WHAT WE DON'T TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT FAT

Aubrey Gordon
Boston: Beacon Press, 2020

REVIEWED BY LAKAY CORNELL

Activism and organizing generally live in two camps. On the one hand, we have acceptance and tolerance movements, which focus on individual actions and responsibilities and work to move our current system along the moral arc of the universe. On the other hand, oftentimes operating in conjunction with, but outside of those movements, are the movements of liberation and justice. Liberation and justice movements realize that we are only humxns living within a system that was built to oppress us, and that to see change, we must create new systems.

The events of the past few years have led me to believe that we are finally on par for the type of reckoning a movement based in justice requires—and one that finally realizes the vision of Audre Lorde, where we can all flourish.[1]

Aubrey Gordon's book, *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat*, is here to start that reckoning for fat people. Going, in some ways, back to the original goals of radical fat activists from the 1960s, who were focused on capitalism and the diet industries' profit from anti-fat bias, Gordon centers her work in a new field of fat justice as opposed to fat acceptance, body positivity, or any of the other monikers we might be familiar with.

When defining fat justice, she says, "I yearn for more than neutrality, acceptance, or tolerance, all of which strikes me as pleas to simply stop hurting us, rather than asking for help in healing the harms, or requesting that each of us unearth and examine our existing biases against fat people" (6–7).

The universality of this statement is what will distinguish Gordon's work from much (if not most) of the discourse that exists in popular nonfiction media around fat people and anti-fat bias. One could easily replace "against fat people" with "against queer people," "against poor people," "against Black people," "against immigrant people," and so on. The fact that we, the many marginalized peoples, are yearning for this is what both makes our current climate poised for greater change than we have previously seen and Gordon's work so timely and necessary.

In my own writing, I use the terms sexual justice, gender justice, climate justice, and racial justice. One of the brands I profiled last year asked me to replace climate justice with climate solutions, fearing that justice was too scary a term and would fall on deaf ears. I explained to him why I would not change the phrase in words almost identical to those Gordon uses in the final pages of the book. When summing up the need for body justice, as opposed to previously used terms like body acceptance or body positivity, she says, "the movement for body justice understands that each system of oppression needs to be understood on its own terms, and as part of an interdependent web of oppressions that impacts all of us" (156).

In the case of the climate, contrary to the founder's concerns of a doom and gloom narrative, using the word justice signals that we have to talk about power and privilege and that climate destruction is intricately connected to other systems of oppression, such as racism, misogyny, homophobia, and capitalism. In contrast, more commonly used words like solutions call for individuals to change their behaviour. Focusing on individual behaviour over systemic change creates a conversation that pits the need to be tolerated and the need to tolerate in opposing corners, regardless of the oppression and atrocities we are working to overcome.

Gordon highlights this throughout the book, but never more beautifully than when she says, "Every road leads back to the penance I must do for the body I have always had" (29). Where anti-fat bias tells fat people that they are responsible for changing their body, fat acceptance tells straight-size people that they are responsible for changing their perceptions. As with most other planes we have reached in social justice movements, this keeps us fighting with each other, or at the very least, feeling disconnected from each other, and capