as a critique of political process activism. In Chapter Six I argue for theorising that breaks some of the movement's stasis, a stagnation to which naïve futurity and static renditions of the body certainly contribute. But fat activism is not just an intellectual process. I want to keep in mind that fat activism which fails a rigorous grounding in theory, including that which reproduces problematic constructs, still has the capacity for social, political, and personal transformation, not to mention, joy, conviviality and pleasure. Although I will go on to argue the necessity of theorising fat activism, I do not want to make the assumption that theory and abstraction, rather than the concrete and embodied modes of activism, always promote the best understanding of the movement.
In *Fat & Proud* I argued that fat hatred is closely allied to power and that the work of eliminating fat hatred is tied to that of dismantling fatphobic institutions and systems where power impacts negatively on marginalised people (Cooper 1998). Hence, other fat activists in the study sample rejected rights discourse as a rationale for fat activism because they understood them to be constrained by the limitations of dominant interests. Instead of seeking rights within a system that she sees as corrupt, Louisa speaks in favour of fat activism that is part of a bigger revolutionary political ideal, and which might be one of the tools that enables her to dismantle the status quo.

"So, like I guess I don't like the idea of fat activism like beginning and ending with a rights-based movement, like 'We the fat people are oppressed and we want equal rights under this system,' to everything because I feel like it's that same of thing when, how do I want to say, like performance goals are necessary because people are suffering right now, and I don't want that to be the end point, like I don't want, you know, fatties to just be on *Vogue* magazine, or whatever, I want it to be much more broad than that."

Charlotte: The system is shit, it has to change.

Exactly! Like not a piece of the pie, the pie is rotten, let's get rid of the pie, or something, so." (Louisa)

Liz agrees that fat activism is part of a wider concern that draws on concepts like anti-oppression, liberation, ethics, and is associated with intersectional identity politics:

"So I think fat activism is kind of like a way for fat people to engage in their own liberation, but larger than that, like address the ideas of what it means to have, to have a body, for it to be a commodity, and to be used against you, you know, and all sorts of things, for things like, for things like other people's moralisms or for commerce." (Liz)

However, Liz argues that it is not Louisa's revolutionary politics that will counter fatphobia but capitalism. She goes on to say that entrepreneurship built on fat activist values addresses fat hatred:

"Fat hatred is fuelled by capitalism because these companies create products that are all about making fat people skinny, but it's really about making money, it's not about your health, obviously. But we don't have a comparable thing to hang our little hat on […] I think the answer is not not doing that [building fat activist businesses], because we can't do it, like messages are driven by money, even if they're driven by beliefs […] And I think that things, I mean they have to actually have a positive effect on people's lives, but I think that, you know, if you were choosing like paying, whatever, 19.99 a month to be on Weight Watchers, and go through that experience of paying 19.99 a month to be in some
kind of Health At Every Size experience that makes you feel good, you know it's going to have a direct impact. That person wants to spend 19.99 for relief of something." (Liz)

Liz' suggestion that fat activists counter capitalism with capitalism is antithetical to Louisa's fat politics. Yet both women are friends, they share fat activist and queer community where they live, and are part of the same organisations. This suggests that organisations are not necessarily the founts of shared values and collective agreement that they are assumed to be in the literature of fat activism and that they contain a broad range of ideologies. Where Louisa and I may share similar politics with regard to social change, it cannot be assumed that these represent ideology within the movement, or that fat activism has a universal ideology, it is actually a platform for a range of positions.

The desire to homogenise diverse perspectives contained within fat activist organisations and community under a political process model that necessitates sameness and harmony has lead to a discourse that become extremely broad. Fat activism here is part of a politics of the body under capitalism, it is a way of questioning the commodification of bodies and the moralising that is directed at people with non-normative bodies that encompasses both anti-establishment and entrepreneurial or neoliberal ideologies. This broadening discourse is not limited to debates about the usefulness or otherwise of capitalism. Louisa places fat activism alongside trans and disabled people's struggles to resignify gender, citizenship, 'productive bodies,' health and illness.

"So I feel like for me fat activism is part of a larger movement around radicalising the way we think about what bodies are supposed to do, and how they're supposed to look, which is why I like thinking about it in connection to other queer types of bodies like trans folks or disabled folks." (Louisa)

For Reese, fat activism is part of a larger discourse of shame:

"Um, fat activism is, uh, I'm having a really hard time with labelling myself a fat activist right now, not because I don't think fat activism is valid, I absolutely do, because I think it's too narrow for me. Like I don't want to talk about fat specifically, I mean I do, I'm still kind of in limbo about this, so you'll hear that ambivalence. But for me the big thing is shame. I feel like there's a lot of shame in the world and I think that intersects all the different oppressions. And so that's kind of where my heart is right now." (Reese)
Given the growth of intersectional analyses to theorise identity politics, especially in the West, it is not surprising that fat is allied with other identity-based movements that place the body centrally. Fat embodiment is one of many intersections of marginalised identity through which people are socially constructed and situated. However, as my discussion of feminist proxies for fat activism has shown, fat people and fat activism have been made invisible in, for example, feminist body politics that mask the specificity of fat through a series of substitutions for it, including 'beauty,' 'dieting,' or 'cosmetic surgery'. By allying fat with broader discourses of the body, fat itself often becomes obscured, or reduced to a handful of theoretical touchstones and political concerns, notably stigma and discrimination. In the rest of this chapter I will claim that fat activism is indeed a social movement that exceeds a rights discourse, although rights are an important part of what people do as fat activists. I will show that it is a social movement that has significant intersections with, and implications for understanding, other forms of embodiment that have been socially side-lined and the struggles to resignify them in 21st century Western culture. But it is my intention here to discuss fat activism in its own right and revel in its expansiveness without hiding and constraining it in a false universalising of the feminist body.

Political process fat activism is the dominant form of fat activism because it is the most known and knowable in 21st century Western culture. It is concerned with working within the dominant culture, even when complete systemic change is mandated. Political process fat activism appeals because it is presumed to have unambiguous interests that can be achieved collectively. Yet leadership and authority cannot be counted on to do the right thing, universal values cannot be assumed, and the necessity of congruence between fat activists threatens to dominate the movement with discourse that has little concrete meaning.

I shall now describe a different type of fat activism, one that shares a faith in progress, futurity, rationality and speaking to power, but also one where participants relate to each other to produce capital more autonomously.
Activist communities and cultures

Political process models of fat activism ignore the relationships between activists themselves as producers of community and culture, and the benefits of these forms of activism. In this section I will explain some of the qualities and functions of community and culture in fat activism.

What is community?

References to 'community' were made many times by the people I interviewed for this study, 'building community' was regarded as an important activity for fat activists, many of whom were sensitive to experiences of exclusion. Though a central concept, community was rarely defined, its use reiterated the trend in the sample's accounts, and in the literature of fat activism, of universalising concepts. Barbra offered, plainly, "It's mates," but Reese explained its significance in more depth:

"It's a network of people who share a common belief system, who do it lovingly. You know, it's people who you know will show up if you throw something, who will help you, like, spread the word. It's friendship, or acquaintanceship, or allies, I guess. I don't-, defining community, it's a place to go, you know, like whether it's like, like NOLOSE is a community, these people are banded together under this particular umbrella and certainly it feels safer to be with them than not. And also not, it brings up a lot of stuff for a lot of people, it's complicated but so's family, right? So, it's extended family, I guess." (Reese)

Community, then, can be thought of here as affinity networks where there are shared interests, more or less, where support may be found. It would be a mistake, however, to approach fat community only as spaces that are helpful, compassionate or encouraging. Rachel Colls' autoethnography of a BBW night club 'celebrating' fatness reveals tensions of in-group hierarchies relating to gender, sex and self-acceptance (Colls 2012). A paper I co-authored with Samantha Murray expresses some of the difficulties of claiming fat activist community membership (Cooper and Murray 2012). Similarly, community should not be assumed to be a universal concept, there are significant cultural differences in the ways it manifests between, for example, fat people and other identity groups to which they may be allied (Maor 2012).
The work of building fat community and culture fits with sociological theorising of new social movements, moving from how people organise, to examining activism as a kind of culture. Alain Touraine proposes that the interest in activist cultures reflects shifts in sociology, from attempts at objectivism to a search for meaning, a quest that fat activist culture-building might go some way to answering (Touraine 2004). Following this shift, the primary goals of social movements could still entail a Habermasian relationship to structural power, but the cultural turn emphasises the importance of everyday interaction between members of activist communities, where culture and community operate as a frame for activism and reproduce activist identity (Valocchi 1999). Fraser's work on counterpublics captures this mixture of concerns. As well as criticising Habermas' public sphere, she uses it to develop her own theory of activist cultures.

"I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." (Fraser 1990, p.67)

Thus subaltern counterpublics are sites for activism in their own right, they give attention to structural sites of protest as well as forming communities of interest, and they create diverse spaces from which to act. In this way they are more autonomous than activism produced within a political process model; motivation to act is not only generated from the top down, it also occurs through counterpublic relationships.

Despite the richness and relevance of Fraser's theory, I have resisted using counterpublics to describe fat activism. Subaltern counterpublics fail to theorise the movement fully because they rely on an idea of activism as collective and dialectic and other types of fat activism remain unaccounted for within this model. I favour 'social movement' here instead of counterpublic or subculture for this reason.

**Community-building and capital**

Building community is not only about reflecting meaning or understanding relationships, it is a project of building capital, enabling people to exercise power. Community-building within the study sample can be understood as a collective process of creating what Pierre Bourdieu describes as forms of capital, economic, symbolic,
social and cultural, which intertwine with each other (Bourdieu 1986). Community-building benefits activists within the movement by developing new platforms for understanding fat subjectivity and capital promotes visibility, legitimacy, and aids fat activists' petitioning of power through political process.

Community-building can be understood as a public statement of existence, and an invitation to empathise for the purpose of creating a space for collaborative potential action in oneself and others. Eve spells out the practical work of community-building:

"Well, the other part of the activism I guess is all the [organisational] infrastructure-building, community-building, [online messageboards], showing up, providing content, providing ways of talking about things, thinking about things, I guess I feel like I'm building ideas, and that's a lot of my activism is the building of ideas, to the extent that they have legs, they go out into the world and people mess with them and do whatever with them, and I'm just thrilled that that's going to be a legacy of mine, that I feel that that's what I love myself and the power of ideas in my life has been profound, and so I want to just carry that on, pass it on. I guess that's it." (Eve)

Consciousness-raising is associated with feminist praxis of the 1960s and 1970s, but it has been adopted more recently as a fat feminist community-building strategy. Kris describes her participation in a group which used street theatre and performance as its more public face of fat activism at the turn of the millennium, but she says that what happened behind the scenes was equally important.

"And so we would do a performance maybe once a year, maybe twice a year, maybe even up to six times a year, but we would meet weekly almost throughout the whole year and those meetings were really, you know, now I wasn't really thinking about it at the time but in retrospect I can see that they were definitely consciousness-raising sessions. They were ways for us to connect and feel like we weren't alone, and create community, and share our experiences, and then articulate our experiences from being these sort of isolated and depressing moments into, not just a liberatory but kind of, I don't know, a way of thinking it through a group of people. Changing that experience in a way by coming together." (Kris)

The work of inviting people to share the development of ideas in public, to pool resources, can have powerful effects. Verity talks about how encountering a space where community was actively being built was crucial in her own identity development as a writer, activist, as fat, and as a lesbian. She recalls the emotional intensity of her first encounter with community-building, at a reading by fat lesbian activists:
"I think I've written about this, that Judy Freespirit and somebody else I didn't know well, but she was talked of in that way, and she was a writer, and the first time I heard her read it was the first time I'd heard like any lesbian feminist read, it was a fat woman, so it was in the basement of [unclear] so it was consciously fat women, and I sat in the back sobbing the whole time. Sobbing! Sobbing! Because she had named this opening for me. Talk about yeah, like 'I can make the space so that you can walk through,' I mean Judith [Stein, Boston-based fat lesbian feminist Jewish activist] made that space for me, she did. And so then, walking through it, I could say all these different things about "Well, I'm a writer and an activist' but it's the same thing, in some ways it is. I couldn't have even, I mean I was trying, but I couldn't have got there in the form that I did without that." (Verity)

Verity's experience at the workshop enabled her to claim identities that were significant to her, to participate within a community of similar people, and to help develop that community's visibility and capital, through publishing, for example. Given the isolation that many fat people have felt since they were young, being part of a community of people with shared values is psychologically important in claiming a strong self-identity, relinquishing loneliness, and finding people with whom to share life's experiences (Cooper 1998). This is reiterated in the following exchange:

"Charlotte: It is fabulous. When you encounter a proud freak or a bunch of proud freaks it is fucking fabulous.

Yes and it makes me feel like I've found the people that I want to hang out with, and to me that's really it." (Kris)

Embedded in these social relations is a type of social mobility where activists transform and accumulate worth in marginalised social identities, that increase embodied entitlement to space (Skeggs 2004). Where Skeggs has criticised Bourdieu's lack of analysis of gender and capital, here fat activists are generating capital that is saturated with gender, sexuality, and embodiment and, following her critique, these could be considered "a hidden form of cultural capital" p.23 because they perform the alchemical work of converting abjection into asset.

In using community to generate cultural capital, it helps to have pre-existing access to capital. Elliott typifies this in her account of inviting people she encountered in her community to form a collective to produce a tangible object, a zine, in San Francisco the early 1990s. In her account she makes indirect reference to cultural resources
already available to her: zine-making and queer community, a Dyke March, the capital and skills required to make and distribute flyers, for example.

"Another thing I didn't say was that it wasn't just a group of people who knew each other, it started with a couple of people who knew each other, like five of us maybe, and then we started, it wasn't just at the Dyke March, we started going around and any time we would see a fat, queer, dykey, whatever person, um, we would invite them to come and be part of our group. I invited people I had never met, if I saw work they were doing that seemed really good, I saw my friend doing some performance art at [college], and I just walked up to her, I had never met her before, and I was like: 'Do you want to be part of our zine for fat dykes?' [laughter]. And so there was a lot of reaching out to people, you know, er, it's like we really wanted to include the community, that was my personal mission, shared to varying degrees by different people.

Charlotte: Right. So it emboldened you to do that?

Yes! It really did. It was like: 'Oh, I have this ruse for making a connection with you, and flirting with you, and all that, yeah! Yeah.'" (Elliot)

The capital intrinsic to this exchange is relatively modest, yet is cultivated to produce wide-ranging effects. The flyers mentioned by Elliott generated submissions and volunteers who eventually produced the zine, as well as a readership. The zine not only helped reflect diverse fat perspectives within a queer subculture, but created a subculture and constituency of its own: 'fat dykes'. This had a powerful impact on people. Hannah was one of the fat dykes who encountered the zine produced by the collective later on, she recalls:

"So I took a Queer Studies class or something, I don't know that I was exposed to anything all that fascinating but while I was in the class, it was in this co-op at my school that I didn't normally go to and I was just like searching around in the bin and I found a copy of FaT GiRL that someone had just left around. I read it and my mind was just completely blown. I was like 'I know what to do!' I was just so excited, I was like 'WOW!' I think I was kind of turned off by the whole thing at first, I think I was like 'Fuck! Oh my god! Ew!' but then I took it home and I was really like: 'Oh my god, these people are wonderful, they're like the most wonderful people I have ever seen in my life. THESE ARE THE PEOPLE! So I went from being horrified to being 'Oh I'm so glad that there's people like that out there,' to being 'I'm moving to San Francisco and becoming a fat activist in a day and a half' [laughter]." (Hannah)

Hannah's exuberance in recalling her first encounter with the zine 16 years after it was first published points to its on-going power as a project generating capital through community-building; both Hannah and I continue to feel the pull and influence of this
particular zine. It is remarkable that an object as transient as a now-defunct collectively-produced zine about fat dykes, started through a flyering campaign, should have such positive effects not just over time but also place. In London I was given a flyer for FaT GiRL by a friend in 1993, I then sent off for a copy, had work published in it over the following years, visited the collective in San Francisco in 1996, recognised my own identity as a fat dyke through my encounters with the zine, made long-standing friendships, and continue to feel a deep connection to the project. Ann Cvetkovich testifies to the affective power for marginalised people, specifically lesbians, upon encountering the ephemeral objects, such as zines, representing the lesbian public cultures that may be found in the queer archive (Cvetkovich 2003). It is the fleeting nature of these fragile yet enduring objects that adds to their power in directly reassuring and acknowledging the importance of its readers' lives. This is true for Hannah and I, who were acknowledged and resignified in and through the zine, and continue to express delight in it; we have both benefitted from the capital generated by this project.

Capital operates through relationships, therefore community-building can be regarded as a form of activism in a Bourdieusian context because it produces capital. However, elsewhere in the theorising of social movements, for example in counterpublics and in activist experience, the question of whether or not community-building is activism in its own right is vexed. Later I will discuss similar denials of legitimacy directed at micro activism. Liat recalls the community of fat lesbian feminist activists she was part of, a community that was both a political and social group. She implies that the social aspect of the group emerged after the politics were somehow attained or completed, suggesting that there was a clear distinction between their political activism and social activities.

"And there was a social life here with other fat women for a long time, I would say right through the 80s. You know, there were parties and there were people hooking up or whatever, there was a bunch of people who were all dating each other, or not dating each other, so that was always amusing. And you know there was just sort of more of a social scene, people would all go to a bar the same night and dance, or, you know, different things like that. But, you know, wasn't, there wasn't as much political activity, because it was like; 'Ok so we have the politics, now we can have some fun.' You know. (Liat)"

Liat regards the social spaces as extraneous to the political work of fat activism. But this group were still doing fat activism through their relationships and in the supportive (or
otherwise) social spaces they created together, even during their time off. As fat women and, in these examples, as fat lesbian feminists, to recognise and know somebody else, to commit to a relationship, is a political act in a context where one's humanity is repeatedly diminished in the wider culture. I would maintain that such relationships could be understood as gestures of defiance, perhaps, or acts of survival, they are not secondary to the real work of activism, they are a central part of that work.

The group of fat lesbian feminist activists that Liat remembers shows the interplay between personal and political spaces, and illustrates the permeability, or even falseness, of the divide between doing politics and living in the activist work of community-building. Fat activist community contests the distinctions between public and private, political and social, friend and comrade. For example, Sarah was part of a performance group in the Bay Area that was established in the early 1980s, membership changed over its lifespan but the group met "every Sunday, every Sunday with rare exceptions, for about 12 years." Fat activism here is not only in the performances the group produced together, but also in the commitment to meeting for such a long period, in being present for one another, in creating a critical space in which to act on fatness. This critical space can be playful and sociable as well as defiant and bold. Martha explains one of the activities of a fat community group she started in New England in the 1970s:

"We went out together as a group for ice-cream. Instead of feeling ashamed of our size, we were making a political statement that 'here we are.'" (Martha)

Although buying and eating ice cream is a significant act for fat people who face reproach when eating 'bad food' in public, it is the collective nature of this action, taking place very simply in a community, that makes it effective as a fat activist moment. The participants express solidarity and support for each other whilst they publicly break social rules, expose the everyday locations of fat hatred, demand visibility, and express embodied entitlement.

Community-building fosters power, entitlement to space and social mobility for fat people. It can be undertaken by anyone, but has more chance of success if activists already have access to social or subcultural capital. Despite its qualities, community-building is seen in some quarters as less legitimate than political process fat activism.
However, the relationship between community and capital, and the sociological theorising of new social movements, demonstrates that community-building is a valid kind of activism in its own right, and is part of a repertoire of fat activism.

**Using community to generate cultural capital**

I have already hinted that the culture produced by fat activist community-building is also a project of creating capital, and now I want to explore this in more depth by describing how this is done. By cultural capital, I am referring to Bourdieu's concept of how taste is a resource of the powerful (Bourdieu 1986). This generally signifies the use of taste by ruling classes to exclude subordinates, but here I use it as a concept that also enables marginalised people to develop worth for themselves. There is some naïveté to this claim given debates about the appropriation of such cultural capital by dominant culture, which I will save for another time (Halberstam 2005). For now I want to highlight the importance of collectively claiming and producing culture as means of generating capital in fat that, according to some of my study sample, can help to resignify it. Whilst Samantha Murray is sceptical about the extent to which resignification can improve material conditions for fat people, I propose that thinking differently about fat, which can be simultaneous to maintaining a stake in obesity discourse, is an essential part of challenging dominant discourse and developing new knowledge that can have significant material consequences (Murray 2008).

**Existing cultural forms**

The fat activists I interviewed spoke of using whatever resources were available to them in order to produce cultural forms of activism. Examples included sculpture, film, leading religious services, authoring books, and singing. I will discuss some of the methods below but there is not room to address a comprehensive range of activities because these are as varied as activists themselves. This inability to demarcate the fullness of fat activist cultural production reiterates the queer fat qualities of not fitting, and of being uncontainable. For a more in-depth discussion of how some contemporary fat activists use visual cultures, I would direct readers to Stefanie Snider's paper on the topic (Snider 2012).
Dana's fat activism, writing articles for local newspapers, is typical of how fat activists use existing forms to develop cultural capital:

"From 1973 through 1977, I contributed my essays and poetry to Sister! (a Los Angeles Feminist newspaper) [...] I also wrote several fat positive articles for The Venice Beachhead (a local alternative newspaper) during these years. I wrote The Venice Beachhead articles and the articles in Sister! independent of being in The Fat Underground, although I was supported and encouraged by the other fat activists." (Dana)

Writing for newspapers helped introduce fat activist concepts to a bigger audience, and assisted new community and culture building, that is, it generated fat activist capital. As the writer Dana maintained a high degree of editorial control over the content, contrasting with Impi and her colleague, mentioned previously, who were forced to negotiate the unfriendly editorial constraints of the journalists for whom they were providing content. It also created a paper trail of work that could be archived. In my chapter for Fat Studies in the UK, I wrote about the relative absence of and necessity for archiving and remembering fat activism as a resource from which others could draw over time (Cooper 2009a). Being accepted for publication by a newspaper requires certain skills and capital, to which Dana already had access. Elliot's kinship with queer community enabled her to start a zine for fat dykes and, like her, Dana benefitted from pre-existing social capital through her association with a fat activist organisation.

Performance is a significant site for fat activism, according to the sample. Sarah recalls the shift that occurred in her upon attending We Dance, Deb Burgard's innovative dance classes for fat women in the Bay Area in the late 1980s:

"And so Deb's class was such a joy. But I started it in these like baggy clothes and all, and we had mirrors, and I wouldn't look at myself, I'd just stare at Debbie besides trying to make sure I was doing the steps right and having fun. But from that, little by little I started watching other people in the class, and I, there started to be this shift in my vision, and I was like noticing how beautiful there were parts of, like how their cha-cha moved as my mother would say, their arms would wiggle, and their bellies and their thighs and everything, and just seeing the joy that they were having, and the fun that they were having. And one day it just happened and I slipped into view too, and I saw that I was like, my face looked like theirs, the joy of movement." (Sarah)

An environment that was supportive, diverse, and politicised around fat, revealed to Sarah the value of her body as a dancer, which she was able to communicate to others.
We Dance helped produce this knowledge collectively, not only to participants but, since We Dance was an integral part of Deb Burgard and Pat Lyons' work on fat and health, to audiences and readers (Lyons and Burgard 1990). Within fat activist performance, dance, burlesque and drag create popular, playful experimental spaces (Asbill 2009). Fat activists developing these performance forms have capitalised on their popularity in recent years, expanding performance venues for fat people where previously there would have been few opportunities. Performance is particularly important within fat activist culture as a means of developing capital because of the immediacy of fat embodiment, its use as a reflection of fat experience, and its audiences as gatherings of fat community (Cooper 1998, McAllister 2009).

Some performers complicate the ways that cultural capital is produced in fat activist performance. Kris speaks of her own performance practice, which has evolved within her work as an artist and fat activist. She says:

"I do do performance now and again, a few times a year and I tend to show a lot of my body when I do that, by either wearing outrageously tight outfits or, you know, a t-shirt that is too small and rides up and I don't pull it down." (Kris)

Here the performer is modelling possibility, performing what could happen if clothes were allowed to rise, and if fat bodies did not have to be surveilled, she is contributing to the capacity to imagine other forms of fat embodiment. Kris makes exposing her fat body part of her performance, but for Benjamin displaying his body onstage raises questions about the responsibility of performing fatness. Where previously he used nudity in performance, now he is more circumspect about it.

"Very few people have seen a body like mine undressed and it's like, you know, a naked, gender-variant, large- and, I, so I just know that I, I don't wanna do that lightly. And so I just like don't want to make that choice by default. So I just like really, I haven't been like getting undressed as often, and I am just kind of like I think of my body with a lot of responsibility in there too. [...]And in some ways that's just taking care of my audience, I think it's also about artistry. I have something that I can get a reaction with, it's on me, I don't necessarily, I want to be careful with that. [...] I think that people definitely see my fat before they see anything else." (Benjamin)

Kris and Benjamin talk about their performance as activism that is observed by other fat people, to whom they feel responsible. Benjamin's reflections on the politics of disclosing his body in public echo a recent campaign in which advice was circulated to
help prevent fat people's pictures being used to market fatphobia or weight loss without the model's consent (Cooper 2012a). Both speakers feed back their embodied knowledge about showing one's fat body to the people who watch them perform and, from this, new knowledge can emerge and be developed productively.

Although some forms of cultural production rely on specialist skills, or existing access to capital, alternative cultural praxis is also present and, in theory, requires few previous resources. Daniah talks about their creative use of graffiti:

"So the [group] started off as picking up Sharpies and writing [our name] and other words pertaining to fat and queers all over [the city] in bathrooms in queer spaces and non-queer spaces, and it was basically about making the word visible, Fat, making fat visible, the word. And wondering, like thinking about what would happen when people are taking a dump or taking a piss and they're looking at these words, [our name], what are they thinking about, what is the jog for their brain?" (Daniah)

Daniah was able to capitalise on the graffiti, find kinship, and develop a popular performance and activist group which has increased fat activist community in her country and beyond.

In a similar vein, accessible web-publishing and online social media tools have enabled other fat activists to develop cultural practice, build community, and resignify fatness. Using minimal technology and working outside a studio, Rosa, a photographer, uses her blog to expand notions of the "aesthetic validity" of fat with carefully constructed collaborative photographs of the fat people, mostly women, she meets in her everyday life. She calls this "photoactivism".

"Many of these people have never gotten naked in front of another person that they're not sexual with, it's a totally new experience, and I think that for anyone would be exhilarating, and then to see their naked body on the internet. It can be exhilarating, but when you factor in that we have bodies that society wants us to be ashamed of, wants us to hide under tent dresses, and teaches us that we should not have any pride and should not expect someone else to look at it as a thing of beauty, or even just to look at it, that adds a whole other level of power to it." (Rosa)

The power to which Rosa refers includes not just the fat body resignified through the gaze, but her website, which attracts a large amount of traffic and has spawned sub-sites, products, and a huge fan-base. Rosa makes little money from her photography,
she has decided that her photoactivism is not for profit; the capital she is generating through her project is not necessarily economic, its power is in creating value in fatness.

New cultural forms

As well as building on and synthesising existing forms, fat activism has developed its own tactics to increase community and develop cultural capital. Here I will briefly mention fat swims, fatshion and clothing swaps. These reflect the popularity and mainstreaming of alternative fat discourses around health and fashion. I consider these new forms to be constructions of what Foucault names 'heterotopias': places that disrupt normative concepts of space and time to create windows of possibility in which other ways of being that cannot normally be tolerated have opportunities to thrive (Foucault and Miskowiec 1967, Halberstam 2005). This can also be understood as autonomous methods of creating value, or capital, or power in fat embodiment.

For example, fat swims are swimming sessions, usually held in accessible pools away from the view of outsiders, where fat people can swim together and socialise around a pool without being harassed. Fat swims were first organised by lesbian fat activists in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early 1980s, the strategy has travelled to other cities in North America since then, and they are a feature of national gatherings in the US such as NAAFA and NOLOSE. Fat people cannot normally be tolerated in the states of undress required to swim, especially as a group, without being the target of unwanted attention. Fat swims are heterotopic because they create an alternative space in which fat embodiment is normalised and can be enjoyed playfully and socially; this would not normally be possible. Fat swims can be seen as part of a HAES strategy for activity that does not stigmatise weight, and swims are characterised by an atmosphere of well-being rather than training.

There is evidence that, for some time, plus-size clothing retailers have used strategies familiar to fat activists to market their products, suggesting a close relationship between capitalism and some forms of activism (Pathé 1962). More recently, fat activists have sought to interrogate this relationship, with mixed results. Amanda Piasecki coined the term 'Fatshionista' for the eponymous LiveJournal online community that she founded in 2004. Originally intended as a place to discuss the politics, ethics and aesthetics of fat
and fashion raised by the marketing of fat in the plus-size clothing industry in the West, the community quickly became very popular and its original intentions were lost. It generated a number of online practices popular amongst fatshion-orientated fat activists, including outfit-blogging, where participants post an image of themselves in an outfit they like and invite comments from readers. Despite problematic relationships to consumerism and heteronormativity, fatshion remains heterotopic because it upsets normative constructions of fashion, which tend to exclude fat people, and instead encourages their creative participation.

Clothing swaps were popularised by fat feminist activists in the United States as a means of acquiring difficult-to-find affordable large-sized clothing and sharing garments as a community resource. The Fat Girl Flea refashioned this idea, made it bigger and added to it a celebratory fatshionista sensibility. The first Flea took place in New York in 2004 as a fundraiser for NOLOSE, it has continued sporadically since then and has inspired similar events elsewhere, including the 2010 Big Bum Jumble in the UK. Liz was instrumental in setting up the Flea, now called The Big Fat Flea, and here she discusses its ethos of accessibility:

"So the Flea grew over the years that we did it, we always do it at the Gay and Lesbian Centre, so there's a certain level of, like, you have to be willing to walk into the Lesbian and Gay Community Centre, but sometimes people's desire for inexpensive clothing trumps whatever–

Charlotte: Their homophobia!

Trumps their homophobia! Shopping trumps a lot of things! It really really does. It's a really powerful tool in like you don't think about it but you're not inviting people in to, say, support being queer, but there's a certain level of acceptance or support or at least tolerance or a lack of intolerance even in that moment, to like walk in that door and pay your $5 or whatever, and then rummage through an insane amount of clothing and walk out with your stuff, and then hopefully what people experience in the space of the Fat Girl Flea Market is an idea of community, is an idea of body, or people who are actively choosing to not engage in self-hate culture, not engage in dieting as a, whatever, self-punishing activity, and choose to do things differently. But you don't actually have to subscribe to it to participate, because our goal is to make as much money as we can so that people who want to be fat activists can participate and create community. But it definitely reaches, like, you know, I mean there're just like church ladies with four kids who come in and get 50 bags of clothes, and they're doing it because they have a particular need. So it makes me happy that we're creating a space in which multiple needs are met and it's not, it's not about
dogma, it's about kind of the, you know, it's still the reality that there's a lack of accessible clothing out there." (Liz)

Not all clothes swaps take place in this way, some are small gatherings of people allied to social networks, but the Flea remains the biggest of these events, and the standard in terms of community and culture-building. By capitalising on the mainstreaming of fat fashion, the Flea has become a popular and accessible event but it has not done so at the expense of its roots in LGBT community. Instead, it has created a cross-cultural space for community-building and the development of fat cultural capital in which people can find what they need and want without judgement, which supports a celebratory atmosphere, centred on an abundance of cheap recycled clothing.

Elsewhere, fat activists take existing forms and create new forms. Sarah remembers going to a play party, a social space for public sex, that was organised by a younger generation of queer fat activists in the early 1990s:

"I remember [my girlfriend] and I went to, it was a FaT GiRL fundraiser, it was a big play party at this, I don't remember where, it was in San Francisco someplace, and that was a lot of fun but it was, you know, not my Mama's activism!" (Sarah)

Fat activism here takes the form of exposure to and participation in forbidden forms of fat embodiment mediated through desire. This happens in other fat and queer sexualised spaces, such as the volunteer brothel that was organised by fat activists at a national queer conference in the United States in 2010 and 2011. The play party is already a transgressive space but, when appropriated by "fat dykes and the women who want them" (FaT GiRL's maxim), it creates a unique time and place, which endures in community memory, where fat dyke sexuality is central and no longer marginalised.

Although they are sometimes regarded as secondary to political process forms of activism, community and culture-building are important means of doing fat activism because, as well as reproducing activist identity, they are sites for building capital and embodied entitlement. This has repercussions for political process models, which requires the resource of a mobilised public, but it also has worth for activists, especially those able to build on pre-existing social capital, in the construction of heterotopias, that is, spaces where fat people can flourish autonomously.
Micro fat activism

Political process fat activism and the work of community and culture-building in fat activism enables social movements to be theorised as collective endeavours. But organisations, even loose and informal groups, cannot meet their members' interests at all times, and there are forms of fat activism that challenge the assumption that collective action is a necessary part of activism. Fat activism has a wide strategic repertoire and although the people in the sample reported engaging with fat activism of different types, their most numerous accounts by far were activities and interventions that I call 'micro fat activism'.

Micro activism takes place in everyday spaces, is generally performed by one person, sometimes two, but rarely more, and happens in small, conversational moments. Martha describes the activism involved in speaking out or speaking back to fatphobic comments where she works:

"So all that workplace conversation about food being bad. So I spent time trying to figure out what can I say where I don't want to engage, and I don't want to really come out as a radical fat activist, and I don't want to listen to this, and I don't need to slay the person for saying it, so what can I say? So that's where we started coming up with language like: 'I don't think food is good or bad.'"

(Martha)

This is the work of gently drawing people's attention to micro-oppression, but it also involves being visible to others in an unthreatening way and bringing fat consciousness to other conversations, for example in friendships. Such interventions are often extremely understated and represent the dynamic ways in which fat activists take fat activism into their own hands. Micro fat activism reflects bell hooks' and Ian Maxey's insistence that activists reclaim the quiet, inclusive and broad work of emancipation as an everyday activity, they argue that this enables them to address the multiplicity of sites of oppression that saturate everyday life in poststructural interpretations of power (hooks 1994, Maxey 1999). Micro fat activism does not rely on collective action, indeed it can involve very small acts undertaken in isolation. The sample referred to activities such as Googling someone, sending off for books, stealing office supplies from work to make flyers, surviving, buying things, exercising, learning, playing with one's identity. This type of activism might be the only way in which people perform fat activism, or it
might be carried out in conjunction with other forms. Where political process fat activism is built on a promise of delayed gratification, micro fat activism is immediate, there is no need to mobilise large numbers of people, or attract the attention of the great and the good, it can be undertaken now, in the moment. Micro fat activism requires few material resources, and is not dependent on place, for example it is not necessarily an urban phenomenon. Micro fat activism is supported by thought and intention, but it is not always public. It can involve choosing to eat something, for example, or appreciatively acknowledging one's embodiment by making an accessible home for oneself, as described here by Maria:

"Downstairs has one of those taller toilets too, it's kind of nice to have a house where you can make it fat friendly, with outdoor furniture that is fat friendly. I can sit on it and have room, and it's, you know, nice to be in a place where you feel comfortable." (Maria)

The quiet spaces of micro activism are overlooked in sociological grand narratives of social movements, but they are theorised more readily in feminist accounts. Feminist strategies for activism emphasise the value of lived experience and the self as the starting point (Naples and Bojar 2002). This is evident in a long account from Martha, who describes micro fat activism as personal development which led to an awakening:

"Somewhere in the, probably like '74 or '-5, I had already come out, so I was a lesbian, I was living in a group house, and I saw something about the Fat Liberator Publications, which might have been in Lesbian Connection magazine, I can't remember where I saw it, and I sent for it and I can't particularly remember why I sent for it except something about it grabbed me. And they came and I read 'em and I think there was a kind of an infiltration process and I was a feminist and I was a lesbian and I was an activist, I was working in women's healthcare at the time in a community-run health centre, and so to me it all came from there, and then I had a kind of an epiphany at an event, and I could tell you that pretty briefly, and then from that I said, well what happened was I used to sew and I made myself a pair of pants to wear to a concert, a lesbian concert, and they were just drawstring waist so they didn't pull me in at all, and wearing them was I was so conscious that for the first time I wasn't wearing like jeans that sort of held on my stomach or anything that held me in, so throughout this whole concert while I was listening to the music I was also thinking: 'This is big, this thing of wearing these loose pants, and maybe they even make me look fatter,' who knows, you know, but that was all in my mind, and I had good friends, they were good lesbian feminists, and I thought: 'Not one of these women will really get what this is about. They would support me, they would be glad for me, they would do all those things and they wouldn't get it in themselves,' because none of them were fat. So I did what seemed natural at that
moment which was I organised a fat lesbian support group. And so, you know I, that's not everybody-, I don't know, that's just what I did. So that, I think the first meeting was in 1978, it was in January and my friend Marcia remembers the date exactly, but I don't, I never remember quite if it was '78 or '79. But that was how it started, I wanted to have a place to talk about what it meant to be a fat woman wearing clothes that didn't pull me in, as just one example of the whole spectrum." (Martha)

It could be argued that micro fat activism is an activism of solipsistic individualism, but Martha's example is embedded in community. She may have been alienated from a lesbian feminist community that she believed would not understand what it was for her to be fat, but she was able to use her alienation to leverage and synthesise other resources, such as her work in women's health, and her encounters with Fat Liberator Publications, which were part of her experience within that community. She was able to do "what seemed natural" at the time, form a support group, because she had access to the resources enabling her to undertake that work. The micro activism of reading or making something was produced in relation to a known or imagined other world of fat activism as well as being an activity in its own right.

The geographers Deborah Martin et al. provide material that supports Martha's experience, they regard small, everyday actions as the beginnings of community-building, where those actions can become more formalised:

"We argue that activism needs to be conceptualised and understood as an activity that emerges from the everyday lived context (place) in which people are embedded; activism entails an individual making particular kinds of new connections between people that alter power relations within existing social networks." (Martin et al. 2007, p.80)

Whilst Martin and her co-authors maintain a conventional approach to activism as collective activity and social change, they include space for individuals whose actions and connection to others are ambiguous. It is unclear whether or not they consider these small actions as activism, or as a kind of pre-activism, but Sara O'Shaughnessy and Emily Huddart Kennedy regard them as valid in their own right. Through their study of women's environmental activism, they propose a theory of relational activism which highlights "the way that relationship-building work contributes to conventional activism and constitutes activism in and of itself" (O'Shaughnessy and Huddart Kennedy 2010, p.551). They go on to say of relational activism:
"This term draws attention to the importance of community, networks, and communication in contributing to long-term change. Relational activism is a form of activism precisely because of the intentionality of such behaviours: these are (often) private-sphere actions undertaken with the intent of demonstrating, encouraging, or communicating to others the tractability and importance of a behavioural commitment to the environment." (p.552)

Feminists theorising activism in this way support the presence of small-scale interventions as part of a repertoire of activist strategies, and reiterate that micro activism is part of a network of relations within and beyond the social movement.

Being recognisable as human and intelligible to oneself and to others forms the necessary grounding for the production of liveable lives, according to Judith Butler (Butler 2004b, Butler 2004a). This is articulated by Hannah:

"And so I think for me [fat activism] just means this simple act of allowing yourself to be a valid person and taking other people with you when possible." (Hannah)

Community-building and cultural capital enables fat activists to claim visibility as people who matter. In addition, the immediacy of micro fat activism, particularly its quiet relational qualities and use of assertiveness strategies produces embodied esteem within its practitioners and supports them in creating liveable lives for themselves and others. In this way subtle personal and social transformations take place, as noted by Helen:

"I think the most immediate thing is to make living a life easier, like living, living fat, being fat, embodying fat, less abjected, less self-flagellating and self-loathing, and that's certainly been a kind of really obvious benefit of fat activism for me." (Helen)

Following Foucault, Butler acknowledges the problematic nature of authorship within restrictive and regulated social contexts. Yet Foucault and Butler also accept the agency of marginalised people (Foucault 1980). Making liveable lives entails the making explicit of fat activism and fat identity, declaring that they matter, and creating a social space for dialogue.

Some study participants were very certain that micro fat activism is a legitimate type of fat activism. Verity recalls the influence of radical lesbian feminism on her sense of self as a fat activist; here fat activist identity connotes fat activist activity:
"It was so related to grassroots lesbian feminism and the idea was: 'Yes, you're an activist, of course you're an activist, we're all activists. If you take the, if you proudly claim the word "fat" and walk through the world doing that, that's activism'" (Verity)

Liat is also an older activist who shares roots in radical lesbian feminism with Verity, she is adamant of the validity of micro activism as a strategy within a spectrum of potential fat activist interventions, and places it at the centre of her practice unapologetically:

"So I see the entire spectrum and I think that a lot of us are fat activists and we may not ever go to a rally again but we do things in our own communities or in our own lives too." (Liat)

Julia, who comes from a different background to Liat and Verity, recognises that, although the political process model dominates, there are many possible ways of being a fat activist, which she has observed in the actions of someone she admires:

"Because it's like, Beth Ditto's a fat activist but I don't know whether she actually does any 'organising'." (Julia)

But despite this strength of opinion, Paz observes that micro activism get lost within a field where there are already diverse forms of action:

"I think that often a thing that happens with people who are in identity-focused movements and-, which is that a lot of the personal work in a lot of the personal liberation work that ties in to movements for change gets lost and doesn't get defined as part of it. [...] fat folks who are doing different things, they often don't see themselves as being activists when they do things like intervene, when they do things like take a moment to talk to somebody at their workplace or interrupt something. And I feel like a lot of activism is about those personal moments." (Paz)

Recognising micro activism as activism is contentious and is reminiscent of the debate that the community-building work of socialising is also not fat activism. Julia describes the boundary policing within her activist communities about what constitutes activism.

Here it is more allied to political process activism using direct action tactics:

"It's policed quite a lot in [the German city where I live], possibly in the UK as well. I mean here an activist is more you're considered an activist if you're more of the banner-holding variety, and that you have to be doing something specifically about changing, changing the administration of the world." (Julia)
Both Paz and Julia highlight the dominance of political process activism within fat activism discourse and the positioning as secondary to the more preponderant forms of micro fat activism, an act that diminishes the perceived legitimacy of those interventions.

A more inclusive understanding of the breadth of activism, such as that offered by Chris Bobel, would help remedy this situation. Based on her research of embodied feminist social movements, Bobel argues that people who do activism do not necessarily think of themselves as activists because they have a 'perfect standard' of activism against which they measure themselves (Bobel 2007). They assume that activists should be politically experienced and seasoned within the movement before their actions can be considered legitimate, or they can claim an activist identity for themselves. Bobel suggests that there needs to be a re-evaluation of activist identity because the perfect standard is unattainable and diminishes people's self-identities as activists. She writes that there is "a disconnection between what I call 'doing activism' and 'being activist'," and that "one can 'do activism' without 'being an activist'" (p.148-149). Presumably one might do activism without also being part of activist community. Bobel goes on to say:

"These discrepancies in the literature point to the need for a more nuanced, more complex conceptualisation of collective identity, one that interrogates rather than assumes the importance of collective identity as merely an instrumental resource and thus is better equipped to tease out the relationship between personal and collective identities in the context of social movement activity." (p.148)

Bobel's findings reassert that the division between public-political and private-personal is a false one. Yet many of the activists I interviewed for this project reproduced this division whilst simultaneously claiming that micro activism was also a central aspect of fat activism. The work a fat activist might undertake to develop self-acceptance, for example, is distinguishable though related to the bigger work, as explained by Leora:

"Even people who have a good relationship with their body have this regular, on-going work, that they do to keep that up, and I feel that that's different to fat activism, in a way. But of course they're [Charlotte interrupts and then shuts up] but they're like siblings to me." (Leora)

Kris describes a philosophical division between what she calls formal and informal activism.
"Well formal would have been more like organising a group of people to do something in a public way that had an explicit message. And informal is more day to day life through the connections that I make, talking about food, and bodies and health, but not necessarily doing it in a costume with a leaflet and stickers." (Kris)

By adopting a hegemonic understanding of activism, one that privileges certain forms over others, fat activists are stuck between what they know to be activism, and how they might describe the everyday embedding of what they do. Analyses that appreciate many different activist strategies within the same social movement might be more helpful in building recognition and confidence in what constitutes fat activism and what it is that fat activists do.

Ambiguous fat activism

Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards argue in their influential book about third wave feminist activism that "activism is everyday acts of defiance. And these acts, taken together, make up a vital feminist movement" (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, p.283). But, according to the authors, these acts must include a certain amount of efficiency, accountability, public-ness, and impact in order to be thought of as activism. They go on to add: "If someone agitates or protests without any constituency, is it activism? In a word, no" (ibid.). The authors present too narrow a definition of activism, and phenomena that falls outside this is dismissed too quickly as illegitimate. I have shown how notions of legitimacy and illegitimacy in fat activism marginalise some forms of action and elevate others, and that activists sometimes do not recognise what they do as activism, or lack confidence in it, because they do not regard it as valid. Yet it is my argument that fat activism covers a range of interventions and that many different activities can be thought of as activism. In this section I want to explore examples of fat activism offered by some of the sample that inhabits more abstruse space than that proposed by Baumgardner and Richards. This is activism that does not fit other models, or have a clear purpose, it relates to micro fat activism most closely but does not share its focus on progressive futures. Political process fat activism, building community and culture, and micro fat activism share the qualities of reason, they are constructive, and they promise social improvements. Ambiguous fat activism disrupts these values and themes.
Ambiguous fat activism upsets typologies of structural functionalist social movement theory, which attempts to fix meaning out of social movements that are otherwise haphazard and opportunist (Tilly 2004, Della Porta and Diani 2006). Models that constrain social action within limited forms or linear processes leave no space for that which is vague, multiple, anti-social or contradictory, yet these qualities exist in fat activism. These forms of fat activism refute what Elizabeth Armstrong and Mary Bernstein call the "marginal status" conferred by narrow definitions of social movements (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008, p.80). Instead they form what the authors describe as "awkward social movements" that is, "phenomena that looked like social movements, but did not make sense within the categories of the political process approach" (p.78). In this way, ambiguous fat activism can be thought of as awkward activism within a broader social movement.

Ambiguous fat activism represents an awkward social movement because it disrupts clean boundaries. For example, although Kerry had already started to develop her ideas about fat activism through reading and micro activism undertaken alone, her earliest encounters with groups concerned with fat embodiment did not name or recognise it as such, and groups specifically devoted to fat activism did not exist at that time. Discourse was contextualised not within a politics of fat, but queer politics, yet was clearly associated with fatness.

"I suppose my experience of the early 2000s was that in [the city where I live] there was much more inclusivity in the queer community that was all about really positive body diversity, but not called 'fat activist' at least, and also having said that there was also big sections of the queer community that were in kind of community that just fuckin' hated fat." (Kerry)

This raises questions about what fat activism is, how it relates to other forms of activism, questions of purity and hybridity, for example: where does queer activism end and fat activism begin?

In this chapter I have given examples of activism that produces objects, moments and spaces, documentation, or which exists through relationships. In thinking about more ambiguous modes of fat activism, those forms of materiality were brought into question. Hannah proposes that it is the quality of activist work that counts, and that her preference is for activism that entails labour:
"Well like the doing both the intense personal work and work in the world of manifesting whatever it is that you're trying to do, whether that's making change happen, or running a film festival, or surviving, writing a book, doing actual labour to... One of the reasons why I have such a hard time with the burlesque culture is because I'm like "What work is involved with that?" I know there's work involved in taking off your clothes and the personal work, but where's the work? Show me the work!" (Hannah)

Here, materiality is a part of what might be considered 'good' fat activism. But ambiguous fat activism can be activism that is not there, it has no presence or apparent labour, for example in the act of not doing something. Liz points out that fat activists can be:

"People who are actively choosing to not engage in self-hate culture, not engage in dieting as a, whatever, self-punishing activity, and choosing to do things differently." (Liz)

Or ambiguous fat activism can be immaterial in other ways, it can be the work of imagination, or fantasy, or the enjoyment in reading accounts of fat activism. Verity explains:

"I take the witnessing very seriously, like sort of, so I love to see things developing, I love to see the accounts on the internet, and that can be internationally, I mean I'm monolingual so for me it has to be in English, but to get glimpses of what things are going on in other places, I get reports back about how they're, what went well, what didn't go well, how the planning is happening, and sometimes to sort of just like drop in like small encouragements, like evidence of other, I mean I'm far from alone in this, there are other people who are interested in caring and are specifically interested in this thing, or this approach, or this idea that you're rolling around, it can be ideas." (Verity)

In contrast to Baumgardner and Richards' closed and fixed definition, ambiguous and immaterial fat activism hint that activism might be a less restricted phenomenon than is generally theorised. If the act of imagining something can be thought of as activism, as Verity proposes, activism is potentially limitless, beyond boundaries.

Ambiguous fat activism is provocative, it upsets notions of propriety in activism and invokes the preposterous. Julia speaks of a period in her life where she took off her clothes in public, an act which often alarmed those around her. She describes these moments as early forays into fat activism, later channelled into performance and burlesque, and influenced by the singer Beth Ditto, who has also used public nudity as a fat activist strategy.
"I was quite into tearing my clothes off at like gigs and parties and things like that, part of like when I was being in my element, or whatever the phrase would be, feeling in your element, something like that, would be I'd be like 'Woo hoo!' and prance around in my –, and I'd get some –, it would be very unusual for me to get a positive response, I think most people, I mean even my friends, their response would be kind of like feeling protective towards me [mouths something, laughter] […] and actually like coming up and giving me clothing and 'Why don't you put this on?' I think like feeling protective of me as like a fat person in their underwear who appeared to not –, I guess they thought like 'Oh, she doesn't know what she's doing' or something, I don't know, I guess that was how they read it more, 'Oh dear she got so drunk she thinks that's a good idea' or something like that." (Julia)

Kris gives an account of her performance activism that involved putting fat bodies in contexts where they would not be expected, and Julia also appears to be doing this in an attempt to expand notions of fat embodiment by claiming embodied entitlement to space. She does this alone and with uncertain intention, yet it is still clearly an action that provokes questions about fat, sexuality, and public bodies, hence it remains fat activism. The mischievous act of taking off her clothes disrupts propriety, demands attention for fat women's bodies in contexts where they may have been denigrated or made invisible, and is fun, but also provokes anxiety and confusion, and so it makes a complicated activist intervention. Other fat activists in the sample mentioned lying and vandalism as strategies, which raise ethical questions and produce similarly ambiguous interventions. Where political process activism exalts good citizenship, community-building the ability to get along, and micro fat activism the values of assertiveness, self-love and mutual respect, ambiguous fat activism troubles social movement theorizing because it is not immediately or obviously invested in playing fairly or nicely.

The pleasures of anti-social behaviour and fat activism are touched upon by Kathleen LeBesco (LeBesco 2004). Refusing to observe the rules of obesity discourse unlocks creative, non-conformist and unruly spaces for revolting fat bodies. I would like to add to this that fun is an important quality, especially in ambiguous fat activism that is belligerent, rebellious and disorderly. Åsa Wettergren claims that anger or outrage are understood as prompts for social action, but that fun tends to be neglected even though it generates a feeling of liberation, social cohesion, and basically makes people happy (Wettergren 2009). Joy, pleasure, fun and laughter were referenced many times by the study sample, contrasting sharply with depictions of fatness in obesity discourse, which use humour to diminish or ridicule fat embodiment, or grim accounts of fatphobia.
Ashley recalls the uplifting emotional effect of a series of events at the 2009 London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, one of which, a film show and talk, I co-organised. Here fat people were not only recognised and allowed to exist but encouraged to misbehave, dance and *thrive*.

"I have to say that weekend was like one of the most amazing weekends of my life. I just remember coming to that and going to The Raincoats screening the night before and then Unskinny Bop at the BFI [British Film Institute] and dancing round the hall, and then coming to The Chubsters which I'd convinced [my friend] to come along to with me, actually, and the two of us, who, I'd sort of been thinking a lot about and posting on Fatshionista and we'd talked about it, but it being the first, just the most like liberating experience and how that, you know, I remember we both came away from it and, er, we came out into the foyer and we were literally so giddy that we span each other around immediately outside. And then I sort of ran off to get the train and I remember sitting on the train back and not being able to sit still and just thinking constantly. Yeah, it really was amazing and I think I came home and shared as many of the films that I could find again on YouTube and whatnot to everyone I knew and, yeah, it was really amazing." (Ashley)

Ambiguous fat activism might be cast as surplus to requirements in structural functionalist social movement theorising because it does not easily fit universal theoretical models that value common purpose or rationality, but it is valuable within postmodern and poststructuralist analyses. In their paper examining activist identity, Rosemary McKechnie and Barbara Körner use autobiography and non-linear narrative to identify changes that occur over time, for example a loss of certainty in what one is doing, or a search for more complexity and ambiguity in one's activism (McKechnie and Körner 2009). Thus ambiguous fat activism reflects the temporal life not only of the activist but of the social movement in which activist cultures are constantly moving and reformulating themselves in shifting and fragmented contexts (Touraine 2004). In short, activism is discursively produced, as historical sociologist Charles Tilly demonstrates in his classic paper about the emergence of social movements in 18th century rights discourses (Tilly 2004). Thus the conditions from which social movements arise influence their rationales, content, and strategies; they define how activism is conceptualised. These conditions will always vary. Michel Wieviorka argues that theorising more recent social movements is a slippery business because of mutating and contradictory cultures within those social movements. He claims this is because they are responding to an ever-shifting range of discourses, so universal theories of social movements offer inadequate means of thinking about activism in the context of
globalisation, the end of communism, global ideological shifts, and the rise of corporations, for example (Wieviorka 2005). Engin Isin further positions social movement theory within discourse by declaring that as the figure of the globalised, migrant, unfixed citizen becomes more ambiguous, so too does activism (Isin 2009). Ambiguous fat activism challenges fixed and universal social movement theorising because it reflects the ever-changing discursive production of activism, it embraces irrationality, the immaterial and the awkward, it confuses boundaries and it engenders mischief. Like fat, it doesn't fit current Western normative constructions and expectations of social action, but is clearly part of a repertoire of fat activism.

**Conclusion: an unlimited social movement**

In the course of this chapter I have identified and discussed four themes emerging from the data which attempt to clarify the question of what constitutes fat activism. Political process fat activism, and the activism of community and culture-building are more readily theorised by the sociology of social movements, and are the most visible kinds of fat activism. Micro fat activism does not feature highly in social movement theory, even though it was reported as the most popular kind of intervention, and ambiguous activism also disrupts the conceptualisation of social movements. The sureness of critical theory gives way to shifting, individualist activisms, where activism manifests within social relationships and imagination; rationales based on progress narratives are undermined by rambling alliances and diverse, multi-directional, multiple motives which transgress tidy boundaries. I have moved from activism that is tight, definite, and certain towards terrain that is ambiguous, weird and unlimited, because it is in those latter spaces that fat activism contributes powerfully to notions of citizenship and social action by complicating those concepts.

Political process fat activism is dominant because this is the type of action most understandable as activism in the 21st century West, not because it is more legitimate than the activism of, for example, arranging a home in which you are comfortably fat. This suggests that fat activism, and the reasons for doing it, are discursively produced. It is context that makes an action interpretable as fat activism, including those interventions that are fragmented, contradictory, non-teleological, imagined, or only witnessed as such. There are discursive threads and genealogies that bind some kinds of
interventions together, which I will discuss in the next chapter, but even amongst a small sample of people connected within a social network, the diversity of its discursive grounding is immense.

"I find all these kinds of ways of defining problematic because they do insist on a singularity because that's the only way that we can kind of culturally make them intelligible because one thing has to mean one thing only." (Kerry)

"There isn't a sort of uniform fat activist or activism." (Jamie)

The range of possibility for fat activism is as manifold, uncontainable and unlimited as discourse, there is no universal narrative and can never be a comprehensive definition of fat activism, with clear, fixed, boundaries, something that Kerry and Jamie understand. Instead of trying to contain or restrict what they do, fat activists might relish the sprawling, unruly, indefinable project they have created and think of its implications for other kinds of social movements. Meanwhile, social movement theory remains fairly limited in relation to fat activism, but it is still useful to think of fat activism as a social movement because it has the potential to expose the inadequacies of obesity discourse, it shows that fat is more complex than medicalisation or social pathology and invites other ways of thinking about fat. In addition, framing fat activism as a social movement helps develop possibilities for embodiment, it ignites agency, community and culture, and enables human beings to assert their place in the world.
Chapter Five: Fat Feminism

"This was the week in which I met Judy [Freespirit, co-founder of The Fat Underground] and went through six boxes of her stuff at the GLBT Historical Society. I'm reeling.

She's living in a sort of hospital/care home/hospice situation, a big institution, and it added to a strange feeling of time, like not quite being in the world, dreamlike. At the same time it's pressured, she's pretty ill, I don't know if I will ever see her again. It's a one-shot occasion.

Handling her stuff in the archive is breath-taking. I feel so moved by her diaries and all the ephemera of fat feminist activism that she's kept, she sees how precious it is. It's incredible to me to be able to hold and see the things I've imagined for so long, for decades. I watched maybe the only remaining copy of a video of The Fat Underground. There they were, they're really real!

The act of looking, of knowing what to look for, of forming ideas and connections around the materials, of being able to ask Judy questions, to see who she is; these acts mean I am part of this too and that I am passing it on to others. It feels mind-blowing to be reflected in these moments as a fat dyke, like I'm with my people! Not just in the present but over time and space, and in a way that most fat activists don't know about. It feels huge, spiritual, amazing that we can speak to each other across such enormous distance, not just the thousands of miles between London and San Francisco, but across the years, across our mutual poverty, across different feminisms, her faith and my atheism. It's like we're being together outside of the usual physical constraints. Cosmic! And completely meaningless and invisible, even laughable, to most people." (Research Notebook)

I began the previous chapter with an account of how the study participants found it difficult to answer a basic question about who they are and what they do. From this I embarked on a discussion of what fat activism is, coming to the conclusion that attempts to enclose fat activism within rigid boundaries are inadvisable because it is a phenomenon that overflows restrictive definitions, and one that shifts according to context. Although I gave many examples of fat activism in the previous chapter, what was missing from those moments was that, in order to deepen understanding of them, they need contextualising in discourse.

When I look back on my life, I can see clearly that I encountered and elaborated my idea of fat activism as a young woman through a number of ways including class, medicalisation, punk and normativity, but feminism was dominant. Fat feminism was the only place where fat was understood explicitly and meaningfully to me as part of a
matrix of power, gender and sexuality. It articulates, and continues to illuminate, the massive contributions by women and lesbians to fat activism. This fat feminism was not the work of the feminist proxies for fat activism that I mentioned earlier, instead I am referring to a body of work that has suffered obscurity even though it represents a far-ranging fat activism that has travelled though lesbian feminist networks and, more recently, has moved into queer discourse.

Fat feminism represents not only my own discursive origins in fat activism, but is also a significant presence in the sample. I make this claim on the basis that some of the study participants were part of fat feminist interventions in the 1970s and 1980s. Others participated in projects that bridged fat feminist and fat queer feminist activist communities a decade later. Some research participants came to fat activism as a result of knowing me and reading my work, and some younger contributors found fat activism through a strand of Fat Studies that has uninterrupted genealogical connections to fat feminism. A small number were feminists allied to queer praxis who incorporated their fat activism into that framework, and have since developed a synthesis of fat queer feminism.

Given the centrality of fat feminism to my biography and fat activist community, it makes sense to explore it here as a discursive basis for the fat activism in this study. In this chapter fat feminism connects fat activism to space, time and discourse. I draw on accounts originated by radical lesbian feminists, a cultural group that remains marginal in 21st century Western hegemonies. I consider this group subaltern and think that respect for their contributions to the field is vital in a scholarship that is becoming professionalised and made respectable through Fat Studies and institutional life.

Following the discussion of feminist proxies for fat activism that I presented in the literature review, I begin this chapter with data that describe how that more dominant discourse overshadows fat feminism. I then curate a mixture of archival evidence and interview data to discuss the origins of this other fat feminism, and describe how small, everyday actions over space and time have constructed a travelling fat feminist activist discourse and community. I argue that there are limitations to this travelling fat activism, and propose that activists and scholars pay attention to these particular tensions to reinvigorate the movement with anti-oppressive strategies.
Marginalising discourse

I discussed a feminist discourse of the body in the thesis literature review that has come to represent fat feminism not only in the social science literature but also more generally. I explained that there had been critiques of this work by fat activists and critical scholars that had done little to dent the preponderance of the discourse. The refusal of the most widely read and cited of the group of authors representing the literature, Susie Orbach, to engage with criticism and continue to speak for fat experience in ways that continue to pathologize fat people is a source of great anger amongst fat feminist activists. In an interview with me, fat activist and Fat Studies author Corinna Tomrley expresses some of the feeling of dismay that Orbach continues to reproduce particular constructions of fat embodiment:

"What is so problematic about this is that she and her work – particularly Fat is a Feminist Issue are often portrayed as really, really important. Her work is undoubtedly influential. But I really think it’s the idea of FIFI [Fat is a Feminist Issue] that has the influence a lot of the time, rather than what she actually wrote. Although the idea that women 'eat their feelings' and are hiding in fat is a pervasive one and came right out of that book. FIFI is considered an essential text for women to read and this is so scary. It's basically a diet book that pretends not to be a diet book so it has the potential to be really appealing to women for whom the words 'she mentioned a woman who had lost lots of weight without dieting' and 'I lost lots of weight' are magical and seductive. It's so, so flawed but gets reissued again and again. And each time Orbach writes a new intro appropriating fat activist speech yet says we're a problem all over again. She has not changed her tune, or retracted anything." (Cooper 2009c)

Tomrley expresses dismay at the popularity of a discourse that now speaks for and obscures fat feminism that has emerged through fat activism. Her consternation is reflected in other comments from the sample.

"You see a complacency [in the literature standing-in for grassroots fat feminism] that either wilfully ignores, or is just simply not aware of, and not interested in acknowledging, the history that has given rise to [fat feminism], that kind of positionality, that really hard won work." (Kerry)

There is a feeling of being let down by a version of fat feminism that privileges normative embodiment and refuses to acknowledge fat people's contributions to discourse, an absence that is felt very personally:
"Why are they thinking about this all the time through the experience of the thin woman? Why is fat never mentioned or people who are more or less permanently fat? Where are they in this picture? And they weren't anywhere." (Impi)

The fat feminism represented by Orbach, and preoccupied with proxies for fat and fat activism such as 'dieting' or 'body image', has failed to contend with fatphobia arising from within its discourse, and reproduces fat hatred in problematic and anti-feminist ways, according to Ashley:

"I remember going to see a potential PhD supervisor when I was finishing my MA, and her kind of talking about fat activism and saying: 'Yes, it's all fine and great for people like you because, you know, like, you look nice and are perfectly acceptable, but you know there's a point, isn't there, and you know, obviously I support you but I wouldn't necessarily support someone who's a size 30 or something,' I believe was close to what she said. [...] And, I think it's that sort of hypocrisy that comes with certain types of body activism and body, and particularly, like, feminist body work, that annoys me more than anything else." (Ashley)

This "hypocrisy" has negative material effects on fat people, reproducing fat hatred, and further alienating those who are superfat, as well as fat people like Ashley who are in the education system (McAfee 1998). It is this that spurs me to reclaim fat feminism from its colonisers, and make explicit the existence of a different fat feminism.

Over the next few pages I refute this marginalisation of fat people and challenge the appropriation and obscuring of fat embodiment by feminist proxies. I develop a picture of a different fat feminist discourse pre-dating Orbach et al. that comes directly from feminist activists' analyses of fat based on their lived experience. I will consider the origins of the fat feminism that underpins the sample's discursive positioning, and make suggestions for how that discourse has travelled as activism. Towards the end of the chapter I will discuss some of the tensions that play out between transnational fat feminist subjects and argue for fat feminist activist praxis that upholds the movement's founding anti-imperialist values.

**Origins**

A less than meagre scholarly literature on early fat feminism means that the origin story I am presenting is a scavenging expedition centred on encounters with the archive, it is
an assemblage of scattered resources, texts of forgetfulness and omission, contingent and forever incomplete. As I produce this story I am mindful of the literature on social memory and narrative, especially the figure of the unreliable narrator, of which I may be one (Polletta 1998, Misztal 2003, Cattell and Climo 2002, Stone-Mediatore 2003). But I have not been able to count on others to tell this story, especially the architects of obesity discourse or the women who have come to speak for fat feminism, because they do not have the knowledge, experience or capacity to provide it. Instead, this assemblage consists of activist encounters with archives of fat activism: it is my direct experience of fat activist communities that has enabled me to navigate obscure physical and virtual repositories, embark on personal communications and oral histories, solicit accounts by people in the sample who contributed to the movement's origins, and participate in the collective conversational acts of remembering and noting. The act of assembling an archive of fat feminist origins is also rendered here as activism, a resource from which to develop critical awareness. The explanatory historical material in this chapter is necessary because I am telling a story that has not yet been told in this relative fullness, this is the first time that many of these details have been scavenged together, and I include descriptive detail in order to illustrate the story's richness.

Within this assemblage of archival material, I argue that fat feminism emerged as a response to systemic anti-feminism in the first national fat activist organisation, an organisation that remains the most prominent representative of fat activism. I support Greta Rensenbrink's claim that fat feminist activism was able to capitalise on pre-existing feminist resources and also suffered from some of the same problems that beleaguered other feminist organisations at that time (Rensenbrink 2010). In addition, I assert that fat feminism produced a theory of fat activism built on oppression, gender and sexuality. According to the little that is documented, they used a mixture of methods, including political process, community and culture-building, which located activism in everyday spaces.

**Anti-feminism**

Fat feminism became necessary because of the marginalisation of women, including lesbians, feminist and otherwise, within the first model for a fat activist organisation, which remains the most prominent and recognised model within the literature.
NAAFA was founded in and around New York after William Fabrey read an article published by Llewellyn Louderback which gave accounts of anti-fat discrimination (Louderback 1967, Cooper 2011a). Fabrey identified then and now as a Fat Admirer (see Glossary). Although Louderback was fat, it was for the sake of his and Fabrey's wives, Ann Louderback and Joyce Fabrey, that they issued a call to action. Together they convened a group of people and approved a formal constitution for NAAFA, then the National Association to Aid Fat Americans, on 13 June 1969. Louderback published *Fat Power* the following year, with research assistance from Ann and the Fabreys, and left the organisation soon afterwards (Louderback 1970).

NAAFA was conceived as an organisation by men who have a sexual interest in fat women who were interested in developing activism that benefitted them as well as the fat people to whom they were attracted. Fabrey, an engineer, and Louderback, a writer of pulp fiction, had limited experience of political organising, and NAAFA's aims at the time were somewhat naïve:

"I wanted to make the world a safer and more pleasant place for persons of size, and for them to like themselves better, and lastly, and less important, for nobody to tell me what my taste should be."

Fabrey concedes that the people who joined NAAFA were not ready for activism and the organisation quickly reformulated itself into a series of local social groups, called chapters, whose principle function was to provide opportunities for fat women and men who were sexually attracted to them to meet each other (Cooper 2011a). Although many women members welcome sexual attention, NAAFA's founding values also produced a space in which sexual harassment was tolerated. For example, Erich Goode was able to abuse his position as an ethnographer with impunity (Goode and Preissler 1983, Bell 2002, Goode 2002, Saguy 2002). Other women attending NAAFA gatherings have complained of non-consensual encounters, like Liat:

"I got in the pool and there was this straight guy with two NAAFA women, you know, one on each side, and I get in the pool and I had a two-piece at the time, and he was like, he like made some comment to me, and I'm like: 'Dude, I'm a lesbian.' Like: 'BACK OFF!'" (Liat)

The primacy of men's sexuality has resulted in an activist culture where men were and are regarded as a scarce and precious resource, as observed by Anna:
"In the conference I went to, I felt that there was a competition for, fierce competition – that's how they're fierce – fierce competition for like skinny guys, and a few people doing what I would characterise as activist work, you know, having Elizabeth Fisher with her seatbelt extender campaign, and some of the stuff that Marilyn Wann tried to do when she became a board member. But for the most part it seems like a social scene, and not that I'm opposed to a social scene, but it's a little bit boring, and a little bit focused on winning male approval. And I would be equally troubled if were focused on winning female approval, it's not the maleness necessarily of that dynamic-

Charlotte: It's about the seeking approval.

Yeah." (Anna)

Given my argument that a multitude of actions can be construed as fat activism, it is possible to regard these social interactions as activism. But their capacity to excite or inspire is restricted and they fail to appeal to people like Anna who want fat activism that attracts a broader range of interests and is accountable to feminism.

NAAFA had an uncomfortable relationship with the women's liberation movement. The organisation was established on behalf of Fabrey and Louderback's wives, but both Ann and Joyce, who are now dead, and other women involved in establishing it, are voiceless and generally nameless in accounts. Fabrey attempted to foster strategic relationships with feminism, writing to Ms magazine in 1972 to congratulate them on including fat in the matrix of factors for social exclusion; and inviting Karen Jones to write about sexism for the NAAFA newsletter in 1974 (Tillmon 1972, Jones 1974). But the organisation's underlying culture persisted. NAAFA hosted a Fat Feminist Caucus for over ten years from 1983, but this took nine years to establish because it was consistently blocked by anti-feminist members, and homophobia at board level prevented a number of lesbian fat feminists from gaining recognition until as late as 1987 (Stimson 1993). A NAAFA Feminist Special Interest Group existed for some time but its activities are undocumented and inconclusive.

The marginalising of women within NAAFA, the active prevention of their access to organisational power, a patriarchal culture tolerant of sexual harassment, tokenistic attempts to engage with feminism, homophobia and sexism more generally, and a conservative membership base produced an organisation where women not primarily interested in finding male sexual partners could not flourish as political agents.
Although there are fat feminists in NAAFA, others have seceded from the group at various times. In the early part of the movement they formed alternative organisations, the most prominent of which became The Fat Underground.

**Early fat feminist praxis**

The Fat Underground were the first to theorise fat oppression. This they did through a combination of ideas and action produced through the Radical Therapy movement, and feminist activism. They allied fat oppression with other liberation struggles, identified sites for everyday resistance, gendered fat embodiment and made use of non-hierarchical organising and innovative activist strategies. I will cover these in more detail in this section, as well as offer some glimpses into the origins of The Fat Underground and its departure from NAAFA.

*Theorising fat oppression*

Two feminists living in Los Angeles in the early 1970s, Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran (also known as Vivian F. Mayer and Sara Golda Bracha Fishman), were NAAFA members and part of the Radical Feminist Therapy Collective, one of the most powerful, prestigious and visible groups in the radical fringe in Los Angeles at that time (Retter 2000). Radical therapy was critical of the medicalisation and depoliticisation of ordinary human experience and oppression, it was a social model of mental health, it sought systemic change, and was based in a Marxist analysis of power (Agel 1971). Feminist radical therapy included an analysis of gender within the discourse (Zerbe Enns 1997). In 1972 Freespirit and Aldebaran approached the group to ask to be trained as radical therapists because they wanted to apply a similar critique to the medicalisation of fat, especially the medical mistreatment of fat people. Lynn Mabel-Lois (later Lynn McAfee), joined them. Aldebaran explains:

"About two years ago [1972] we began to talk between ourselves and to friends to develop an analysis of the oppression of fat women that fitted into the framework of radical therapy: the idea that people are okay, not sick, and that people's crazy and sad feelings come out of living oppressed lives." (Aldebaran 1995, p.58)
In November 1973 The Radical Feminist Therapy Collective began a Fat Women's Problem Solving Group at the Westside Women's Centre, which was facilitated by Aldebaran and "Simone, a fat woman who is not in the F.U. (whatever that means at this point)" (Aldebaran 1995, p.58). This was a popular "weekly drop-in rap group for women" (Mayer 1983, p.xv). They produced a document *A Fat Women's Problem-Solving Group: Radical Change* which explains how the group was able to politicise their personal experiences of being fat through discussion and analysis (Aldebaran et al. n.d.).

The Fat Women's Problem Solving Group morphed into The Fat Underground. Initially NAAFA members but, finding little encouragement in the parent organisation, or fat activism as it stood at the time, they formally withdrew their membership and focused on further synthesising fat politics with feminism. The rift between the latter's assimilationist foundation, not to mention its on-going problems with sexism, could no longer be reconciled:

"[Judy Freespirit] says of the old factions within NAAFA. 'Their idea of activism was to go to the Cerebral Palsy Foundation and do volunteer work so that people would say that fat people are nice.'" (Reilly 1998, para 19)

Martha adds:

"I always used to say that [NAAFA] were the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, an organisation positioned as politically conservative by more radical activists] of fat liberation, which isn't a bad analogy in its own way, and there we were, you know, basically saying: 'Tear down the wall motherfucker!' and it's like a very challenging moment." (Martha)

The Fat Underground was technically open to all, but it became known as a women's group for feminists. Other women who were not feminists left the group, as did a man named Ray Simpson, who formed FACT in Pasadena: "Fat Action Coming Together. It's more establishment than FU [Fat Underground], and more activist than NAAFA, or rather, will be." (Aldebaran 1995, p.58). In researching the thesis I could not verify the outcome of FACT. Meanwhile, The Fat Underground undertook a wide range of activisms, using the resources available to them, and embedding their work within the radical communities of which they were already members. They used feminism as a theoretical basis for their activism in four central areas concerned with gendered subjectivity and the relationship to power.
Firstly, Louderback's *Fat Power* inspired the formation of The Fat Underground by spelling out the terrain in which fatphobia exists, but Mayer notes: "Louderback's analysis of why the oppression exists was sketchy" (Mayer 1983, p.xii). Freespirit and Aldebaran's *Fat Liberation Manifesto* locates fat embodiment within a wider social context, identifies the humanity of fat people, and encourages them to claim rights, autonomy and collective power within a framework of commercial and medical exploitation, named as "special enemies", whose interests are supported by unethical and erroneous obesity science (Freespirit and Aldebaran 1973). Twenty-five years after publishing the manifesto, Fishman remarks that their alliances with other struggles, including those against racism, capitalism and imperialism is what made their analysis extraordinary. Fat was no longer a site for personal failing and redemption but was reconfigured and aligned within a political landscape (Fishman 1998). Although The Fat Underground were of the left, the left "neither wanted or accepted us" and despite their willingness to develop wide-ranging alliances, the group was unable to build fruitful coalitions elsewhere (Aldebaran 1995, p.58).

Secondly, feminism allowed them to synthesise the work of Erving Goffman and Louderback within an understanding of oppression and resistance as everyday experience (Goffman 1963, Louderback 1970, Fishman 1998). Although they recognised social forces at play, they were aware that fat oppression took place in the prosaic spaces of ordinary life. Their activist strategies of consciousness-raising and civil disobedience took advantage of this.

Thirdly, it enabled the group to establish an analysis of fat oppression based on gender and radical lesbian identity. Greta Rensenbrink points out that The Fat Underground regarded fat hatred as a component of patriarchy, "The intensity of women's fear of fat was fundamental to women's oppression, The Fat Underground theorised" (Rensenbrink 2010, p.218). As a result of this they did not look to men as agents of their liberation.

"We saw ourselves as, um, lawless.
Charlotte: You didn't ask for anybody's permission.
No, that was the whole point of feminism, right!
Charlotte: Right right right!
[laughs] Up until then we had to ask somebody, some male person, usually. And as feminists we got to make our own decisions, and were just running with it, and it was SO FREEING." (Judy)

Fourthly, The Fat Underground was a collective that sought to question hegemony. Although some members' actions were significant or memorable, it was a group without formal leadership where decisions were made together. The Fat Underground maintained an unstructured membership. Archivist Karen Stimson lists 19 members but these are difficult to verify because people came and went, and the group was associated with overlapping organisations including The Radical Feminist Therapy Collective, The Fat Women's Problem-Solving Group, and other consciousness-raising groups that The Fat Underground convened (Stimson 1995). According to my interview with Judy, group members also lied about the number of people involved as an attention-grabbing strategy. Aldebaran acknowledged that the group maintained ambiguous boundaries:

"The Fat Underground is going through some profound structural changes right now, and I'm not even sure who's part of it and whether we're still a collective." (Aldebaran 1995, p.58)

There were limitations to their style of organising in terms of direction, action and relative chaos. In 1974, for example, Aldebaran was afraid the group would founder because of a lack of leadership, though reassured herself of the benefits of non-hierarchical organising:

"I'm sitting here at my typewriter feeling like an old general. Isn't that absurd? No-one's talking about retiring! We are leader-full, not leader-less. (I hope, hope, hope. Now it's wait and see, work reasonably hard and have faith)." (Aldebaran 1995, p.60)

Aldebaran's sense of responsibility and anxiety that nobody else would volunteer for duty hints that The Fat Underground's collective process was typically fraught (Vannucci and Singer 2010). Yet with nobody officially in charge, a manifesto but no official constitution or membership rules, people involved with the organisation were encouraged to take responsibility for its progression. This resulted in a dynamic space where fat feminists were encouraged to reflect and act together, and this produced some of the most vigorous fat activism of the movement to date.

The Fat Underground offered a more sophisticated analysis of fat embodiment than their contemporaries in fat activism, who tended to orient themselves towards NAAFA.
Marvin Grosswirth's *Fat Pride* fails to connect fat oppression to wider social structures, or ally it with other liberation movements; it is presented simply as an unfortunate personal experience that can be remedied by fat-friendly consumerism and services (Grosswirth 1971). In the timidly titled *Fat Can Be Beautiful*, Abraham I. Friedman, a normatively-sized obesity doctor, appropriates the terms of early fat liberation, describing NAAFA as a "militant" organisation (p.84), but ultimately advocates a model of weight loss and speaks of fatness in a typically abjecting manner (Friedman 1974).

Within feminism, Aldebaran mentions an unnamed group in New York who allied fat oppression with 'looksism' but failed to provide an account of it within medicalisation or moral discourse (Aldebaran 1995). This perhaps foreshadowed the feminist proxies for fat activism that came later.

The Fat Underground manifested their political beliefs through several key activist strategies built around consciousness-raising and spectacle. Vivian F. Mayer refers to activities including "weekly drop-in rap groups for women," Fishman mentions that retreats were held, and Dana, who was associated with The Fat Underground, recalls activities such as eating together, and swimming (Mayer 1983, p.xv, Fishman 1998). The women undertook consciousness-raising through research. Mabel-Lois taught Aldebaran how to use medical libraries where they radically reappraised obesity research to publish a series of position papers on eating, health, job discrimination, psychiatry and sexism (The Fat Underground 1974b, The Fat Underground 1974c, The Fat Underground 1974d, The Fat Underground 1974e, The Fat Underground 1974f). Alongside their own publications, there is evidence of publishing elsewhere in *Sister* and *The Lesbian Tide*, Los Angeles women's liberation papers of the period, as well as Radical Therapy journals (Aldebaran 1973a, Aldebaran 1973b, The Fat Underground 1974a, Bas Hannah 1974, Mabel-Lois 1974). The group produced a video depicting them speaking to camera and outlining their beliefs about fat, as well as short sketches and conversations (The Fat Underground n.d.).

More significantly, the group championed direct action and performance, promoting an ideal that was unruly, unapologetic and anti-assimilationist. This is illustrated by Judy who recalls a moment in The Fat Underground's video where Lynn Mabel-Lois delivers an attack on fat hatred directly to the camera.
"And she said: 'I feel like a freak and I'm getting PROUD.' She lifted her arm that was sleeveless and [shakes fat arm]." (Judy)

Indeed, The Fat Underground's most well-known action was at a Women's Day in Los Angeles in August 1974 where Mabel-Lois led an impromptu theatrical eulogy to the singer Cass Elliot and accused the medical establishment of killing fat women, including Elliot, with weight loss (Freespirit and Aldebaran 1983, Aldebaran 1995, Fishman 1998). On another occasion The Fat Underground attended and disrupted a medical research conference devoted to weight loss (Fishman 1998). Mayer also recalls demonstrations against a TV channel's weight loss series (Mayer 1983). Such interventions bring to mind Kathleen LeBesco's concept of 'revolting' fat, using fat embodiment to creatively disrupt fatphobia, and the Situationist tactic of détournement, whereby the group used civil disturbance and humour to reverse and expose power relationships that were built on the subordination of fat women.

**Limitations and struggles**

The Fat Underground were symbolically important as fearless freedom-fighters, originators, trail-blazers, but their struggles reveal the shortcomings of the myth. But despite their popularity in the Los Angeles women's scene, the group struggled with the effects of external and internal isolation and despondence. In 1974 they tried to establish more fat feminist consciousness-raising groups but were met with women who did not understand their mission and "were looking for the radical feminist way to be forever slim" (Aldebaran 1995, p.60). Their frustration concerning this encroachment foreshadows a number of problems: the appropriation of fat feminism by normatively-sized scholars reproducing proxies for fat as a means of selling weight loss; the urge to delineate fat separatist space, as described by Rensenbrink; and, following that, the ongoing fall-out within the movement about how fat activists create boundaries around body size and weight loss, which I will discuss in the next chapter (Rensenbrink 2010). Private correspondence and papers produced by Aldebaran and Judy Freespirit from the early 1970s, now archived, reveal loneliness, longing and anxiety. Freespirit's personal journals of the period present an ambivalent relationship to her fat embodiment and lesbian sexuality, intensified by other problems. The group's founding members all experienced burn-out in the later stages (Mayer 1983). Dana, who was encouraged by Freespirit to attend The Fat Women's Problem-Solving Group at The Women's Centre,
and was later a member of The Fat Underground, remembers the more painful aspects of fat embodiment present in the group:

"I recall many of the women in The Fat Women's Problem Solving Group had been on extensive, excessive reducing diets before coming to our meetings. Some of the women had serious physical problems due to diets and the resulting problems that result from being deprived of food. I also recall the immense emotional suffering of some of the women in the group. As a result of dieting and social stigma, women who were overweight and healthy and could have had the opportunity to live our lives in an atmosphere of acceptance of diversity, now often had eating issues, feelings of social rejection and physical problems, due to fat prejudice. Thus began our desire to take some action to make things right and to end fat prejudice." (Dana)

Dana reveals some of the internal tensions of the group concerning method, recalling that she experienced disapproval from some members when she decided to give preference to her art and dance practice as a fat woman above her involvement with the group.

By 1976 The Fat Underground had ended acrimoniously, Freespirit had left the group, and there were problems with romantic and interpersonal relationships. Mayer's claims that there were disagreements within the lesbian community on the West Coast about political correctness are corroborated by Yolanda Retter, who cites criticisms levied against the Radical Feminist Therapy Collective for its alleged abuse of power (Mayer 1983, Sturgis 1985, Retter 2000). But as early as 1974, Aldebaran recognised that the fat feminism she helped establish was a discourse that travelled through particular feminist networks.

"Through laying out the line on fat women and working with fat women at the weekly drop-in groups that we conduct, and through our presence at other movement actions and our friendship with other movement women, we have spread the idea." (Aldebaran 1995, p.62)

Despite their own struggles, ridicule, disbelief, resentment and silencing from political activists and other feminists, the fat feminism that the group founded continued beyond its demise, travelling through space, time, community and culture (Mabel-Lois 1974, Sturgis 1983, Moran 1992, Rensenbrink 2010). This is exemplified through Ashley's account of stumbling across the canonical fat feminist text many years later in a setting far removed from the book's origins.
"I remember getting a copy of Shadow On A Tightrope from a Bradford charity shop.

Charlotte: [gasps] WOWIE!

Yes, isn't it! It must have been, I had a boyfriend up there so I think I was only about 17 or something, and it being this like, you know, I think at the time I wasn't really ready for it so it was a bit crazy and I shoved it at the bottom of my bookshelf and forgot about it and then came back to it when I was at university proper. Yeah, I sort of like that I'd come at it from that more haphazard scurrying, sort of scavenger way of contacting.

Charlotte: I love that idea of the fatty scavenger, that's so beautiful, and it makes me–

I think it really works with like the internet generation as well because I think there are so many people nowadays, they just come on to things entirely randomly and it's just, you know, like, just a link from a link from a link, and yeah I really think it works as much with that generation as much as it works with, you know, me finding this knackered book in a bookshop." (Ashley)

In this quote the speaker reads the book as an historical and cultural artefact, a time capsule with content that is out of time and out of place, but one from which strategic knowledge can be gleaned. In this next section I will document the travels that built new locations for fat feminist activism more closely.

**Travels**

I wrote about various types of interventions that the sample conceptualised as fat activism in the previous chapter. This chapter places those activities in a matrix of place, time and discourse, it demonstrates that fat activism is not static but dynamic, and reveals some of how diverse fat feminist activist community is socially constructed, formed and maintained.

In this section I will build on Kathy Davis' study of how the feminist text *Our Bodies Ourselves* formed a travelling feminist epistemeology (Davis 2007). Davis defines travelling feminist epistemology as: "How feminist knowledge and knowledge practices move from place to place and are 'translated' in different cultural locations" (p.10). She is not the first or only scholar to theorise travelling epistemology, imperialism and transnational feminisms, her study makes use of previous work by scholar interrogating colonialism, including Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Caren Kaplan.
(Said 1978, Said 1983, Spivak 1987, Kaplan 1996). But it is Davis to whom I turn because she writes about a feminist project that emerged out of a similar North American feminism to fat feminism, to which there are direct connections in this study.

Like Davis, I will use detailed archival evidence, supported by accounts from the sample, to build a picture of the practical ways through which epistemology travelled, describing small acts and their cumulative effect over time and place. What I add to her study is an understanding of travelling feminist phenomena as not only an abstract epistemology but also a more concrete social change, hence I use 'travelling fat feminist activism' here instead of 'travelling feminist epistemology'. What follows is a loose chronology divided into headings that signal fat feminist travels across country, through culture, across national borders and through queer space.

**Travelling West to East through community**

Like many Fat Studies scholars based in the US, Rensenbrink does not extend her gaze very far in geographical terms, but she does explain how early fat feminism was able to travel first from Los Angeles to the San Francisco Bay Area (Rensenbrink 2010). The author explains that a (lesbian) cultural feminist infrastructure already existed in San Francisco by the mid 1970s, with a plethora of services, groups and meeting spaces, as well as communal houses. She writes that in 1975 a woman at The San Francisco Women's Centre started a consciousness-raising group for fat women, which spawned a group for fat lesbians and one for older fat women. Members of The Fat Underground visited these groups and further politicised their members. In 1978 or 1979, according to Rensenbrink, a Fat Underground lecture encouraged women to write and present their own fat manifestos at the Artemis feminist café. Around the same time Life In The Fat Lane was founded, this group was concerned with fighting fat oppression and consisted of members of the consciousness-raising group and The Gorgons, lesbian separatists, who had been inspired by Fat Underground publications. Judy Freespirit moved to Oakland and in 1981 she started Fat Lip Reader's Theatre, a fat feminist writing and performance collective, which later produced a video, *Nothing to Lose* (Fat Lip Reader's Theatre 1989). Diverse fat feminist culture in the Bay Area was able to flourish over the decade after The Fat Underground came to town because the conditions were ripe: there was already a welcoming community, primarily lesbian, that
had access to particular resources. Fat lesbian feminists were able to support readings, exhibitions, more than one performance group, clothing swaps, a fat swim at Richmond Plunge, the Robust and Rowdy dances, Oakland's We Dance classes, the Let It All Hang Out Pride rallies, and Cynthia Riggs' Making It Big clothes shop, to name a few interventions.

New England was another important centre for fat feminism at that time, largely because of the organising undertaken by Judith Stein and her partner Meridith Lawrence, and the activities of the New Haven Fat Liberation Front, who were already part of The Fat Underground's social network. In 1978 or 1979 Stein founded a fat feminist group in the Boston area called, variously, Boston Fat Liberation, Boston Area Fat Liberation, Boston Area Fat Feminist Liberation, Boston Area Fat Lesbians (BAFL). The group met for discussion, support, and also potluck dinner gatherings. When Stein left the group Lawrence co-organised it at the Cambridge Women's Centre. Verity attended this later group and recalls the awkward earnestness of the meetings:

"So I'm picturing sitting in a room in a circle, there would be a topic and then they would start trying to get a conversation going and, you know, [Verity and Charlotte laugh] it wasn't always easy!" (Verity)

Stein went on to publish a number of articles on fat and Jewish feminism, and wrote and circulated an information sheet about fat liberation at the Jewish Feminist Conference in San Francisco in 1982, according to Dykewomon's essay, *Travelling Fat* (Judith Stein 1980, Dykewomon 1983, Stein et al. 1981, Stein 1981, Stein 1983, Stein 1986). A feminist health worker, Stein advised the editorial collective for *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and ensured that fat feminism was included in several US editions of the book (Boston Womens Health Collective 1984). In 1984 and 1985 Stein and Lawrence presented fat feminist radio shows on local radio for International Women's Day (Stein and Lawrence 1984, Stein and Lawrence 1985). This work enabled them to reach larger audiences for fat feminism and develop alliances with Jewish feminist activism, the women's health communities surrounding *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, as described by Kathy Davis, and in higher education institutions.

With a growing support base, more ambitious gatherings took place. In April 1980 two meetings were convened over three days: The Feminist Fat Activist's Working Meeting

Fat feminism was able to travel across country because of national kinship networks of the type described by Verity:

"Judith Stein and Judy Freespirit, they started talking on the phone, they corresponded, they maintained those relationships, and the thing about The Fat Underground is that they would send out newsletters and they advertised in the back of feminist periodicals, and so then, you know, like Elana read them in Northampton, and kept them under her bed, so you know it was like that. So there were groups that were trying to get the word out, you know, but you had to be in the world to find out about it." (Verity)

Fat feminist activism travelled through acts of friendship, circulating small-run newsletters, buying cheap advertising in sympathetic community periodicals, and preserving ad hoc archives. Mabel-Lois' practical suggestion that, faced with fatphobia in lesbian communities, fat feminist lesbians turn to each other for sexual and romantic partnerships, helped create a somewhat insular miniature universe of overlapping friends and lovers who worked together as activists (Mabel-Lois 1974). These were in-group activities, unavailable to outsiders who did not already know the codes of entry, which perhaps explains why this work remains obscured from broader discussion in Fat Studies and elsewhere. Nevertheless, the connections that facilitated this travelling fat feminist activism endure and are not locked into the past, but continue through networks of older fat feminists. Three of the people I interviewed, who met through one of the groups mentioned above, are in contact with each other 25 years later.

**Travelling through culture**

I will now take a closer look at the methods of fat feminist cultural production that enabled these kinship networks to thrive. These included The Michigan Womyn's Music
Festival, which is a major, on-going, annual international gathering for radical feminists; independent publishing; and mainstream media exposure, which resulted in the formation of a number of fat feminist activist groups.

Stein continued to engage people through a fat feminist presence, including workshops and discussions, at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Liat recalls that in 1979:

"ReaRae Sears is a white woman but she owns a tipi, and [Sears and Stein] brought the tipi and it became the meeting place for fat liberation. And so the first fat liberation meeting that I went to there, and I'm not sure it was the very first one, but the first one I attended, there must have been 50-75 women in a circle with Judith and ReaRae at the tipi, [...] standing up talking." (Liat)

From Michigan, according to a contributor to A Queer and Trans Fat Activist Timeline, and corroborated by Martha and Liat, other lesbian and fat activists in the Midwest began to adopt fat feminism, which culminated in the publication of Shadow On A Tightrope in Iowa, the canonical fat feminist text (Cooper 2011b). The collection of first person essays and accounts of fat feminism was originally mooted by The Fat Underground, with Aldebaran and Sharon Bas Hannah, who gave the book its title, trying and failing to publish it during their stay in New Haven. In 1978 Mayer began to sell packets of articles from the book's original manuscript through advertisements in feminist periodicals under the name Fat Liberator Publications. Liat was given the papers in 1978 by a housemate who had ordered them from a lesbian magazine. She remembers:

"Yeah it came from a woman who lived in LA who had been doing radical therapy stuff and she, I was living in [Michigan] in a group house, and there was a woman there [...] and we were living in this house together and she pulled out this bunch—, and it was I remember they, I think I still have it actually, it was all different colours, stapled, and she was like: 'I think you might be interested in this,' I read it and I was like, SNAP, I mean it was just like a massive connection, light-bulbs going off, you know, and there I was. And I was like, no turning back." (Liat)

In 1980 Mayer stopped doing fat activism to concentrate on other aspects of her life. She handed Fat Liberator Publications to Diane Denne, who then passed them on to Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser. The pair advertised in radical feminist periodicals for new contributions for the book, which they published alongside older Fat
Underground material as *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (Schoenfielder and Wieser 1983).

North America, and other Western locations including the UK, to some extent, enjoyed a rich culture of local and national lesbian feminist periodicals that peaked in volume in the 1970s and 1980s and petered out by the following decade. It was through these publishing networks that fat feminism travelled. Susan Koppelman acknowledges that the proliferation of fat feminist publishing in periodicals such as *Sister, Lesbian Contradiction* and *Plexus*, became a home for a fat feminist activist "bravura literature" (Koppelman 2003, p.247). Some journals devoted special issues or sections to fat, for example *Matrix*, and *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* (Matrix 1987, Baker 1984). Other journals had sympathetic editors, for example Elana Dykewomon at *Sinister Wisdom*, who were themselves involved with fat activism and were therefore open to articles about radical lesbian fat embodiment (Freespirit 1986, Stinson 1987). Verity recalls how explicit editorial policies encouraging fat feminist writing engendered confidence and security in her, knowing there was somewhere she could publish her work and that journal editors and readers would take her seriously:

"Well I guess the other thing, you know that I was thinking about having looked at that huge pile of [lesbian journals, Verity had recently shown me her collection] like so, and Elana she wasn't the editor of *Sinister Wisdom* when I first got published there, but she was the editor of *Sinister Wisdom* for many years and that was a place where I could be reliably published. Right now I don't have that, but I knew if I sent something out it would be very seriously considered and it might well be taken, and fat was no barrier, and so I sent and sent and sent and I would write and I would send and I knew, you know, that there was a place." (Verity)

Publication conferred legitimacy to the preposterous project of fat activism. Lesbian feminist periodicals were an important site for fat feminism and no doubt contributed to its spread, but their ephemeral nature was no match for a book-length work such as *Shadow On A Tightrope*. Verity, again, explains that the book was important because it represented a community that had been experienced until then as nebulous and isolated:

"There was a sense of connection to a larger movement in that way but it wasn't based in geography. I don't know of other fat groups that were active in the area. But then we read *Shadow On A Tightrope* it seemed that there were people in other places." (Verity)

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The combination of networks of fat feminists produced through the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, and through the abundance of feminist publishing activity, together with the feeling that "there were people in other places" exploded into apparent material reality during the period that *Shadow On A Tightrope* was first published. Fat feminism enjoyed mainstream national exposure in the United States with Fat Lip's appearance on The Phil Donahue Show, and through *Radiance* magazine, established in 1984 (Freespirit 1986). The Fat Avengers, a lesbian separatist fat feminist group based in Seattle, produced a calendar, *Images of Our Flesh*, in 1983, featuring photographs by Cookie Andrews-Hunt (Andrews-Hunt 1983). Elana Dykewomon indicates that there were other lesbian feminist fat liberation organisations across the US, including Fat Is A Lesbian Issue in New York, and The Lesbian Fat Activists Network in Woodstock; Lesbians of Size in Portland and Sisters of Size in Seattle; Big, Beautiful Lesbians in Washington DC; Sisters Are Fighting Fat Oppression in Minneapolis; and groups unnamed by her in Atlanta, Boston, Northampton Massachusetts, Canada, the UK, Australia and The Netherlands, where Vet Vrieg sprung from a fat feminist gathering in Amsterdam in 1980 (Dykewomon 2000).

Yet this upsurge of activity was coupled with a sense of unreality, there was a feeling of mythology about it, which was the product of a lack of documentation and communication in a context of struggle.

"No one knows how many fat liberation struggles took place in the last decade. We have lacked a way to communicate with each other. Under the triple stresses of fat oppression, isolation, and the disinterest or even hostility with which our pleas for support were often met, fat activists have all too often taken the frustrations out on each other and destroyed our own organisations before they could take root. For years, I have heard rumours of fat women's groups in Baltimore, Philadelphia, elsewhere, that formed, then toppled into oblivion with no proof that they ever existed." (Mayer 1983, p.xvii)

Groups went as quickly as they had arrived. Although they were the outcome of a travelling fat feminist activism, that alone could not sustain them in a context where they were already facing social marginalisation as fat people and lesbians, in a period of feminist ideological conflict, where burn-out was common.
Transnational travels

Fat feminism travelled to the UK by the same means that it had travelled through the US: the existence of a strong feminist community that had already developed audiences and resources of its own, *Shadow On A Tightrope*, and kinship networks. Heather Smith, one of the founders of the London Fat Women's Group, the first fat feminist activist group in the UK, explains how it was formed in a BBC documentary made by the group:

"A few years ago a friend of mine and I read a book on fat oppression and what we thought was that we should try to write an article in the British feminist press to try and get it put on the political agenda here so that it would be seen as an issue that was worth, you know, considering. And once the article was published in a feminist magazine, from that we got lots of responses and this is how the group has grown and grown." (BBC 1989a)

Then, as now, fat activism from the United States was believed to offer the best model for organising. A support group was formed, publishing in feminist journals took place, and a conference was held in March 1989 (Jenkins and Smith 1987, Bean et al. 1987, Smith 1989, Teddern 1989, Vron 1991). The conference was an important consciousness raising event:

"For a few hours we stepped out of our isolation and into an unfamiliar reality. It felt like the alchemy of other fat women's energy collected and combined and strengthened us all in ways we are not used to. The world was different; it was exciting and emotional and scary. I know the way I felt for days afterwards was different from anything before or since: a brief glimpse of what it might feel like not to be oppressed." (Vron 1991, p.11)

In her own report of the conference, Smith maintains a commitment to the anti-oppressive practice more broadly that had been initiated by The Fat Underground 15 years previously (Smith 1989). But the reaction to this activism within British feminism was mixed, with attacks launched on associates of The London Fat Women's Group by normatively-sized women, and critiques by other fat feminists of some of the conference's strategies (Hayman 1986, Mitchell 1986, Pollard 2000). Diana Pollard reported that local groups were formed after the conference, but she does not name them or elaborate this claim (ibid.). This echoes the short-lived proliferation of local fat activist groups to which Mayer and Dykewomon previously referred (Mayer 1983, Dykewomon 2000). Compared to fat feminism in the United States, fat feminist
activism was less able to leverage its legitimacy and longevity in the UK, perhaps because a community infrastructure was not as diverse and developed as it was in North America, and locations where support could be found were not forthcoming.

Nevertheless, fat feminists in the UK had significant access to national media as relatively autonomous programme creators. Nancy Roberts, a feminist, broadcaster and founding member of Spare Tyre Theatre Company, helped introduce anti-diet and fatshion discourse to the mainstream in her feel-good 1983 Thames Television talk show *Nancy At Large*, and its related publications (Roberts 1987). Incidentally, Roberts' connections to Orbachian fat feminism through The Women's Therapy Centre, as well as grassroots fat feminism through The London Fat Women's Group, and her dual US-UK citizenship, characterises her as something of a hybrid figure in fat activism, transnationally traversing polarised discourse. Members of The London Fat Women's Group made a BBC documentary and appeared on the popular talk-show *Wogan* to promote their 1989 conference (BBC 1989a, BBC 1989b). Their media appearances led to success and visibility that the group was not prepared for. Smith writes that many women had to be turned away from the conference, and that there were problems with intrusive newspaper reporters (Smith 1989). The London Fat Women's Group ended shortly after the conference and anecdotal evidence suggests that this was largely due to in-fighting relating to the television appearances, and burn-out (Pollard 2000).

The London Fat Women's Group's television appearances were my first encounters with critical fat embodiment and fat activism. I watched these programmes excitedly and wanted to be a part of fat feminism. By the time I was in a position to participate, The London Fat Women's Group had ended. I tried to re-establish a Fat Women's Group in London, I followed the earlier group's strategy of placing an advert in *Spare Rib*, the national feminist magazine, and a number of people responded. Members of the first group were supportive of this second group. Varying numbers of fat women met monthly for approximately two years from 1992, but we lacked direction, my group facilitation skills were weak, and aside from producing a popular newsletter, enthusiasm soon foundered. I left the group in 1994 when Diana Pollard assumed its leadership. Under her, The Fat Women's Group produced an exhibition of fat women's art in 1995 at the London Women's Centre, which had been home to both Fat Women's Groups and the Fat Women's Conference. In 1996 Pollard re-launched The Fat Women's Group to
include men, naming it SIZE: The National Size Acceptance Network. Through SIZE, Pollard authored *Freesize* magazine in 1998, but this failed to thrive (Pollard 1999).

Acrimonious relationships between Pollard, Shelley Bovey, the publisher of my first book, and I echo the difficulties faced by members of The Fat Underground as that organisation fractured and ended. They also illustrate the role that in-fighting played in how fat feminist activism in the UK at that time came to be documented. In her account of that period of fat feminism, which was edited by Bovey and published through The Women's Press, Pollard omits all mention of my name and contributions to the movement despite having known about and benefitted from them (Pollard 2000). I have described how relationships and kinship networks helped establish and develop fat feminist activist discourse, and that in some cases they endured, but it is also worth noting that activist relationships can be fragile or volatile, that publishers' politics also decide the legitimacy of some voices over others, and this too affects a social movement's intergenerational documentation and transmission. Where material evidence is already scarce and obscure, this writing-out of history further marginalises the contribution of fat feminist activists to discourse.

Meanwhile, fat activism in the UK was moving away from lesbian feminism, a radical critique of fat oppression, or fat liberation. Bovey's popular critical work on fat, which was partly researched at The Fat Women's Conference, became more apologist in later editions, and culminated in her renouncement of fat liberation and the publication, by the same lesbian feminist publisher that had handled my book *Fat & Proud*, of a book explaining how to lose weight (Bovey 1989, Bovey 1994, Bovey 2000, Bovey 2001). Mary Evans Young's public relations campaign for her franchise, Dietbreakers, shifted the discourse towards anti-diet rhetoric that did not always include fat people (Evans Young 1995). She was not the only entrepreneur to see the financial value of fat activism during this period, *Extra Special, Yes!* and *Pretty Big* were three women's magazines which focused on the plus size fashion industry and the bright and breezy self-help rhetoric concerning fatness that had been popularised by Roberts. Whilst the promotion of self-acceptance through fat politics was good for business, the radical lesbian feminism of the London Fat Women's Group and their predecessors was alien to these far more mainstream projects. What originated as a branch of a social movement
allied with other liberation movements burned out and was appropriated into a non-feminist commercial discourse of small businesses, assimilation and consumerism.

**Queer travels**

Fat feminism stalled in the UK because of burn-out and appropriation by commercial interests. It had also stalled in the United States because of a lack of communication between groups that quickly came and went. Yet fat feminism travelled through other genealogical branches, growing like a rhizome into queer territories as the 1990s unfolded.

The Bay Area continued to be an important location and in 1994 a group of young activists published *Fat GiRL*, a ‘zine for fat dykes and the women who want them’. *FaT GiRL* had close connections to earlier fat feminism, older fat lesbian feminists were featured in the zine and at least one founding collective member, Max Airborne, had been introduced to fat activism by radical lesbian feminist separatists (Airborne 1995). *FaT GiRL* continued to build fat feminist culture through publishing, working collectively, and engaging closely with identity politics, oppression and liberation (Hernandez 1994, Barbara et al. 1995, Vale 1999). As with the fat feminism of the previous decade, *FaT GiRL* used available resources and networks, but these had changed by 1994 to encompass desktop publishing and online technologies. These enabled the zine to be published autonomously and relatively cheaply, to reach a large interactive readership, and to benefit from zine publishing and queercore (queer punk) networks rather than a lesbian journal distribution model (Polack 1996).

*FaT GiRL* ended by the late 1990s but fat feminism continued to travel through other queer networks, such as Pretty Porky and Pissed Off, a performance-activist group based in Toronto, and NOLOSE (Mitchell 2005). NOLOSE is a false acronym for National Organisation for Lesbians of Size. It was founded by Dot Nelson-Turnier in 1997. Nelson-Turnier had been a member of FLAB (Fat is a Lesbian Issue/Fat Lesbian Action Brigade) fat feminist groups based in New York, convened by Shira Stone and Gail Horowitz. Nelson-Turnier was inspired to act after reading fatphobic comments made by lesbians about a fat cover model for the periodical *The Lesbian Connection* (Nelson-Turnier 1997, Stone 1998, Lee 2000, Lee 2001). This typified the continuing
problem of fatphobia in lesbian communities in the United States and showed that lesbian media's support of fat feminism could not be assumed (Mabel-Lois 1974). Nelson-Turnier initially wanted to establish a national network of local groups which, as Mayer had pointed out, needed better lines of communication (Mayer 1983, Nelson-Turnier 1998). However, by the end of the 1990s fat feminism in the US found greater expression in one-off events and less in on-going groups; 1997's Fall Fat Women's Gathering in Seattle had been a great success, for example, and there had been a well-attended rally against fat hatred for the writer Susan Stinson in Northampton, Massachusetts in 2000 (Stinson 2000). In 2000 the first NOLOSE conference took place in New York state and in 2001 the first board was formed by Dianne Rubinstein, Shira Stone and Diana Lee. NOLOSE has continued since then, and has been held on the East Coast of the United States, New England and, latterly, Oakland in California. It has supported smaller spin-off projects in New York like The Fat Girl Flea and Jiggle-O in 2003, as well as a zine and smaller gatherings. In Portland, Oregon, Fat Girl Speaks, a series of events incorporating performance and workshops, carried on the work into the mid 2000s.

The origins of fat feminism are immersed within a feminism that is problematic, maligned, unfashionable and obscure, that is, radical lesbian feminism, including, at times, lesbian separatism. Critiques of this feminism surfaced within queer, third wave and postmodern feminisms because of, for example, its essentialism and subsequent transphobia, and its fundamentalism (Anonymous 1990, Jagose 1996, Sullivan 2003, Morland and Willox 2005). The lesbian sex wars, brutal debates about sex and patriarchy, and the emergence of gender politics and activism were similarly responsible for its loss of authority (Rubin 1984, Halberstam 1998, Califia 2000). Part of the difficulty in reasserting this other fat feminism is that it is rooted in the 'wrong kind of feminism,' a feminism that has been contested, rejected, and polarised from later feminisms that have been more recently positioned as progressive.

Radical lesbian feminist separatism is commonly constructed in opposition to third wave queer feminism (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993, Clarke 2004). But Kris remarks that they are closely related through DIY cultural praxis:
"Well I think in part it is because the third wave's roots come from lesbian separatism and so it's that. So there's that. The idea that if the world isn't going to be the way you want it to, fuck the world, make your own world." (Kris)

*FaT GiRL* and NOLOSE constitute a reformulation of this earlier fat feminism and extended its travels into queer and third wave feminisms. They did and do this through their relationships with earlier fat feminism and their synthesis of it with later feminisms, *FaT GiRL* particularly through punk postmodernist DIY media. *FaT GiRL* established fat dyke identity but left that concept open to interpretation, and engaged positively with nascent genderqueer and trans identities which disrupted the essentialist constructs of womanhood upon which radical lesbian feminism was built. At the same time, the zine published articles by and about earlier feminists engaged with fat activism, there was no explicit editorial divide between the older and newer radical fat lesbian and queer activism, it was inclusive.

Nevertheless, there were departures. Where fat dykes were depicted in fairly cosy and pleasant terms in other early feminist representations, for example in Andrews-Hunt's calendar, or in Leslie Baker's photo-spread for *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* of Judith Stein and Meridith Lawrence at home together, *FaT GiRL* published explicit photographs that revelled in varieties of sex, especially SM, that would have been taboo in other feminisms, and which queered notions of lesbian sexuality (Andrews-Hunt 1983, Baker 1984, Johnson et al. 1995, Dudley 1995). These newer, more raw representations of fat dyke sexuality and culture reflected the milieu from which the zine was produced. Elliot recalls an abundance of fat, queer, kinky sex at the time:

"So in the early '90s, you know, '93, '94, '95, many of us that were part of the group that started *FaT GiRL* were also part of the leather scene. [...] And so we were going to play parties and leather-related events. Um, there was a lot of fat people! A lot of fat people. Fat people fucking, fat people having sex, fat people being seen as hot. There was this little tiny subculture where we could see that, you know, [...] there was just a good number of fat people out there, publicly having sex. And radical sex." (Elliot)

Throughout its decade-long existence, NOLOSE, like *FaT GiRL*, has also attempted to bridge generational and ideological schisms between radical lesbian feminism and queer sensibilities. In 2004 a new group of NOLOSE board members set about queering the organisation by developing long-running community discussions about the inclusion of all genders, in a space that had previously been women-only, and addressing the
intersectionality of fat politics (Shuai et al. 2011). A number of older lesbian feminist participants responded by withdrawing from the conference, their anxieties expressed here by Martha:

"I think the other thing that's changed that's been hard for me, and I still wrestle with is, as an old time lesbian feminist, dealing with gender, gender identity, transgender, the whole community has shifted to a place that's not altogether comfortable for me. So I'm sort of trying to think about well what does that mean, and what do you want to do with that, and that's been mostly an intellectual activity at this point. But I mean I think that's part of what kept us from NOLOSE in part for a while was, that's not how I identify my lesbian community, and it's like I think I'm at the point now where I can say: 'Get over yourself and take what you can,' you know, but it's different, it's different." (Martha)

In 2010 NOLOSE moved to Oakland, capitalising on its community of older fat lesbian feminists, and women like Martha began to return. But although NOLOSE community discussion about gender is an example of how a hybrid fat feminism can become established in the borderlands between different ideologies, this is not an easy process and is the subject of on-going argument. The struggle reflects continuing and perhaps unavoidable activist investment in congruence, teleology and progressive collective futurity, particularly within identity politics. At the same time, the existence of an organisation that reflects and serves diverse feminisms, including those that present relationships of seemingly intractable dissonance, suggests that many accounts are possible in particular sites, rather than narratives of 'the fat experience' that are based on limited, single explanations; instead of one side dominating the other, there can be space for both and more.

From Los Angeles to the Bay Area and back again, through extant and defunct subcultural networks, across borders of nation and ideology, stalling in dead ends and resurfacing unexpectedly, augmented by its proponents, fat feminist activism has covered a lot of ground and continues to travel. I have been a part of those travels, introducing people to fat activism through my work, for example, and in the travelling I undertook to produce this project. However, as the debate about gender in NOLOSE illustrates, these travels are sometimes accompanied by tensions. It is the conflicts raised by travelling fat activism to which I will now turn.
Travel and power

In *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves*, Davis reminds her readers that travel cannot be taken at face value, it requires some comment about how travel and power intersect (Davis 2007). In this section I will pay attention to power relationships within travelling fat feminist activism, and consider how it manifests in unequal transnational power relationships through Amerocentrism, imperialism, xenophobia and racism. This contradicts the anti-oppressive tenets of the originators of fat feminist discourse, influenced by civil rights activism. They also reveal the capacity for reproducing oppressive praxis in social movements for liberation.

Crossing national borders, for example from the United States to the UK, as I have shown fat feminism to do, is not a neutral act. Britain's political and cultural subordination to the imbibes travelling fat feminist activism with power. Imperialism refers to unequal power relationships between cultures that reproduce the domination and subordination of one at the expense of another, and is produced through ideology, policy and cultural attitudes (Tomlinson 1991, Duggan 2003). The Amerocentrism, described here by Davis, is part of the relationship between people in the US and the UK, and elsewhere, including feminists, and could be considered a kind of imperialism. It is also related to discourses of white and Western domination.

"US feminism has often situated itself (and has been situated by others) as the standard against which all women's struggles across the globe are to be measured. Ironically, even so-called international or comparative studies of feminism tend to treat the United States as the undisputed centre of feminist history. Precedence is given to events and struggles occurring within the borders of the United States." (Davis 2007, p.203)

When fat feminism and fat activism travels across international borders from the US, the power relationships identified in Davis' quote are highlighted. It is common for the fat activists 'elsewhere' to be diminished by the soft power of US cultural imperialism, Julia describes one such incident:

"One of the first discussions I had here [in Germany] about fat activist stuff was someone who'd recently arrived from the States: 'I can't believe,' sorry to do the accent but, whining, 'there's no fat activism in the UK, what's wrong with people, I can't believe it, I'm astounded.' I'm like: 'That's not true actually,' and I gave it to them. 'So what's that going to achieve?' Totally snooty about it. I was
like: 'Look, it's not going to look the same, it's a completely different culture and, for the record, I'm not trying to emulate you either, why are you expecting it to look and function the same way? Of course it's not going to look and function the same way.' Oh I phrased it very politely, however." (Julia)

Despite its travels to the UK and Australasia; or the existence of long-standing fat activist groups in non-Anglophone countries, such as Dicke in Germany, or the now defunct Vet Vrieg in The Netherlands; or work by Fat Studies scholars and activists based outside the US; or the possibility that critical work on fat exists elsewhere; the United States is still presumed to be the centre of fat feminism and fat activism by those within and beyond that country. United States dominance is reproduced rather than challenged or resisted by activists and scholars within and beyond the United States. For example, Stephanie von Liebenstein argues that fat activism in Germany is different to that in other national contexts because of the legacy of post-war mass health initiatives following the Third Reich, yet her paper is orientated primarily towards the US, other German and European fat activists are overlooked, as though they do not exist, even though the journal that published her paper has an international editorial board of Fat Studies scholars and activists (von Liebenstein 2012). The study participants from outside the US reported to me that fat people elsewhere are constructed as happy recipients of US wisdom, they are not expected to speak back to Amerocentrism, achieve recognition in the US, or generate radical fat activism of their own, especially if they have not made themselves palatable to indifferent US audiences.

"I think from our experiences of going to American-based conferences, I think when either you or I have tried to say: 'Things are different in other places' that is largely unacknowledged, because discussions of other places has quite low status." (Billy)

Xenophobia flourishes in a context where innate cultural superiority is assumed. At my first NOLOSE in 2004 a stranger from the United State implored me to "Do Harry Potter! Do Harry Potter!" that is, she demanded I entertain her with my accent, which she misread as received English pronunciation. I felt diminished by this, I had travelled thousands of miles expensively for deep encounters with fat and queer feminist activism, and I did not expect or want to be reduced to someone's cheap entertainment.

Racism also operates within this rhetoric. For example, on Hiroshima Day in 2008 (6 August) US fat activist Marilyn Wann launched a project entitled 1000 Fat Cranes
Having read a *New York Times* article about a Japanese policy to monitor and fine employees based on their waist size, she embarked upon a scheme to "send 1,000 Fat Cranes flying on a peace mission to Japan" (Norimitsu 2008, Wann 2008a). This was an allusion to the powerful mythology of Sadako Sasaki, a girl who died as a result of the Hiroshima atom bomb, and who sought to fold 1000 paper cranes for peace. This story has become a central narrative and symbol of Japan's peace movement and is the basis of the Children's Peace Monument in Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park. Wann, who had no contact with fat activists in Japan, proposed an adaptation of this symbol, with an added fold to make the paper crane appear fat, to encourage Japanese people to make peace with their bodies. The project was launched with publicity and videos demonstrating the special origami fold were circulated online (Wann 2008b, Gard 2008).

1000 Fat Cranes was an insensitive appropriation by people within the United States of a sacred symbol, which was then used to berate an anonymous Other under the guise of 'peace' in a project launched on a day commemorating the catastrophic results of the United States' military aggression in Japan. Critiques of the project were slow to appear, Wann is a powerful and prominent advocate of fat activism, someone who is referred to in the literature as a leader of the movement. Conversations took place first in private and then through the Fatosphere. One anonymous public criticism was offered, presumably the author feared the social repercussions of writing under their own name to point out that fat activist leadership had a problem with racism (Anonymous 2008). 1000 Fat Cranes was quietly abandoned soon after, and four years later Wann offered a public apology for it on her Facebook as part of another debate about racism in fat activism (Shuai 2008, Shuai et al. 2012, Wann 2012).

Fat feminism is grounded in anti-imperialism, its original proponents were supporters of the American civil rights movement and worked within a social model of mental health that sought to identify and challenge oppressive conditions within dominant culture. The radical feminism that initially enabled fat feminism to travel was similarly engaged with liberation struggles, and the question of how to live freely as embodied fat people continues. In this way, fat feminism and fat activism can be regarded as de-colonising strategies because they are largely concerned with removing the powerful and harmful
learned, imposed, 'foreign' occupation of fat oppression and obesity discourse on people.

But aspects of fat feminism, and other fat activist discourses, have the capacity to re-colonise people. Fat activists cannot be assumed to be anti-oppressive in other spheres, as Kris notes:

"Yeah, and even fat activists, like we're talking about, even though I would say that their goal is rarely if ever hopefully to reinforce the status quo, they probably aren't in terms of making fat bodies public, but they probably often are in terms of the status quo around race and class and things like that, right? So they may be making the fat body public but it may be coming through a very white, homogenous, heteronormative, hegemonic – whatever h-word you want to use – for a vision of reinforcing the status quo." (Kris)

Amerocentrism and racism, for example, repeat patterns of marginalisation that are modelled more broadly between obesity discourse and fat activism. Fat activists are not only fighting for recognition in wider culture, especially where they have been displaced through the promotion of feminist proxies for fat activism, they are fighting for recognition amongst each other.

One remedy for this could be that fat activists take responsibility for the discursive constructions of fat feminist activism, that they acknowledge the power of location and open themselves to other possibilities, as proposed by Impi:

"Ideally Americans, American fat scholars or American fat activists, would realise that because they are working in the United States it's always global, it's never local. Even though they want to believe that it's local it never is, and that's the reason they should always, when they're using their voice, they should always at least remember that they are using a global voice, they are not just using it for 'our little group in Kansas' or whatever the typical place has to be, and whenever they're making big statements about fat and fatness and fat people, it would be also perhaps useful to remember that they are especially using a global voice. [...] They are fairly sensitive in that they always have this add, add whatever list, whether it's race, ethnicity, religion, class, blah blah blah, all this list, but then they fail to see that, ok, fatness is not just American fatness, or American fat issue." (Impi)

Acknowledging the global implications of universalising North American identity is still no guarantee that fat activism and fat feminism will be able to progress in diverse and contingent ways and address transnational subjects more fully because there is little
motivation for scholars and activists in the US to do so. Billy is less optimistic about discursive development under the movement's current conditions, suggesting that fat activism in the US will continue to be upheld as the universal model, perhaps coercively:

"I can imagine a future where America becomes even more insular as new kind of fat activisms around the world spring up, but kind of protecting the brand, could happen." (Billy)

Travelling fat activism has the capacity to expand discourse, as I have shown in my discussion of fat feminist activist travels, but problems arising through those travels also have the capacity to diminish engagement as the discourse continues its transnational journeys.

**Conclusion: dynamism and stagnation**

I opened this chapter with accounts about the negative effects of the more dominant fat feminism on fat activists whose activism is discursively located in a different, older discourse. I went on to use data and archival evidence to explain the nature of this other fat feminism, which originated as an alternative to anti-feminism in mainstream fat activism and developed a praxis based in a gendered analysis of fat oppression, that was situated in radical lesbian feminism. I considered some of the limitations and tensions that transpired within that milieu. Building on Davis' study of travelling feminist epistemology, which is itself located in postcolonial discourse, I charted a travelling fat activism based in fat feminism, placing it within a framework of space, time and discourse. I went on to identify some of the problematic ways in which power is expressed in those travels, and argued for scholarship and activism that addresses these issues.

Because of its capacity to travel, fat feminism has great potential in creating plural, hybrid spaces in discourses relating to fat. The discussions about gender at NOLOSE suggest that bridges can be built between ideologies. Unfortunately, fat feminism and, by extension, fat activism, has struggled to generate multiple narratives, despite travelling far. Fat activism with genealogical connections to fat feminism in London, Melbourne or Berlin today looks similar to that produced in Los Angeles in 1973. It is
telling, for example, that *Fat Power* and *The Fat Liberation Manifesto*, both produced decades ago, maintain a contemporary feel; this is not evidence of unity, or merely a testimony to the strength of the writing, it also represents a discourse that has stagnated (Louderback 1970, Freespirit and Aldebaran 1973). Oppression remains the theoretical starting point for fat feminist activism, but this is not parlayed into activism that is necessarily anti-oppression, and neither does it fully account for fat activism that emerges through pleasure, fun, or privilege. Fat activism beyond white Western Anglophone cultures remains undocumented, unknown, and unrecognised within the dominant parts of the movement. Mayer's observation that fat feminism is a discourse of isolation remains true: powerful kinship networks cannot always be assumed, fat activists work under tremendous social pressure and opprobrium, they are not always mutually supportive, and the discourse remains usurped by its proxies in academia (Mayer 1983). Instead of flourishing freely as expansive and contextual ways of knowing that people might scavenge and adapt for themselves, fat feminism and fat activism are more likely to be locked into reductive patterns of subordination based on imperialism and racism, and controlled narratives. Nevertheless, discourse enables activists and scholars to locate what they do more fully, it helps develop a deeper understanding of activism, and provides a basis from which to theorise further.
Chapter Six: Theorising Fat Activism

"A couple of things will remain with me from this performance [of Homosexual Death Drive, my band]. Firstly, people see two funny-looking older fat women and immediately assume we will be a comedy act, this is common when we play. Some of our songs have funny lines, but the song about me getting raped by a babysitter is not one of them. By the time we perform that song people are inevitably in this space where they think they have a handle on us and then – whammo – we give it to them. It's really amazing to play with that dynamic, it fucks people right up and I love it. It's painful to sing about being assaulted, though it's a cathartic pain too because the song is about survival, and it is totally worth it to wipe the smiles off people's faces, to see them start to notice that there's more going on, and that there's depth to what we do. It works for me too when they don't listen to what I'm singing and carry on as though we're a funny fat lady joke, it acts as a metaphor for what happens when you try and speak about abuse, the way that people ignore you or can't actually hear you because what you're saying is so far out. Other people in the audience can see that dynamic too. So on Saturday night, some people were ashen-faced, and others were oblivious, dancing around to that song, trying to get my attention with their cuteness. It was really incredible.

The other thing is that most of the people there were straight. There was a lot of nicest kids in town Brighton hipster boyfriend going on. From the stage I could hear people at the back talking as we performed, but I also saw a lot of women's faces turned to us, the girlfriends were watching us and they looked transfixed, they weren't looking at their boyfriends any more. I had a little cry backstage afterwards because of this. It felt so subversive to reach those women.

Lots of people came up to us afterwards, almost all women. They said that they deeply appreciated what we had done, said it was really powerful, people were excited by us, someone who'd seen us before said we were much stronger than before, they called us transgressive. This was so satisfying. The men who spoke to us were more uptight and their compliments more directive: "You should be headlining," "You're inspired by Homocult," "You don't need to wear a mask". Whatever. They weren't the ones we were playing for.

I've been writing about The Chubsters and thinking about the Fattylympics a lot lately, and I think that one of the things I'm good at is goading nice people into a temporary frenzy, I'm really good at inciting chaos and this seems closely connected to my queer fatness. I just seem to get the devil in me and people go along with it, they don't expect me to be able to do it but they want it and they love it, I do too, I love a bit of pandemonium, that's what rock n roll is all about." (Research Notebook)

In the two previous chapters I remarked that the study sample generally struggled to offer concise responses when asked to define fat activism or consider the discursive locations of their own fat activism. Their fragmented responses, added to a meagre body of literature, suggests that people within the movement are not currently abstracting and
theorising fat activism, a position also argued by Hannele Harjunen (Harjunen 2010). Participants that did suggest theoretical rationales for what they do tended to offer bland responses at a high level of abstraction, rather than those that could be mapped directly onto the specificities of fat activism.

"And I've always been interested in the body, and how we construct the body and what the body means as fat people and how we perform our embodiment as fat people." (Kris)

"A lot of it is about visibility and putting fat bodies on stage." (Daniah)

The dearth of fat activist theorising is taking place in a context of discursive inertia. Towards the end of the discussion of fat feminism, I commented that fat activism has suffered from stasis, despite its extensive travels and multiple genealogies. The dominance, repetition and flimsiness of some fat activist rhetoric has contributed to a movement that has not yet matured into the ability to theorise itself extensively or contain some of the tensions revealed through discourse. This exchange between Verity and I illustrates some of the frustrations of encountering concepts that have become clichés to us as experienced fat activists, and our hunger for a more complex praxis.

"Charlotte: One of the things that I've been talking about fat activism with people, it seems like it's, the movement is like in a perpetual 101 state, people are so disconnected from the history and other people as well, generally, that it's always this, it is always this 'love your body' kind of crap. If you've been involved in these ideas for any amount of time, it just bores you to tears, you're just not into it at all, and I think, I don't know, I think there are some of us that would just, I mean where do we go from there? Where do we go? What can the activism be?

Verity: The reason that it's been hard to move past the 101 stage, at least it seems like that to me, I associate with a couple of things: one is this idea that was certainly how I was introduced to fat politics, 'fat is healthy' right? So then, I mean and there was never-, also with 'love your body' it's such a static idea. So then, as we age, as illness and death veers its ugly head as it is wont to do in the human condition, and, then people got silent, they dropped off, you know, I don't know, I mean some people might have thought they were wrong, some people, it happened in all sorts of different ways but it did not work with the received rhetoric. And 'love your body' like one of the things that I have such a problem with that is like your body changes every fucking second, so you can't, you can love this body and then it'll be over in five minutes! There's got to be something else that's more of a process or it's just impossible. So, how is it? Has that changed? Really it's changed because we're having this conversation."
Verity speaks to the limitations of a popular fat activism that cannot adequately encompass on-going pain, illness or frailty within its rhetoric, or bodies in states of perpetual change. But at the end of this conversation she is optimistic about the movement's capacity to theorise fat activism and enable imaginative critical reflection. I would like to reflect some of her hopefulness in this final chapter by considering how theory might help fat activism develop.

In earlier chapters I have looked to social movement theory and have shown that, where universalising definitions are given, there are gaps in its ability to reflect the complex fat activism that people do. I have claimed that an examination of travelling fat feminist epistemology is a useful means of identifying points at which the forms of fat activism represented by the study sample have been discursively produced. But different theoretical tools are required to address and support the multiple and expansive hybrid spaces of fat activism, and to contribute to a movement that can be scavenged and adapted by people in their own contexts. To do this, I look to queer theory.

I realise that queer is a contentious term for those steeped in homophobia and, like fat, it is a concept around which many people feel threatened. There is a large body of work that examines the social organising by queer people, for example concerning HIV/AIDS, but fewer authors address queer as a group of qualities and not just a sexual identity (Watney 1994, Hodge 2000, Hill 2004, Brown 2007). Elizabeth Armstrong and Mary Bernstein's "awkward social movements," together with other poststructuralist configurations of social movements that I mentioned previously look very queer, yet none of those authors take up the challenge of applying it to their work (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008, p.11). Homophobia may explain some of the reluctance to use queer, but it is also unfairly dismissed as too abstract, too preoccupied with high theory or postmodern texts, it avoids affect, and it is assumed to have little relevance to grassroots activism (Walters 2005, Edwards 1998, Clarke 2004). Furthermore, queer heralds the unworkability of postmodern fragmentation, and is held as being of no relevance to anyone except a small group of trendy academics (Katsiaficas 2010, Warner 2012, Halberstam et al. 2012).

I am raising the spectre of queer theory to theorise fat activism for two reasons. Firstly, almost all the study sample identifies as queer and, where they do not claim this identity
explicitly, they nevertheless maintain close connections to queer culture. I, too, think of myself as queer. For those who do identify as queer, their queerness was regarded as a significant part of their identity, including as fat activists, and a number of participants voiced enthusiasm for queer theory during their interviews. Secondly, I have already broached queer elsewhere in this thesis: the literature review argued that queer theory currently offers the best model for theorising fat activism; my methodology is queer; ambiguous and indefinable fat activism is queer; and fat feminism has enjoyed queer travels. Queer theory is a productive means of theorising the tensions within fat activism, unlocking some of the movement's discursive inertia, and it has useful implications not only for the sociology of social movements, but also for activists of all kinds.

In this chapter, I build on these earlier discussions by explaining what I mean by queer, and use it to theorise some of the conflicts in fat activism. I will do this through a discussion of essentialism and assimilation in the movement, interrogating some of its taken for granted boundaries, and proposing alternative means of opening up fat activist praxis. As with any study of fat rooted in queer theory, my argument owes a significant debt to Kathleen LeBesco's pioneering work concerning essentialism and assimilation, on which I hope to build (LeBesco 2004).

**What is queer?**

Queer has come to denote a non-normative, non-heterosexual sexual identity. More inclusive than the post-Stonewall categories of lesbian and gay, it encompasses bisexual, transgender and other non-heteronormative ways of being. Queer raises questions about the social construction of sexual identity, by revealing how typologies are not natural but genealogically located in Victorian scientific discourse (Foucault 1981). It recognises the unfixed nature of sexual desire and gender expression where queer becomes a way of framing what one does rather than who one is (Jagose 1996). In a similar vein, Judith Butler describes queer as an anti-identity and draws attention to the multiplicity of identity (Butler 2006). Yet queer contradicts this openness and has also become a synonym for a restrictive kind of gay identity, that of young, able-bodied, white, affluent, urban men who conform to certain community conventions (Eng et al.
This paradox illustrates the slippery nature of queer and the difficulty, or rather inappropriateness, of trying to pin it down.

To queer fat activism is to acknowledge the presence and contributions of queer people to the movement (Cooper 2011b, Cooper 2012b). There are many fat activists who think of themselves as queer and ally with queer communities. Yet this is not to say that people affiliated to queer communities, including some trans people, necessarily embrace fat activism or fat queer embodiment:

"I think that some of the specific ways that trans communities have felt like they, like they'll throw fat people under the bus, you know, is around, are around how very often that people who are female-bodied or transitioning, and sometimes through the process of whether they go up or not through the process of hormones and of taking T [testosterone], you know, sometimes they gain weight and there's a sense of fear around that, a very very real sense of fear around transmasculine communities, somehow that that's actually feminising, which is interesting, it's interesting that fat is seen as something that morphs you, you know, and morphs bodies. See to me that's exciting." (Paz)

At the same time queer and lesbian feminist contributions to fat activism have been overlooked or actively erased. For example, in her self-help book about fat self-acceptance Sue Dyson quotes extensively from the Fat Dykes Statement, but fails to mention its original title, excises references to lesbians, and does not attribute it to one of the lesbian workshops at the 1989 Fat Women's Conference in London where it was produced, even though a full credited version was published two years previously (Smith 1989, Dyson 1991).

To embody fat and queer is to risk community opprobrium and obliteration, but within fat activism the presence of queer sexuality and gender are significant, not least in the community roots of fat feminism. Of its contributions, queer identity enables dynamic discussions of sexuality, gender and fat embodiment, and has given fat activism concepts such as coming out as fat (Christine and Deva 1991, Moon and Kosofsky Sedgwick 1994, Cooper 1998, Mitchell 2005, Murray 2005b, Murray 2008, McAllister 2009, Saguy and Ward 2011, Pausé 2012b).

It is not just the presence of queer-identified people that queers fat activism; queer represents a number of qualities that can be used to illuminate the movement. Unlike
definitions of activism that immobilise and constrain, queer theory has the capacity to unlock the ways in which activism is understood. Jasbir Puar further disconnects the concept from identity politics by referring to queer as an assemblage that undoes the binary between that which is queer and that which is not, and acknowledges the spaces in which queer concedes to dominant culture (Puar 2007). Noreen Giffney speaks of some of the qualities that might be included in a queer assemblage, which reflects the weird and irrational ambiguous interventions that I mentioned earlier in the thesis.

"There is an unremitting emphasis in queer theoretical work on fluidity, über-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinibility, unknowability, the preposterous, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness and that which is unrepresentable and uncommunicable. [...] There is an underlying belief permeating the field that some things cannot be explained and that is okay. In this, queer theory seeks to allow for complexity and the holding of uncertainties by encouraging the experiencing of states without necessarily trying to understand, dissect or categorise them." (Giffney 2009, p.8)

I would like to explore two aspects of this queer assemblage here. Firstly a discussion of some of the problematic 'inbetween' spaces that emerge when fat activist concepts are tightly controlled, and secondly a disruption of what I regard to be the false binary between normativity and transgression in fat activism. Both are intended to un-fix rigid demarcations, to address stagnation in the movement, and promote inclusion and fluidity when conceptualising fat activism. These are not the only subjects one might explore in queering fat activism, Giffney's list of queer qualities could inspire extensive works, for example, but I write about these particular themes here because they are the ones that emerged most startlingly from my data.

**Queering fat activist tensions**

As queer has come to denote a restrictive kind of gay identity, so fat activism has come to mean a limited set of themes, debates, practises and people. Here I explore some of the implications of pursuing fat activism that is carefully circumscribed by particular boundaries concerning what is and what is not fat activism, who can be a fat activist, and the ideological positions they must protect in order to remain in the movement. I also consider how queer theory helps open up those spaces, for example in creating opportunities for multiple sites of action by diverse people, critiquing the limitations of
assimilation, and also enabling scholars and activists to interrogate the complexities of fat activism.

**Difference and multiplicity**

Essentialism is the belief that all people sharing a trait will have things in common that bind them; the trait indicates a particular sameness and this has political implications (Cartwright 1968). For example, some feminists have argued that the category 'woman' connects all people with certain biological characteristics, and implies shared interests. Whilst essentialism is associated with historic feminisms, 'strategic essentialism' remains part of fat activism that has close connections to feminism. By 'strategic essentialism' I mean a series of "necessary fictions" used to achieve political and social visibility (Spivak 1990, p.45, Richardson 2000, Richardson et al. 2006). A number of these necessary fictions are apparent in fat activism, they raise significant problems within the movement, bolstering some at the expense of others. It is this collective raising up and letting down of some people in fat activism that I will now discuss.

**What is and what is not fat activism**

The first necessary fiction of strategic essentialism in fat activism concerns the series of assumptions, reiterated in the literature, that suggests there is a clear division between what is and what is not fat activism. I wrote about how hegemonic fat activism is constructed by activists in Chapter Four: fat activism has particular aims, it is produced by certain types of people in specific places, it is identifiable. The fiction is necessary within dominant models of activism because it sets out the presumed requirements of social action orientated towards social change, and reproduces an identifiable activism within mainstream discourse. I have also demonstrated that restrictive definitions of fat activism do not fully reflect the interventions that people make as fat activists. Following this, people within the study sample complained about how limited conceptualisations of fat activism created frustratingly narrow discourse, and resulted in their withdrawal from the movement, to a greater or lesser extent.

"And then there's some kind of fat activism, like we've talked about this, there's something going on right now called something like, I can't remember what it's called, revolution or something, a new year resolution? A new year revolution?
They're sending out, I think to a really a large number of people or at least 100 people, little emails that are, you know, 'love your body,' very simplistic, and they feel very prescriptive and reductive, and I find them really... and for those I like 'unclick' and don't support, and complain to my friend about them!" (Verity)

The mass email campaign to which Verity refers expresses a common fat activist sentiment, an imperative that everyone should love their bodies. But Verity resents the intrusion of the email, and the peer pressure to disseminate what she feels is a reductive and authoritarian message which leaves little space for ambivalence or states of embodiment that are not loving. In this way, she rejects a mode of fat activism that is an inadequate means of expressing the complexity of fat embodiment. What she is seeking, indirectly, is fat activism that more fully comprehends her lived experience.

Here, the mass email is constructed as 'fat activism' but Verity's critical appraisal of it, and abandonment of it, is not. It is her actions that are potentially constructed as the problem. I say potentially because Verity chooses to leave the discussion quietly without initiating a public debate. The quietness of her exit from the campaign suggests that she understands that her response is problematic in this context, she is an unwelcome killjoy, and there may be community repercussions from people who do not share her views (Ahmed 2010).

Who can be a fat activist

The second necessary fiction concerns who can and who cannot be a fat activist. The question of who is 'fat enough' to produce fat identity and identify fatphobia is strategically necessary in a context where fat is frequently summoned as a disembodied metaphor by the normatively-embodied. Compare, for example, Orbach's use of 'feeling fat' as a metaphor for feeling bad, ugly, or out of place, in relation to fat activists' concrete representations of fatness and fatphobia (Orbach 1978, Freespirit 1983). Some study participants reported that in the US, normatively-sized people in some fat activist communities are constructed as 'allies'. But, as Barbra proposes, whilst allies raise questions of privilege and access, their categorisation does little to challenge the strategic essentialism of 'fat enough'.

"I suppose I'm thinking that allies is used as a: 'Well, what are we going to do with the thin people? We'll call them allies' [...] and then we can accept them
into the fold. There is definitely that, but I just think: 'Well who are you to say who's not, who's got a different experience to you?' But it is difficult because obviously there's the whole thing about privilege, which I think is an interesting one to have brought up but again it gets into that hand-wringing territory. And it's, I mean, I think thin, having thin people involved, especially in that area is a bonus because it's the whole thing of like: 'Well, they're not going to listen to us because we're the fatties and there's something wrong with us. But you don't have anything invested in that, you're not trying to explain that your body is ok, it's not a personal thing.'" (Barbra)

'Fat enough' produces polarised categories of fat and thin, which are closely linked to notions of morality and correctitude, and they reproduce certain divisions. Greta Rensenbrink provides an account of body policing at the swimming pool that exemplifies the historic strategic essentialism of fat feminist activist bodies (Rensenbrink 2010). Here, instead of the more typical scenario of a fat person receiving unwanted attention, it is the thinner people who are ejected from the area by fat activists. These people are concerned with maintaining a safe space, which entails restricting the use of the pool to people weighing 200lbs (91kg or around 14st) or more, for which they are the self-appointed monitors. Martha, as someone active in that milieu, would have been familiar with this practise, and expresses regrets about the values that support it, a mentality of strict boundary-policing that encompassed not just fatness but also sexuality and political allegiance.

"I have to say, when I look back at it now from so many years later, we were arrogant and snotty, we were, although not everybody identified as a lesbian separatist, we really were in a certain way, lesbians, and you know like: 'Ooh, straight women,' and also we were pretty obnoxious about who was fat or who wasn't, and what came from that that was good was the kind of aesthetic commitment to fat bodies and seeing the beauty of fat women. But there wasn't, I heard later from a lot of women, that they felt like if they weren't 100% on board, they were going to get thrown off the boat, sort of. That's the obnoxious part. [...] There was no room for doubt. The little bit I understand about social movements, that's sort of typical. In the early days there's no room for doubt: you're with us or you're not. But of course life's a lot more grey than that, so that's what I think about that." (Martha)

Anna is someone who was "thrown off the boat" by this approach to fat activism. She describes an incident that took place some years ago:

"I heard of the, I think it was called the [fat feminist organisation] and I thought: 'Ok, I'm starting to do academic- ' this is early in my PhD career, 'I'm starting to do actual writing about this stuff, let me see if I can present a paper.' And called and spoke to a woman who, thankfully I've completely forgotten who this
person was, I've erased her identity so I can't, I'm not going to name names but it's like I can't remember the name. [My friend] knows who it is but won't tell me! And explained in my eager, fresh-faced, grad student way that I really wanted to do, you know, I was working on, god only knows what it was at the time but 'I'd love to be part of this,' and the woman asked me: 'Well, how much do you weigh?' and at that point, you know my weight goes up and down, at that point it was down, and so I said: 'Oh, about 150 pounds [68kg, 10st] or so,' and she said, you could hear the wall go up in her voice and she said: 'We, we need to reserve space, you know, this is a safe space, we need to reserve space for people of size to present,' and I said: 'Ok,' and then hung up and felt sad, and felt kind of pushed out by the place I had come from, the place I was certainly going back to, as I know my own physical trajectory. But, you know, also a little bit saddened by the whole, you know, very identity politics-y thing going on there."

(Anna)

In hearing this account I felt angry at Anna's exclusion and remembered all too well what that experience is like when one is in need of community. Anna changed the subject and down-played her own feelings when I expressed concern about what she had told me. I wondered if her exclusion remained too difficult to talk about, especially with a researcher, or if she was afraid of the repercussions of giving a negative account of the organisation she approached. I decided to respect what I understood as her need to leave it and did not pursue the story further with her. But I could not forget her account, it came to exemplify for me the hypocrisy within the movement, I felt compelled to explore it.

As Martha points out, a movement in which there is no room for doubt produces casualties of the people that inhabit its grey areas. According to Yvette Taylor it is the 'disruptive' people who get left behind in social movements premised upon a rhetoric of collective futurity, they cannot be tolerated within such a paradigm and can be physically, socially, emotionally and politically excluded from fat community (Taylor 2012). This explains some of Verity's reluctance to engage in public debate about the mass email campaign to which she privately objected. The grey areas in fat activism include people like Anna, as well as people who want to lose weight, people who cannot claim self-acceptance, people who accept some of the movement's criticisms and not others. Liz explains:

"But most people still don't want to be fat, even if they don't want to engage in a diet culture or engage in a culture that is telling them that they're bad, so they don't want to be viewed as, you know, bad, but they don't really know how to view this kind of idea, issue, outside of their own particular body, and I think fat
activism doesn't do a great job of framing the issue and addressing that conflict. Because what people often feel like they have to do in fat activism is be perfect. Fat activists always love their body, no matter what size it is, always want to be fat, never ever want to change, and you know, that's the rules. So if that's like, if that's not how you feel then you can't be a fat activist. And that's the problem."

(Liz)

Like Bobel's activists who feel that they can never measure up as adequately activist, these casualties become disillusioned and disenfranchised within a movement that fails to recognise or support them, or address the contradictions they present.

*What is and what is not permissible in fat activism*

Fat activism is bounded with regard to what is and what is not permissible within the movement. This necessary fiction helps develop identifiable fat political platforms, around which action can be taken. For example, early fat feminism developed a powerful critique of dieting and medicalisation in relation to fatness. The legacy of this critique plays out in the present through policy and action, for example in some fat activists' intolerance of weight loss surgery (Throsby 2012, NAAFA n.d.). Other fat activists promote a policy of 'no diet talk,' and 'no fat talk,' that is, a censure on speaking ill of one's body, has been championed by various young women's associations (Rochman 2010, Perkins 2011). The effect of these restrictive yet politically strategic positions, which refuse debates on censorship, is that even when there are sites for agency, complexity and resistance in weight loss surgery, as Throsby documents, weight loss is frequently taboo within fat activism, in some cases it is literally unspeakable; whilst it is acceptable to critique it, it is distasteful to seek it or to flaunt it happily.

Benjamin recounts an incident which illustrates how, regardless of whether or not weight loss is pursued intentionally, a clear stance against it by fat activists produces divisions and, here, creates a culture of rumour-mongering and paranoia.

"I was a lot larger and I was more feminine-presenting, and it's hard to say that on tape because I'm still over 300 pounds [136kg, 21st] right now, so it's hard to be: 'I used to be larger,' which I was, but I'm still quite large though. So I like to, I always like to, I actually have this I'm sorry to go off track, I'll get back on track.
Charlotte: No, it's ok.

But I had a really horrible experience with, I friend-requested [a fat activist] on Facebook. And she heard a rumour that I had weight loss surgery and I did not have weight loss surgery, and because she heard a rumour I had weight loss surgery she wouldn't accept my friend request. And I just wrote back and I was like: 'I'm sorry that, based upon rumours, you won't accept my friend request, and that also makes me feel sad because I feel like the point of these social networking sites is that you know I think you do really badass work in the world and if I was friends with you I'd get to keep tabs on it. You know what, if you don't think that at over 300lbs, as a tranny dancer, I do enough in the world, you don't get to keep tabs on that too.' I think it's just interesting. So I like to remind myself that I'm still a really big person. It's just interesting, I forget, I don't forget that I used to be larger, but I have to like, you know I didn't do anything drastic. I was like: 'Wow, that was really intense.'

Charlotte: I'm so shocked by that.

Yeah, it was really hurtful because, but I mean, I also didn't have that response where I was like: 'You know what? I didn't have weight loss surgery.' But it was very awkward because I saw her and I was like: 'I'm not, I can't be friendly to you.' It was just like if someone heard a rumour I was gay or something. And what a weird rumour. It's so funny, actually I got my gall bladder removed, which was on the wrong side of your body as weight loss surgery, but now I get really nervous that that's what people think! I had laproscopic gall bladder removed, and I take my shirt off when I dance, and I think that people will think I've had weight loss surgery! Isn't that funny?" (Benjamin)

The efficacy, dangers and health implications of dieting, weight loss drugs and surgery are not the issues at stake here, but rather the effect of the taboo. It may be that the fat activist mentioned regards such schisms as the unfortunate price of developing politically strategic positions untainted by doubt or complexity. Yet the speaker is left with a sense of anxiety, wondering if others think that they have 'sold out' and had weight loss surgery because of the position of a surgical scar. There may also be uncomfortable resonances for him in relation to his embodied shifts in weight and gender, his work as a dancer, and his relationship to fat activist community. It is interesting to see how the speaker works queerly with the ambiguity of the rumour being directed at him by refusing to deny that he has had weight loss surgery, and embracing possibilities that he might be further allied with the perceived transgression. This is a defiant gesture which exposes the oppressive hypocrisy of the rumour which the speaker is being made to justify; instead of being confined to its binary terms, he opts for a more subversive answer. Later in the interview he speaks of his support for a mutual friend, a strong fat activist, who experienced painful shunning within the
movement after they had surgery. Perhaps this response is made in solidarity with that friend.

**Collateral damage**

The development of strategically essentialist positions concerning what fat activism is, who can be a fat activist, and what can be tolerated within the movement reflects a desire to retreat to a place of safety and familiarity in a context where fat people are under tremendous attack from an ever-shifting range of sources. The fixedness and assuredness of objects renders them safe and knowable, they are objects to which one can securely relate, in contrast to the qualities of nebulousness and changeability that characterise queer phenomena (Ahmed 2006). Strategic essentialism fulfils a need for safe space, a concrete place where people of shared identity can gather without harassment from outsiders, a concept popularised by the women's movement, particularly through separatism. But as I have shown, safe space is not safe for everyone. I have shared accounts here in which 'disruptive' speakers understand that they must protect themselves through silence and withdrawal, or experience painful exclusion and misrepresentation.

Casualties may be politically tolerable when those excluded are clearly outsiders, especially when they are identified as agents of oppression. For example, in 2010 the concept Health At Every Size was trademarked by Think Tank, a group of health professionals and activists that meets in San Leandro, California. This was done so that weight loss corporations could not appropriate HAES. The act removed it from public ownership and self-appointed its controllers as moral guardians. The collateral damage of sequestering and stunting HAES in this 'protective' way is yet to be seen.

But collateral damage affects people like Verity, Anna and Benjamin who are already thoroughly embedded in fat activism. It also includes potential allies, or the ambivalently fat people to whom Liz refers. As Paz points out, identifying insiders and outsiders is unfeasible, the perceived transgressors are part of the very fabric of fat activism, they cannot be rooted out or avoided, nor should they be.
"What does it mean for folks who have lived a fat life, who have gone through weight loss surgery, and are connected to community? I feel like it's a similar question around gender stuff. You know, somebody who is in, say, a lesbian community, and has transitioned and identifies as a man, and that person also identifies as a lesbian, is a dyke, they're part of that community, maybe leadership in that community, they're already there." (Paz)

Those who do not conform to the tenets of strategic essentialism report instances of shunning and shaming that are intolerable in a supposedly liberationist movement. Impi claims that strategic essentialism reproduces cycles of exclusion.

"I do understand the need to separate yourself from, like, 'Ok, this is our thing and we identify as fat people and we are in this group.' Well, ok, I think one part of it is to make the separation between us and all this, that: 'we are the ones who are in with this knowledge and in with this crowd and you are not.' Like paying back all the times when you are, you have felt, left outside. And sometimes I don't think that people realise what they are doing, that they are feeding the same cycle of just wanting to leave other people out of our revolution, because this is our thing. And, well, in any case I would be really careful about branding other, some people, as not part of this group, or others as belonging to it self-evidently because that's not the case." (Impi)

Kerry, who has a gastric band and has experienced rejection relating to it within fat activism, explains:

"What I've realised through my own experience, is that there's a hyper-morality and surveillance that operates in the fat acceptance and activist community in some quarters, that basically is seeking to reproduce kind of moral correctitude and propriety in its members and to kind of, you know, to position them as morally and politically suspect, when they transgress any of the unwritten rules." (Kerry)

The hyper-morality and surveillance that Kerry describes contributes to a climate in which critical speech becomes risky, culminating in the possibility of retribution and excommunication. During the process of interviewing people for this study, for example, some people were hesitant to give critical comments when asked about the types of fat activism they disliked. This response is typical:

"Charlotte: I'm interested in the kinds of fat activism that really turn you off, that you think are just either a waste of time or that irritate you. What doesn't work?

Yeah well, you know it's like I do hesitate to answer that because I um, I don't want to ever put, so I would ask that you, are you, you wouldn't attach my name to, you can say generally 'some people said this,' but I do not want you to say
'[name] said this.' (A participant who did not wish to be named, even via a pseudonym)

Adiva argues that collateral damage is an understandable product of life in the bunker during a war on obesity.

"I think at the same time, the people in the trenches who are really getting the barbed end of the fat hatred on a daily basis, I mean like on a second-by-second basis, like we're not going to be perfect people, and we're going to have times of nastiness and rage and unpleasantness, and we're going to write things that aren't perfect, and I think that's all part of just understanding that we are under immense pressure." (Adiva)

The social pressure under which fat activists act cannot be discounted, but systemic scrutiny, and the possibility of symbolic punishment for moral transgression against arbitrary rules create cultures of fear and immobilisation, and intolerance for non-conformists.

"It is a really weird thing to feel like a freak within your own community, and not a freak in a good way, or like an outcast or an outsider, someone who's a bit suspected." (Barbra)

Strategic essentialism poses a series of necessary fictions that produce bounded, relatable forms of fat activism that can be easily popularised, for example through the mass email campaign that targeted Verity. But these forms produce casualties in people who cannot or will not conform to their tenets. Instead of problematising essentialism in fat activism, fat activists themselves experience exclusion and marginalisation because they are the wrong kind of people, or they raise intolerable questions. That this goes on in a movement concerned with embodied liberation could be considered a queer paradox, or evidence that some things are intolerable. Yet people feel their exclusions painfully, and it could be argued similarly that this is untenable.

Opening and unfixing fat activism

My own fat activism has become a queer project of troubling the tight parameters of the movement that lead to collateral damage which, to me, is insupportable. I am interested in opening up spaces concerning what can be construed as fat activism, who can be a fat activist, and what is worth addressing. This is because I consider these to be the places where dynamic ideas can emerge.
Queer fat activism enables a broad range of people to participate and contribute as equals mindful of each others' differences. For example, Liz states that she doesn't need other people to be the same as her in order to form activist alliances.

"I live in this plus-size fashion world, also I am waaay radical for a lot of people, and I, you know, and I choose to engage in certain ways. But if I had a litmus test I wouldn't have any colleagues or friends, except for maybe one person I can think of. And I don't want to have that, and I don't actually expect most people to believe what I believe, I really don't, and I don't need them to. But like, and I think because I don't need them to, we can be in the same space together." (Liz)

Relationships of this kind can flourish in a queer rendering of fat activism because queer disrupts the strategic essentialism of the universalising narrative to invite a consideration of difference and contradiction, which may reveal sites for productive dialogue (Sullivan 2003). In this way, Linnell Secomb argues:

"The creation of a totalising unity is the movement of totalitarianism and unfreedom. Disagreement, on the other hand, holds a space open for diversity and for freedom." (Secomb 2000, p.134)

To Secomb, communities that work best are those which upset totalitarian identity. In this interpretation of activism sameness is not necessarily a pre-requisite for social change, and identity can be left open.

Noreen Giffney and Michael O'Rourke state that queer contributes to the possibility of blurring boundaries and generating hybrid forms of activism (Giffney and O'Rourke 2009). For example, where 'lesbian and gay' reduces sexual identity to binary constructions of gender and desire, queer breaks it open to include many more communities of interest and possibilities for the development of dynamic new spaces. Jamie proposes that, in the same way, fat activism can include diverse people:

"I also like to think of, you know, fat activism as not just being done by fat people, which I think is similar to queer, that queer defines a space of non-normativity in various ways and I think maybe that could include fatness." (Jamie)

Therefore, instead of attempting to remove undesirables or stifle difficult conversations, queering the presence of transgressive people who are, as Paz stated, "already there" in fat activism could involve seeing them as an asset, a means of broadening discourse as people whose contributions are valuable in a movement where complexity rather than
simplicity is sought. For example, if embodied sameness is not a fundament of fat activism, the instability of fat embodiment and the contradictions implicit in the fixity and/or changeability of fat identity can be more readily addressed. Following this, queering weight loss could release fat activism to make feelings of ambivalence, for example, available for discussion and action, or to expose problematic trends, for example a hypocritical surveillance culture within fat activist community. This is not the postmodern fragmentation of social justice activism feared by structuralist social movement theorists such as George Katsiaficas, instead it expands activist constituencies, appealing to those who would not recognise themselves as activists under more restrictive models (Katsiaficas 2010).

My research demonstrates that fat activism is already experienced in multiple ways but some forms of fat activism are privileged over others. I wish to add a note of caution that privileging queer may also reproduce hegemonies; whilst queered fat activism makes space for interventions that are context-specific or slippery, these should not be positioned as superior to other types of action. Benjamin's account of witnessing a rights-based speech at a queer fat conference exemplifies this pluralism well:

"I just remember being at that NOLOSE when Lynn McAfee talked, and just bawling my eyes out, and oh it isn't all about fucking and like being punk and like, having sex. It is about rights, and there are people actually who are, and it is important, I'm the person at the cabaret and doing the dance party and wearing tight pants. But there's actually someone trying to advocate for me somewhere, and we have to nod our head to that and hope that that person's a homo but it probably doesn't matter, you know what I mean?!!" (Benjamin)

In practical terms this means that more traditional models, such as rights-based activism, are still important, and that in queering fat activism it is pluralism that matters not the dominance of one model of activism over another. Thus unfixing fat activism queerly is a ways of addressing false hierarchies, making the movement available to diverse people to explore as they choose, and enabling it to become free to develop without constraint.

Assimilation

Queer offers a means of identifying and interrogating normativity, and proposing disruptive alternatives. In this next section I consider how fat activists uphold and
disturb notions of normativity. Towards the end of the discussion I argue that queer also enables one to further analyse the categories of assimilationist and liberationist fat activism proposed by LeBesco which, I argue, are false distinctions (LeBesco 2004).

**Normativity**

Although the fat activists in the study sample spoke about wanting to disrupt social norms, structures, systems and unequal power relationships, this cannot be assumed to be true of all fat activists. For example, healthism and consumerism present two areas in which fat activists uphold normative standards to some extent.

Healthism refers to the social construction of health as an individualist moral project, and a product of governmentality (Foucault 1977, Skrabanek 1994, Rose 1999, Cheek 2008). This can be seen in what LeBesco regards as claiming a 'will to innocence', that is, fat activists presenting themselves as correctly-behaved, blame-free, healthist citizens with regard to their exercise and eating habits (Wann 1998, Ernst 2005). Eve claims that healthism is present in HAES because of its predominance of health professionals who are orientated towards the parameters of their working lives rather than a broader inclination towards fat activism, or the corporeality of fat bodies. This can be seen in the study by Gail Marchessault et al., where dieticians regarded HAES as a weight management tool, contradicting popular interpretations of HAES that include a non-weight-based paradigm for health (Marchessault et al. 2007). Eve comments:

"There's a lot of foment within the HAES community about who's HAES and who's not HAES, and HAES language being co-opted, you know, by Weight Watchers. One of the things that I think is really not said often enough is that Health At Every Size is a specific response to the specific vehicle of oppression of fat people around health. It is not a comprehensive fat activism analysis. It suffers from a kind of myopic, or a lot of the people who are sort of doing HAES are specifically responding to that stereotype of fat being unhealthy, and not really broadening out to a larger focus that's way beyond health in some of the analysis. And so I understand that the tensions exist there. They're focusing so much on health still, and we're doing that partly because we're healthcare professionals, a lot of us, who are really trying to mount some resistance to the use of healthcare as a way of oppressing fat people, and so of course this is what we're talking about since this is the purview, and we're trying to basically say: 'We're not going to use BMI [Body Mass Index] as a proxy for health,' but then we're still healthcare providers and so we are going to say: 'But we do have to have some idea of what we're talking about when we're, or what we're
supporting, if it's not going to be BMI what's it going to be?' and so we end up talking a lot about health and that keeps us very centred in this sometimes uncritical acceptance of the importance of health as a means of according someone worth, which is the healthism problem." (Eve)

The "healthism problem" to which Eve refers is a result of fat activists affiliated with, invested in and upholding dominant cultural values. They are speaking to power in the manners of power, a discourse of respectability, inoffensiveness, normativity and the preservation of a particular order of things. Earlier in this chapter Verity alluded that those who cannot uphold healthism in fat activism tend to leave the movement.

Fatshion offers another perspective of fat activism and normativity in relation to consumerism. Referring to the practise of outfit-blogging, where a person posts online a photograph of themselves in an outfit they have put together for comment, Kerry states:

"And I do think that it is still incredibly queer to see a fat chick take a full length photo of herself and put it up online, as I was saying the other day, that is a queer activist moment, irrespective of whether she would identify as queer." (Kerry)

In this context, outfit-blogging presents queered and thus non-normative embodiment without apology, subverting the assumption that fat bodies are shameful, and it takes place within a community that understands these terms, repudiating the alienation of fat people. But this is naïve; outfit-blogging may subvert some problematic ideological standards but it may uphold others. Anna critiques the unquestioned ideologies of consumerism and citizenship that she sees within fat activism and fashion.

"There's a kind of consumer-citizenship, I guess, that is centred around fashion, like a post-feminist consumer-citizenship centred around fashion that, you know, I'm intrigued by, but I think has a fairly assimilatory tendency to it." (Anna)

Hannah shares an example of how this consumer-citizenship has played out in her experience with fatshion. Here, the "assimilatory tendency" within the community where outfit-blogging is popular fails to critically address its roots and transforms a potentially radical online space into a marketing tool.

"So in American culture at least, a lot of the ways that middle class girls intersect with or have a rite of passage is by the body project, it's all about figuring out how you relate your body to the world and what that means, and often that means obsessing about clothes and how you present yourself, and
middle class fat women are really denied this experience in a lot of ways. What I found with [a fatshion community] is that, as time went on, it became this substitute for a body project for women who had never had those experiences. And so it was a rift between people who actually wanted to talk about the body and what it meant, and people who wanted to get validated for their outfits. [...] And eventually I got really embarrassed by it [...]. I was like: 'This is not about my values at all,' this was about American consumerism and mostly white women being denied to have the opportunity to have consumerism in the way that they wanted. And it's a free market research tool for all these companies [...] I felt horrified by it." (Hannah)

Healthism and consumerism represent fat activism that seeks absorption into society rather than a bigger agenda of extensive social change. Both healthism and Anna's fat "post-feminist consumer-citizenship" have been appropriated by health professionals and the fashion industry because they operate within its frames of reference. These interventions represent the mainstreaming of fat activism, but critical voices have been shouting from the margins for some time and continue to do so. They are concerned that fat activists who uphold standards of normativity are failing to question the status quo by the methods and values of early fat feminism, for example that represented in The Fat Liberation Manifesto (Freespirit and Aldebaran 1973). Zoë Meleo-Erwin argues that fat activists should challenge assimilationist tendencies within the movement and develop critical approaches to normativity, especially within health, and argue for a "more complex, multidimensional and nuanced framing" (Meleo-Erwin 2012, p.393). Jamie argues that fat activists are not sufficiently invested in social change:

"The kinds of things that turn me off in a way are things like fat beauty pageants, yeah, that kind of thing, which is just sort of reproducing things that I consider to be oppressive in the first place, and I don't think that, kind of saying: 'Oh, fat people can enjoy, you know this, that and the other as well,' is a particularly productive way of changing anything. I mean I'm sure they're fun but I question, I would sort of think: 'I'm not sure...' yeah." (Jamie)

The more transgressive qualities of fat activism appear to challenge and remedy assimilationist interventions, and it is to this proposition that I now turn.

Transgression

Because of its transgressive characteristics, and its affinity with the anti-social, to queer is also to connect with that which is subversive, breaks rules, which rebuffs assimilation
and vigorously engages with social change (Halberstam 2008). According to Jamie, queered fat activism is that which threatens normativity:

"Well I think it offers up a lot of opportunities to have a lot of fun and to not to fall into that idea, of kind of identity politics that says: 'We exist and we demand the right to be normal' where it's more: 'We trouble your normalness and we like it that way, and get over it,' kind of thing. Not 'Get over it,' but 'We don't want your acceptance, we are threatening.'" (Jamie)

To queer fat activism is to disengage with the desire to be agents of normality, respectability and politeness. Here, fatphobic slurs are reclaimed and disarmed, particularly through language. This is a strategy used by other marginalised groups, such as disabled people, but queering here also engages the anti-social, which is actively pursued and appreciated, and normative expressions of embodiment, gender and sexuality are overturned. Many study participants spoke of the gleeful pleasures of transgressing normativity, and Hannah, Daniah and Julia refer to their delight in the unruliness of unapologetic fat people:

"The most exciting thing about fat queers is their aggressive embodiment. Like I'm so excited when I meet any fat queers who are large and in charge in their bodies and in themselves, and are taking up space in the world. I think for me that's the most fundamental kind of amazing activism, like in refusing to die, and taking up as much space as possible." (Hannah)

"And so then our performance started to change, especially as we went to NOLOSE. And we decided that we didn't really give a fuck about trying to show everyone that our bodies were the same as, because we didn't really know what that meant any more, whose bodies we wanted to show that ours were the same as, because we already gave much more fat pride and didn't care about showing people that we could do the splits or whatever. So then we started playing more with food and sex and you know, doing much more gruesome style of performances. For example in one of our performances we basically built a gigantic ice cream sundae, then we pretended to fuck the ice cream, fuck each other, we rolled around, we were covered in ice cream, and we were crazy." (Daniah)

"I kind of connected to [the singer Beth Ditto] on a level, totally, and in terms of how punk it is to just be a fat naked person on stage and be: 'I don't give a fuck and I also don't shave and I don't wear deodorant and I'm completely comfortable with my physicality and I don't care whether it shocks you,' how incredible that was, and how much more that spoke to me than, because, you know, I've always been into punk, but how much more that spoke to me than, like, skinny white boys trashing their guitars and things like that. No, this is much better! And I heard a story of when she was getting fatphobic comments at, I think, a gig in Australia or something, that she totally took them to task and..."
made herself vomit on the stage [Charlotte laughs] which I thought was fantastic." (Julia)

Fat activists upholding normativity are concerned with being intelligible to agents of power, but the fat activism of transgression has little such interest.

"It's celebrating the hideousness of the margins or whatever it is that has left us out, made us the last-picked, made us feel alone and sad and unworthy and all the negative things of fatness and queerness and gender etc, and race [...]. When people do find voice from those places it's really incredible and life-changing." (Kris)

To this Kerry adds a further rationale for taking notice of transgressive queer fat activism, observing:

"[...] what you realise about non-normativity is that it's a much bigger constituency than normativity because normativity very quickly emerges as a myth and a fiction." (Kerry)

Here, activists are communicating horizontally rather than upwards, they are developing fat embodiment that is primarily recognisable and meaningful to each other, and not in a mode comprehensible only within obesity discourse. Indeed, the size of the constituency suggests the redundancy of dominant or mainstream discourse. But marginal spaces also have a relationship to power. Discourse that comes from the margins risks being appropriated by the mainstream. Liat describes the mainstreaming of radical fat feminism in this way, which erases the queerness of its originators:

"It's interesting, it's like in a way the movements at their most radical, they kind of have to become palatable for the mainstream, and so I see all those people as sort of co-opting the lesbian feminism, the radical, most radical stuff, and really most of it is language, you know where fat liberation, lesbian fat liberationists talk about 'fat and liberation,' and then it becomes 'size and body image' and they're saying kind of the same things but they're making it palatable for middle America, or whoever, and of course lesbians are discredited because we're a fringe element, and who would listen to us?" (Liat)

In addition, in her essay Axiomatic, Kosofsky Sedgwick writes of the power of the margins. She argues that people pushed to the margins are also a part of the centre because it is here that they embody a quality that disturbs and disrupts that space, in this way they reveal the centre (Kosofsky Sedgwick 2005). Thus whilst these queer interactions take place beyond the margins of obesity discourse, they remain relevant to
it. Earlier in this thesis I proposed that the production of fat activist community and culture is a way of claiming space beyond the terms of obesity discourse. Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay implies that such marginal places can never be truly autonomous, they must always bear a relationship to dominant culture, even when they are critical of it. Nevertheless, she is only claiming a relationship between the margins and the centre, and this does not mean that the margins must always be constituted or constrained by the mainstream, like fat activism and obesity discourse, they can co-exist.

Reconsidering distinctions

LeBesco identifies two types of fat activism: liberationist and assimilationist (LeBesco 2004). The former advocates transgressive fat embodiment, it 'revolts'. Assimilationist fat activism, by contrast, upholds normativity and the will to innocence. LeBesco associates assimilationist fat activism with the consumerism of fatshion. For example, within consumerist fat activism, she argues that "fat folk are embraced as consuming subjects but not as social subjects" (ibid., p.70), but in outfit-blogging, for example, they might assume both roles, consumer and activist overlap and are not mutually exclusive. Given this, assimilationist and liberationist are questionable distinctions since I have shown that most fat activism takes place in highly subjective contexts that disrupt the simplicity of universalist typologies or dichotomies. Moreover, the fat activism of the margins where activists are unconcerned with speaking upwards to power still maintains a relationship to dominant culture.

A rigorous analysis of fat activism using queer theory cannot simply dismiss an intervention like a plus size clothes shop as a consumerist space as opposed to a social space. For example, Re/Dress NYC is now an online retailer selling new and second hand plus-size clothing, but between November 2008 and 2011 it operated a bricks and mortar shop in Brooklyn. As a capitalist and consumerist enterprise, profit was the bottom line and, when a shop was no longer financially viable, it shed its overheads, including a staff of several people, and moved online. This is typical of other plus-size clothing retailers, both corporate and local. However, Re/Dress NYC is owned by Deb Malkin, who has a background in fat queer community organising, including the Fat Girl Flea, NOLOSE, Jiggle-O and various fundraisers. As well as being a shop, the Re/Dress NYC site in Brooklyn was also a community hub, a performance space, and
hosted benefits for people in need. The people who worked and shopped at Re/Dress NYC also participate(d) within other activist networks. Re/Dress NYC could be seen as a hybrid for-profit appropriation of a social enterprise model, where community involvement is regarded as good for business and vice versa. This is thoroughly located in United States consumerism and neoliberalism, where access to money influences one's access to community, and where community space is sacrificed when the economy fails. These factors are indeed problematic and do raise questions about the implications of locating activism within consumerism. However, a place like Re/Dress cannot be considered a mono-dimensional entity, particularly given the pleasure and kinship that people experienced in the space.

The following exchange with Adiva, talking about the differences between NAAFA and NOLOSE, reiterates how difficult it is to distinguish between assimilationist and liberationist fat activism in non-commercial spaces:

"I think that a conference like NAAFA does not feel like a queer conference to me, even though there are queer people on the board, and queer workshops, I've led a queer workshop there, it doesn't feel queer even though there are people at NAAFA and people at NOLOSE who are the same people. I don't really, I don't actually fully understand that but I know that having that queerness, just feeling like, it's almost like a love of just fucking things up, and like fucking with stuff. It's so important. It's like beyond this identification. What do you think? Tell me.

Charlotte: Ok, what I think is queer fat activism is the edge, the edge of it, it's not to be assimilationist, whereas something like NAAFA, which represents a very straight view of fat activism to me, is about trying to get a seat at the master's table. I think queer fat activism is about kicking the table over and shitting all over it.

Yeah, and you know I think that that feels as though it should be the right answer, but when I look at all of the politics of what happens at NAAFA and at NOLOSE, NAAFA's a lot more radical in some ways. So I mean NAAFA is a place where supersized people, or superfat people can be, and NOLOSE, I mean I almost didn't go back to NOLOSE because it was so not that.

Charlotte: Yes, maybe I'm using NAAFA as a shorthand for something else.

Yes, I totally agree and I think it's not that easy because I think there are ways that our queer spaces are very [political?]. I mean lots of weight loss surgery in the NOLOSE community, which is not at all kicking over the master's table, so I agree it has that feeling, but I don't know how to articulate the difference."  (Adiva)
This conversation demonstrates that categories of place and activist style cannot be assumed, they can be read and experienced in different ways. Queer and feminist fat activist space cannot be universally taken for granted as revolutionary, for example, and spaces presumed to be assimilationist might also maintain some capacity for transgression.

LeBesco seeks to privilege one approach to fat activism above another, that is, to diminish consumerist citizenship and support anti-capitalism. These are valuable arguments given the preponderance of conservative fat activism interventions, reflecting neoliberalism and consumerism more widely in 21st century Western culture. The dynamic between assimilationist and liberationist, or conservative and radical, is ongoing in fat activism and is reflected in examples I gave earlier, such as NAAFA and The Fat Underground, in Shelley Bovey's contributions, and through the appropriation and diminishing of fat feminism in the UK in the early 1990s by fatshion entrepreneurs. These instances suggest that assimilationist and conservative interventions are certainly problematic, but they also represent an undeniable constituency of populist fat activism. Perhaps a more productive approach is to acknowledge the presence of many methods and strategies in fat activism that cannot be easily demarcated into hierarchies, or necessarily reconciled with each other, not only in the variety of spaces they produce but also the many ways they manifest within those spaces, including those invested in consumerism.

Discussions about normativity and transgression highlight the question of who is a legitimate subject in fat activism, and what is its legitimate purpose. For example, should fat activism attempt to engage with dominant discourse, is it a means of developing fat identity and culture below the radar? Queer makes space for multiple subject positions within a social movement, and queering fat activism would maintain that all types of intervention are part of a spectrum of behaviour, that normativity and assimilation are not mutually exclusive, that demarcation is contextual, and that all have the potential for legitimacy.

**Conclusion: building fat activist theory**
In this chapter I have used queer theory to address some of the tensions within fat activism, to explore the possibilities for embracing difference and multiplicity, and for critically interrogating normativity and transgression. I have presented an idea of queer that goes beyond identity to consider it as a series of helpful qualities. I have further situated fat activism in discourse, showing that 'natural' beliefs, for example about what fat activism can be, are constructions, and therefore can be interrupted. I argued in the previous chapter that, despite its rich discursive context, fat activism suffers from areas of stagnation. This chapter builds on the findings in response to the question 'What is fat activism?' proposing that as well as being unlimited, there is the potential for many communities of interest within the movement, and that a great range of interventions have the potential for legitimacy as fat activism.

I have argued for attention to be paid to queer as a means of theorising fat activism. I am not the first to apply queer theory to the field, and I am grateful for the work that precedes me. At present, the use of queer theory to explicate fat activism is, as it should be, varied. Although the materiality of fat bodies and the necessity of theorising fatness beyond medicalisation are understood as crucial, the uses of reclaiming 'revolting' fatness and resignifying fat through activism are subject to debate. Theorising fat activism is challenging because there are few published scholars who also have close first-hand knowledge of the movement. I have critically addressed and built upon this work and, hopefully, offered material for a more expansive discussion.

Queer theory supports fat activism because it questions polarised and essentialist concepts and helps create more productive spaces. Queering fat activism reveals the value of the margins, which are always within the centre, and which have a large membership. It fosters tolerance for the irreconcilable differences presented through radical and conservative ideologies within the movement by making space for multiple approaches and fusions. Applying queer theory to social movements has been met with panic and apprehension by sociologists. Steven Epstein asks:

"How are politics possible when actors insist on the fluidity of identity and resist the very notion of categorisation?" (Epstein 1996, p.158)

But queer theory enables a creative rethinking of identity politics, where the need for sameness is re-evaluated, and the contradictions within discourse are not regarded as
inherently problematic. Epstein's question could be answered that politics are possible through organising around goals or activities, working with coalitions, or purposefully seeking out difference and complexity, for example. Other scholars have applied less indefinable theoretical models to fat activism, but queer creates an expansive frame in which the breadth of social movements, and their constituents, can be articulated, it offers a set of qualities that supports multiple subjectivities.

Queer infuses my own fat activism deeply, enabling me to create interventions that are largely messy, ambiguous, mongrel, unrespectable, imaginative, inexpert, embodied, creative and anti-social. Like LeBesco, I favour 'revolting' fat activism, but to this I would add the qualities of queer preposterousness, which makes further allowances for spectacle and irrationality. Such qualities reflect my shifting autobiography and the ways in which I have been socially shaped and situated. I try to do what I can within the circumstances in which I live to create a liveable life now rather than invest all my resources in a progressive future, based on authoritarian promises and values, that may never materialise for me. The passage at the beginning of this chapter, an account of being in a band, points to this kind of fat activism. When I perform as part of Homosexual Death Drive I am drawing on many discursive threads, punk being one of them, and my own queer fat embodiment being another. The purpose of these performances is not only 'fat activism' but I see them as part of my repertoire of fat activism. They enable me to communicate my fatness in certain nuanced ways to people who might not normally be constituted as fat activists but who, on a good night at least, are open to its possibilities. I am not advocating that all fat activism should take the same form as that which attracts me, or suggesting that what I produce has any more or less worth than other kinds of fat activism. The movement is diverse and pluralist, a queered movement has space for everyone.
Chapter Seven: Conclusion

I began this study with a feeling that fat activism was not getting the attention it deserved. In the course of the research I was able to clarify what 'not getting the attention' meant: that fat activism is habitually overlooked, assumed and dismissed in literature explaining and supporting it, in literature critical of it, and by fat activists themselves. Also, that obesity is an inadequate frame for fat activism. I felt that by paying closer attention to the phenomenon, by assuming the role of the feminist queer killjoy, by identifying, situating and theorising it, that some of the tremendous concrete benefits of fat activism would emerge, and some of its problems could be addressed. I did this by speaking to fat activists as a peer, analysing their responses, and engaging critically with literature, the archive, and my own praxis.

In order to produce this work, I scavenged methodology that was accountable to fat people as real, thinking and feeling, vivid, intelligent, agentic, multi-dimensional, embodied, social beings. I did this because it was imperative that, in depicting the richness of fat activism, I did not reproduce more common methodological constructs in which fat people are secondary. I drew on my own experiences and evolving practise as an activist. Whilst I acknowledge that I have made significant contributions to the movement over the decades of my involvement, I situated myself not as an exceptional leader or celebrity, but as someone surrounded and constituted by community.

I structured the thesis around three research questions. The first emerged fairly quickly from the literature and interview data. 'What is fat activism?' set out to clarify what it is that fat activists mean when they talk about what they do. I proposed a series of tentative themes, based on my reading of social movement theory, ranging from "the square stuff," as Barbra calls it, to weirder territory. I concluded that the presence of ambiguous fat activism suggested that the phenomenon cannot be limited to rational interventions, and that this implies that universal definitions of fat activism are not possible. Instead, fat activists are invited to appreciate the complicated and unruly project they have created.

The second research question, 'Where is my fat activism discursively located?' sought an autoethnographic grounding of fat activism as a product of the local and contingent.
In other words, I used myself and my community, represented by the sample, to situate fat activism in time and place. By placing fat activism carefully in discourse, I hoped to offer a deeper understanding of the movement and identify new areas for investigation. I recognised the dominant discourse here as fat feminism, and distinguished it from another body of feminist work that has come to act as a proxy for fat activism. I pieced together an assemblage of fat feminism's discursive origins, its travels, and some of the problems that are associated with those travels. The capacity for travel that fat feminism presents in fat activism builds on the argument that fat activism cannot be limited and is instead a plural, hybrid, evolving phenomenon. Yet comparisons between older fat activist documentation and current discourse suggests that it is a movement that suffers stagnation.

'How can fat activism be theorised productively?', the final research question, followed on from this. Theorising fat activism can help unblock stagnation by creating new ways to understand the movement. I deconstructed some of the certainties of fat activism that have surfaced through fat feminism by drawing on the queer theory that has been proposed elsewhere, primarily by LeBesco. In addition to their impossibility, universal definitions of fat activism are not desirable, because they create constituencies of insiders and outsiders, which inevitably produces collateral damage. Instead, I argued for an expansive fat activism that seeks difference and multiplicity through many communities of interest, which both champions and questions transgression, and which welcomes the possibility for many different kinds of intervention.

**My contributions**

Fat Activism: A Queer Autoethnography is the first major publicly-funded, community-based, critical study of fat activism. It makes a significant contribution to the understanding of fat activism, presenting fat people as agentic narrators of their own lives. With its international scope and diverse sample, I have brought wider horizons to the subject than have been applied before.

The study offers a number of innovations in the understanding of fat activism, including a thorough critique of the literature of the movement; a handful of models that help reveal what fat activism can mean or be; the situating of fat activism in discourse; and
productive ways of theorising conflict in fat activism. I have situated fat activism in community and identified to some extent what those communities look like. I have offered a challenging piece of work that grapples with the concept of fat activism both as a project that decolonises the body and recolonises it through sometimes questionable and oppressive praxis. It is a study that questions many tacit assumptions about fat activism and activism more generally.

I have offered an important methodological contribution to the research of fatness, incorporating research justice. I have revealed some of the weaknesses in the way that obesity discourse defines and impedes people's lives, but from a different angle to pre-existing critical work on fat. This is a profound challenge to obesity research, including critical work, that reproduces the abstraction, abjection, anonymising and absenting of the fat people at whom it is directed. Moreover, it presents huge yet also practical implications for the transformation of obesity policy.

In broader terms, this study has contributed to debates about the relationship between research and activism; about standpoint and accountability in academia; about what is meant by the ethnographic field. I have developed experimental, emancipatory, queer methodology, and built on a body of autoethnographic work. I have added to discussions of what might constitute a social movement, and how feminist and poststructuralist theory can help develop ideas about social action and transformation. I have critiqued the current positioning of fatness within the sociology of the body, and the reliance on feminist proxies for fat activism. I have expanded debates about identity politics. I have built directly on the work of Kathy Davis and Kathleen LeBesco, and applied Michel Foucault's theories of power in a new way in Fat Studies.

In addition to the thesis, which is only part of the research project, I have undertaken numerous knowledge transfer activities to communicate and refine the study. These include academic publishing, and articles for online journals, magazines and zines; conference papers, guest lectures and workshops; film-making and screenings; events, artist residencies and a visiting scholarship; collaborations with research partners, and consultancy. The project and its related activities have garnered substantial media coverage, and my blog traffic has also grown.
As I draw this thesis to a close, I want to offer a more reflective conclusion that considers the work and its contributions within my emotional landscape. I do this to further contextualise the study as autoethnography and distance it from constructions of empirical truth. That it is an emotional piece of work is not surprising given its subject matter. Fat embodiment is often associated with particular emotive states, shame being especially central (Erdman Farrell 2011, Gailey 2012). Fat people also undertake considerable emotional labour in managing stigma in the workplace and beyond (Goffman 1963, Russel Hochschild 2003). This is the labour of politeness in the face of hate, the work of ignoring and 'rising above' as a survival tool. Likewise, the sociology of emotion has made significant contributions to the sociological study of social movements, especially in the cultural dynamics of protest, and typically manifesting as studies of how participants relate to one another (Jasper 1997, Goodwin et al. 2001, Turner and Stets 2005). I have rendered some of these emotions in this study. Whilst this project could be developed further as an exploration of fat activist affect more generally, the emotions that concern me most in this piece of research are my own. Indeed, autoethnography is a methodology that supports, and requires, attention towards the researcher's emotional life, which I have included in the body of the thesis through my use of vignettes and research notebook excerpts.

Feelings associated with research might involve anxiety about looming deadlines, curiosity about the subject, or exhaustion as the work gets written up and submitted. I have certainly experienced these states, but my most noticeable emotions emanating throughout the whole of the project are activist feelings. Ann Cvetkovich writes about the affective experience of encountering archives as activists, more specifically as queer activist cultural workers (Cvetkovich 2003, Garcia et al. 2012). Following her work, how could I not feel overwhelmed, awed, delighted, or empowered when encountering not just the objects that constitute an on-going archive of queer fat activism, but the activities that brought them into being and the communities that supported their existence? Particularly in the light of how these archives of queer fat feminism are consistently disregarded or belittled in obesity discourse and through feminist proxies for fat activism. Powerful affective states emerge through fat- and homophobia more
generally, and especially in the context of the complex feelings arising from my own fat embodiment and its intersections with queer and working class identities, among others.

More complex activist feelings are a part of this research. A controlled kind of anger runs through the work, an anger about the destructive marginalisation, misrepresentation and stereotyping of fat people and fat activism that is reproduced not only by the 'likely suspects' within obesity discourse, but also by feminists, critical theorists, 'friendly' researchers, and fat activists themselves. I want this work to bring about change in this area. The result of this long-held anger is a thesis that shows some of the intricate and splendid aspects of the movement and invites people to participate in further discussion. I feel proud about what fat activists have built, that is, frameworks for living well, that may or may not include complete social transformation, and a strong desire to make this work visible so that others may benefit. Yet amidst this is ambivalence about the possible future appropriation and distortion of the work by others in the discussions that lie ahead. This ambivalence extends to what has been a constant interplay between daring mischievousness and fear. I have bent and broken some of the rules of what a sociological PhD 'should' look like, and have demanded serious attention in a formal environment for a subject that captures the quality of preposterousness that Noreen Giffney cites as critical to queer sensibility (Giffney 2009). Perhaps hope is also an emotion woven into this work, there will surely be detractors but the research will find supporters and will become part of the discourse that others can build on and adapt as they choose.

**The emotional objects of this work**

The emotional content of the thesis exists in relation to objects, a category of phenomena that includes people which, here means those to whom the work is orientated, people and institutions that I want to change as a result of the work. Sara Ahmed notes that the object orientation of emotions in queer phenomenology is askew, unstable, disorientating, and so it remains with this work, where the objects to which my feelings are directed are not always straightforward or presented in an orderly linear fashion (Ahmed 2006). The objects of this work are different groups of imagined readers: fat activists, researchers and activists more generally, and policy-makers,
sociologists and research administrators. Occasionally the emotional work is directed
towards the memory of my mother, and to earlier and later iterations of myself.

I have come to think of these groups as agents of social change in a state of interplay,
people to whom I want to present fat activism for consideration, institutions and
individuals that I would like to influence with this work. There is some hierarchy
regarding the amount of attention I give to them, fat activists are usually the people I am
trying to reach the most; researchers and activists more generally are also significant
objects; and abstract assemblies of institutions, policy-makers and sociologists hold
lesser interest to me. Sometimes one group is more prominent, and sometimes another.
What follows is a brief acknowledgment of my emotional relationships to these objects
throughout the thesis and how these objects might implement my work.

**Fat activists**

If the past is a measure of the future, fat activists will probably continue to struggle.
Unless the narrative can be shifted, fat people will continue to be understood as a
market, as well as helpless fodder for the medical-industrial-complex rather than people
with communities of interest relating to their fatness. Fat activism will continue to be
presented, if it is at all recognised, as a preposterous endeavour, an example of a world
that become unbalanced through political correctness rather than rational enlightenment.
Whilst the capitalist impulse behind weight loss remains unchecked, fat people will
become guinea pigs for new realms of bio-technology, and genetic engineering will be
sold on the back of fat hatred. As protest itself becomes increasingly controlled, so too
might fat activists need to develop strategies to avoid criminalisation.

Even with a more hopeful future scenario where fat activism is more visible, fat
activists risk the appropriation of liberation concepts by individuals and organisations
whose activities are not necessarily built on the values of embodied freedom for people
of all sizes. This is already happening. Furthermore, fat activism will be required to
negotiate and respond to this land grab of intellectual property. One organisation has
already registered HAES as their own trademark to ‘protect’ it from use by weight loss
corporations, but is this an outcome that benefits all fat activists? Meanwhile, the
neoliberal figure of the celebrity has become the model for fat activists interested in
engaging in public debate, which raises questions about the self-authoring of liberal humanism that Samantha Murray critiques at the beginning of this thesis. Elsewhere, fat feminism is already obscured by proxies, and whilst ‘body activism’ and ‘the size zero debate’ become part of a popular discourse of embodiment, fat itself remains obscured within those concepts.

In charting this movement of which I am a part, I have come to recognise its cyclical nature. Activists emerge, enact some form of social change, burn out, and fall away. But another wave always emerges. After The Fat Underground came BAFL and the New Haven Fat Liberation Front, after them came the London Fat Women’s Group, after them came FaT GiRL, then NOLOSE, and so it continues. As long as there will be fat people, there will be those of us who seek to disinvest in our own oppression. This is where hope for the future lies. In addition, the inevitable polarisation and fragmentation of fat activists does not herald the movement’s demise, but a hope for more complexity and opportunities for productive coalitions amongst other communities of interest. In this way, I remain committed to the idea that fat activism is a movement of the margins, that this is a dynamic space. I think that social change relating to fat is still possible through a sneaky kind of revolution; through micro activism, ambiguous activism; through acts of bold imagination as well as material manifestation. This does not preclude the possibility of macro social change, which has also already happened in the legislative protection for fat people in San Francisco, for example, but the daily struggle will no doubt continue.

Fat activists have been key affective objects for me in constructing this research, I harbour a strong desire to see fat activism develop beyond the limitations presented in the current literature, or my somewhat depressing future projections. I long for more of the queer complexity that moves me and transcends apparent impossibilities, and I invite fat activists to create such work. Kate Eichhorn argues that activists find themselves experiencing states of recovery in the queer feminist archive, but that they are also producers of archives through their activism and scholarship, and such archives can encompass pleasure and connection (Eichhorn 2010). Following this, I have generated this research as a resource for fat activists, I consider it an archive of fat queer feminist activism for communities whose activisms are limited by lack of access to documentation, an archive filled with gratitude for what has come before and hope for
what might follow. It is my hope that this research will encourage fat activists to continue the excellent project of not fitting the social boundaries that are prescribed for them.

Although I have orientated the work towards my communities, comrades, friends and loves, I have chosen not to reproduce a flat feel-good introduction to fat activism. This is a risky strategy, few people like to be goaded, yet I feel that it is necessary to challenge conservatism in the movement and provide a series of provocations regarding the recognition and production of fat activism. For example, there is an inbuilt defensiveness when conveying fat activism to others, it is a preposterous activism that suffers collective low self-esteem because it is regularly subjected to ridicule and attack. Fat Studies scholar and activist Zoë Meleo-Erwin defines fat activism in slightly dismissive, even apologist tones:

"Of course, fat activism is not a coherent social movement, per se, and rather can be seen as the diverse collection of activist groups, organizations, events, clubs, researchers, websites, internet forums, legal actions, bloggers, zine makers, amongst others, that at a very minimum agree upon the need to challenge anti-fat bias and stereotypes." (Meleo-Erwin 2012, p.399)

But it is a disservice to claim that fat activism must be 'coherent,' on unnamed terms, in order to earn the recognition of a social movement. Indeed, I have shown that fat activism is a coherent social movement, it can be understood as a queer social movement that builds on poststructuralist social movement theory. At the same time, fat activism does not have to be coherent either in order to be valid. In this way, this research asks fat activists, and others, to understand that in not fitting traditional forms, fat activism is creating new paradigms for social action, it is a valuable endeavour built on the value of fat subjectivity.

In positioning this study towards fat activists I am asking them to invest in building a body of rigorous research, and to demand 'nothing about us without us' from other researchers. I encourage fat activists to recognise and address discourse and theory, to move beyond stale tropes and to develop dynamic praxis that builds on the movement's rich historical, geographical and cultural locations. This involves creating work that
acknowledges the contexts through which fat activism arises, that offers a big picture of fat activism, not isolated and fragmented pieces. It entails approaching areas of disagreement within the movement with confidence. I urge fat activists to find worth in, and be excited by, a movement that is open, queer, hybrid, and which embraces the preposterous. I feel compelled to make the work of the early fat feminists available because of my vexation at their invisibility, and frustration with more recent fat activisms that lack imagination, or ambition, or a grounding against oppression more generally. Through this work I seek to embolden fat activists to reinstate feminism and anti-oppressive politics in their work, and to critically address consumerism, racism and imperialism within the movement. This could enable fat activists to ally with other forms of activism, and to demand that other activists take notice of and learn from fat people.

Researchers

My emotions at the current state of obesity research encompass rage, resentment, frustration and dismay. I regard research based uncritically in obesity discourse as a key area in which the marginalisation, dehumanisation and exploitation of fat people is mandated through epistemologies mediated by ignorance, greed, pity, bigotry and arrogance. The owners of the obesity research knowledge that is regarded as most culturally legitimate in 21st century Western culture are not the people on whose bodies that 'knowledge' has its devastating impact. The privilege conferred by ownership is carefully guarded.

Research justice has been a pivotal part of the affective dimension of the thesis. Longing and hope emerge through the potential for social transformation by research that is produced by and for the people most affected by it. An important part of this work has been to move fat beyond a discourse of helplessness. A section from the Allied Media Projects Network Principles, which acts as a mission statement for the Allied Media Conference, articulates this position:

"We emphasise our own power and legitimacy. We presume our power, not our powerlessness. We spend more time building than attacking. We focus on strategies rather than issues." (Allied Media Projects 2012, p.6)
Although I have included criticism, theory and abstract reasoning, it is of central importance to the study that I have considered the action, capacity, confidence, and skill that can emerge from community knowledge. This is critical in enabling communities to appreciate their agency and wield power. The effects of research that recognises the humanity and agency of fat people could be world-changing. This study reflects a conviction that obesity research must engage with fat activism in order, at the very least, to become accountable and ethical, and that part of the work of fat activism is that it must adopt research justice in order to transform obesity discourse.

I regard this project as an example of the rich material that can emerge when marginal communities are able to exercise the power to narrate their own lives. I recognise the freshness of the data compared to the stultifying representation of 'the obese' in more typical studies of fatness. I hope that other researchers take note and are encouraged to develop projects that also bring forth exciting and innovative perspectives concerning fat embodiment and which do not appropriate or sell-out fat people. Fat activists have a lot to offer! I hope my approach to this research encourages others to reconsider their methodology and standpoint, and to engage with reflective practise with renewed vigour.

This study reveals further that the divide between activism and scholarship is a false one, and that the privileging of the academy over the community must be problematised. Instead of reproducing an obesity research discourse that reduces fat people to abstractions who are absent and Othered, I have put them at the centre of the work. This has meant regarding the research as a resource largely orientated towards fat activists, and refusing the pressure of academic orthodoxy to speak only to a research community. Instead I have made use of methodology that recognises and builds on the subjectivity and social positioning of the researcher and the communities under investigation. My data are conversations, not a dispassionate collection of facts, and I draw predominantly on the fat feminist epistemology developed in communities, not high level obesity policy. These strategies have implications for other researchers in considering how and to whom they orientate their work, and how they might develop productive hybrid understandings of their own subject positioning as researchers.
A critical aspect of research justice is that the work produced extends beyond the academy, or that the university or the laboratory are not the only locations for knowledge production and dissemination. I have openly shared and developed concepts and arguments relating to the thesis through blogging, participation in events, presentations, and through invitations to speak. Although this study reflects scholarly conventions, I speak and write with an accessible voice and avoid jargon. I have offered my work and skills to other activists and researchers where I can, and in various languages. I understand this as part of the process of being accountable to the study participants, creating opportunities for feedback, and developing my sensitivity to anti-oppressive practice in the work. I encourage other researchers to consider these tactics in relation to their own work.

**Institutions and policy-makers**

Throughout the research project I have wanted to use the resources of the university and the study's supporting institutions responsibly and dynamically. Outside of the institution I feel confident in the value of my work, yet I have come to relate to the study's sponsors as metaphorical parents and find myself childishly wanting to make them happy with and proud of me. This is coupled with a nagging fear that I have not produced the work correctly enough for the institutions that have invested in me, a feeling that has been instigated, for example, in a persistent doubt voiced in the institution that my research lacks sociological substance. Once again, Beverley Skeggs' investigation into working class women's beliefs that they lack respectability or authority in education is pertinent to the study (Skeggs 1997).

Clearly my research does have sociological substance regardless of whether or not it fits the particular institutional preference for such a work. I make contributions to methodology, theory, sociologies of the body, of health and illness, of social movements and of emotion. I add to queer, feminist and poststructural epistemologies, and to postcolonial theory. But throughout the study the question of my work's sociological validity has felt irrelevant to me. I locate the research within Fat Studies, which is interdisciplinary, and am orientated to objects who are more likely to find themselves within bodies of work primarily concerning queer, gendered and racialised identities rather than a broader sociology, if indeed they recognise themselves within.
academia at all. This sense of irrelevancy highlights the differences between my own interests for the research, and those of the supporting institution. Based on evidence provided by activists working in similar settings, I suspect that these tensions will preponderate in funded studies generated by activist-researchers (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence 2007).

Other institutions also materialise as objects to which I am emotionally orientated with this research. Obesity discourse does not acknowledge fat people as a constituency that is fully human, instead they are a pathological population, pitiable, a problem, an epidemic, a threat to social order (World Health Organization 2000, Satcher 2001, Crossley 2004, Spurlock 2004, Butland 2005, Government of Ireland 2005, NICE 2006, Yancey et al. 2006, Berlant 2007, Department of Health 2009, Mazzocchi et al. 2009, Department of Health 2011). In order to keep abreast of anti-obesity policy and discourse, I have subscribed to the public communications of organisations such as The International Association for the Study of Obesity/The International Obesity Task Force, and The National Obesity Forum. My affective response to this discourse as a series of institutional objects relating to the research typically ranges from a feeling of being traumatised, with its attendant post-traumatic stress, to incredulousness and disbelief, pain, disgust, numbness, hopelessness and rage, not to mention a certain amount of punk glee at being positioned as a threat. Thus, minimising it within the research project is a survival strategy I have used in order to produce the work and maintain my own safety. The original proposal offered by my supervisors located fat in public health discourse. I have expanded this sphere of interest to include fat people's agency, culture and community, because I did not want to confine fat to health, even within a HAES paradigm, or reduce fat health to what happens to fat people in the clinic. The agents of obesity discourse and public health promotion are unavoidable objects to whom I am orientated, they remain a part of the background to this critical ethnography, but I have shown that they are not necessarily a primary concern for fat activists. My study is not directed principally towards a sociology of policy, but I do not oppose policy change within a wider realm of social change, and I regard this project as a challenge to obesity policy-makers to consider, at the very least, the humanity of fat people.
Beyond the recognition of fat humanity, fat activism has the potential to transform obesity policy if institutions can learn to engage with the full complexity of fat embodiment, the agency of fat people, fat communities, cultures, and the richness of the movement. Strategies currently involve speculative and costly investment in disrupting energy balance, food taxation and marketing, coercive physical activity, genetic engineering, pharmacological and surgical interventions, sanctions against fat people, as well as public-private partnerships with the weight loss industry, whose own data are hardly transparent (Gaesser 2002, Campos 2004). But fat activists have already developed sustainable strategies for living well that cost little in terms of resources and risk, and are adaptable to different circumstances. What would obesity research and policy look like if this was fully addressed? The beneficial impact of appropriate and sensitive services on the well-being of humankind is beyond current imagination.

The swing to the Right in Europe, encroaching neoliberalism and on-going recession could make fat activism an attractive proposition to governments that are divesting themselves from expensive anti-obesity initiatives, or investing in 'Big Society' charitable and voluntary sectors as a means of developing health promotion. However, this would require that fat activists are organised into the type of organisations that are recognisable by institutions whereas, according to my data, fat activism generally takes place outside of organisations, and in ambiguous micro-moments. Invitations to act as consultants and participate in the life of the institution on the terms of those institutions are also double-edged. Diminishing systemic fatphobia requires systemic social change, this is likely to be beyond the scope of the organisation, or to contradict its interests. Queer feminist fat activism engenders social change across multiple frontiers, but this cannot be contained or maintained within the institutions of health promotion as they currently exist, and the preposterous or anti-social qualities from which fat activism benefits greatly is unlikely to be tolerated in such environments. Appropriation, distortion, and misuse of fat activism is a possibility, and the likelihood of egalitarian anti-oppressive collaboration between policy-making institutions with interests in obesity and fat activists remains doubtful at present. This is probable given the current vicious scapegoating of fat people in anti-obesity health promotion and media representation, which is unlikely to change soon (Friedman 2003, Rogge and Greenwald 2004, Rich 2011).
My mother and myself

I now come to the final emotional objects of this work. My mother, Rosemary Cooper, died a traumatic death of breast cancer in 1987, when she was 48 and I was 18. At the time of writing I am four years away from 48, experiencing raw grief for my father's death, wondering what it might feel like to reach her age and, hopefully, surpass it. This is happening in a context where the terror of fat, including my occasional terror, is closely tied to a terror of premature mortality. Fat activism, for me, involves the transformation of that paralysing terror into an engagement with life and living well, and an appreciation of embodiment.

As a nurse, my mother was an unquestioning consumer of weight loss, which she also imposed on me from a very young age. The affective qualities of the research have entailed imagining the conversations we might have had about fat feminism, how we might have been able to reassess what fat, weight loss, and our bodies meant to us alongside and our relationship as fat women. I think of my mum as a woman who was denied her potential, cancer halted it, but she was also diminished through her socialisation as a working class woman and was kept in her place throughout her life. Where my remaining family are almost entirely indifferent to me and my work, I can imagine my mum being very proud because she would see the potential in this research as a promise of education, of enlightenment, of progression. The mother object of my imagination and memory is more optimistic than I am at this stage, I end the work more cynically than I began it, and I might speak back to her about my ambivalence, learned over the last four years, concerning those promises.

My affective objects move backwards and forwards through time. When I orientate myself in relation to the thesis and my younger self, I see it as an exoneration, proof that I have been able to carve out a liveable life to some extent, and that my fatness did not turn out to be the tragedy I was led to believe. In the present there is tenderness towards the work, love for the unruly fat activists who have offered their accounts here, and appreciation for those study participants whose friendships have sustained me for many years. In relating to future iterations of myself, I acknowledge the strength of my activism and am grateful for having had the opportunity to develop this work, which I sincerely hope will be of use to those who need it. Having the space to think about fat
activism, and to participate in many activist projects over the research period, to develop and understand fat activism, has been a tremendous luxury. I know that I will continue this work in the future, and that this project reflects a major development in my approach to fat activism, but at the moment I do not know the form that this future work will take.

But these contributions do not pay the bills now the money has run out and I need to find a way of supporting myself. The thesis has also become a symbol of my market worth, an apprenticeship for a profession I am not sure I want and am unconvinced wants me. Rosalind Gill reminds me that it is not the ticket to intellectual freedom and financial security I assumed naïvely it would be at the beginning of the project (Gill 2010). I recognise my capacity to act but, like my mother, my potential as an independent activist-intellectual also remains truncated by sexism, classism, fatphobia, capitalism and, in my case, homophobia, abuse, and the daily work of being a carer. Producing this work has enabled me to see this very clearly, although I write often about agency, developing a deeper understanding of my own social positioning has been devastating. Regardless of what I have been able to offer here, I am facing an uncertain and difficult future as I come to the end.
Glossary

**BBW**

An acronym for Big Beautiful Woman, a term used to describe fat women in heterosexual sexual subcultures.

**Bear**

A gay sexual and social subculture focused on the convergence of masculinity and the body, including those bodies that are fat and/or hairy.

**Body-policing**

The surveillance and moral judgement of people's bodies against standards of normativity and acceptability.

**DIY**

Do It Yourself, independent, cultural production. DIY has a strong relationship with punk and includes forms such as zines, alternative distribution networks, and performance subcultures.

**Energy Balance**

The dominant rationale for fat in obesity discourse. Energy balance refers to an equation where body weight is the result of a relationship between energy consumed, through eating food, and energy expended, through physical activity. Where more energy is consumed than expended, overweight and obesity results. This model does not take into account other influences which may also affect body weight, for example a history of weight cycling, socio-economic factors, and so on.

**Fat**
I consider fat a form of non-normative embodiment relating to the presence of adipose tissue. I resist using Body Mass Index to measure or categorise fat because I reject the medicalisation, moral stratification, and commercial exploitation of fat bodies that BMI engenders (Evans and Colls 2009). Similarly, I am unable to name a weight at which one becomes fat because this disregards the diversity of how people embody fatness, or are socially positioned as fat. Like all bodies, fat bodies are not static, they age, they get fatter and thinner over time, they may become increasingly or less disabled, they may be changed by disease, decoration, or the life course, and they are socially constructed. There is no universal measure or mark that constitutes what is and what is not fat; fat exists in context and experience; fat people know who they are, and are known as fat by others.

The use of the word 'fat' is controversial. The second edition of Shelley Bovey's popular study of discrimination and resistance amongst fat women, *Being Fat Is Not a Sin*, was renamed *The Forbidden Body*, and the initial title was relegated to secondary status (Bovey 1989, Bovey 1994). Bovey claimed that fat was too strident and alienating a concept, and in later works used 'big' as a substitute for fat (Bovey 2000). This linguistic trend, common in popular accounts of fat at that time, was itself denounced as a euphemism that further enshrined shame (Cooper 1998, Wann 1998). I prioritise fat over medicalised language (obese, overweight, bariatric), euphemisms (large, big, weight, curvy), terms of endearment (cuddly, big-boned), or other interpretations (of size) because I wish to acknowledge its dimensions as a descriptive word, a reclaimed word that contests shame, and a political word that expresses power and exposes the limitations of those other linguistic constructions.

*Fat activism, fat liberation, fat politics, fat pride, fat rights, the movement*

In this study I use these terms somewhat interchangeably to describe a social movement concerned with fatness that has many sites and interests. Other authors use 'fat acceptance' and 'size acceptance' to describe this social movement, however, I consider fat activism to be an endeavour that extends beyond self-acceptance.

*Fat Admirer*
Somebody, usually a normatively-sized man, who has a sexual preference or fetish for fat partners, usually women. Often abbreviated to FA.

*Fat fetish communities*

Sexual subcultures, generally heterosexual, where fat, mostly female fat, is fetishised by male 'admirers'. Feeders, a sub-group, are those who encourage partners to gain weight for sexual pleasure.

*Fat people*

Fat people experience themselves as fat and may or may not be party to experiences that position them socially as fat.

*Fat Studies*

Fat Studies refers to an interdisciplinary body of critical scholarship about fat (Rothblum and Solovay 2009, Tomrley and Kaloski Naylor 2009).

*Fatosphere*

A loose network of bloggers and users of online social media who address fat activism in their work.

*Fatphobia, fat hatred*

The systemic denigration of fatness and fat people is transmitted through blatant signals, such as overt discrimination and stigma, as well as micro-inequities, such as small comments or assumptions. Paradigms which classify fatness as pathology in need of intervention and cure can also be considered fatphobic because they draw upon hegemonic structural power which reproduces stigma and hatred, despite claims of helpfulness (Pauly Morgan 2011).

*Fatshion*
Fatshion was coined in 2004 by Amanda Piasecki, who began a blog to explore the relationships between fat, fashion and politics (Piasecki 2004). Latterly fatshion has become a generic term for plus size fashion.

*Genderqueer*

An umbrella term for non-assimilationist, non-binary (i.e. man and woman, male and female) gender identities.

*Health At Every Size (HAES)*

HAES is a health paradigm that does not advocate remedial weight management. HAES practitioners Jon Robison and Linda Bacon outline three clear tenets: self-acceptance, joyful movement and intuitive eating (Robison 2005, Robison et al. 2007, Bacon 2008). Sometimes social justice or fat activism is included within the model. In practice HAES is interpreted in multiple, and apparently contradictory ways by health professionals working within traditional weight management models (Marchessault et al. 2007).

*International No Diet Day (INDD)*

Established in London in 1992 by Mary Evans Young, an anti-diet campaigner and entrepreneur, INDD was promoted as a day where people stop dieting.

*Mansplain*

A slang portmanteau of 'man' and 'explain' describing a patronising and long-winded style of speaking in which men assume women's ignorance.

*Superfat, supersize*

A fat community word used to describe the fattest fat people. Superfat people are the most visible fat people, and face high levels of discrimination and stigma. They are often excluded from some of the realms of fat activist experience because they do not
conform to healthist constructions of 'the good fat activist'; they may be disabled and excluded from inaccessible fat activist spaces; and they may be prevented from participating in some fat activism, particularly fatshion, where size ranges do not accommodate them.

Zine

A small scale, sometimes homemade, independent publication.
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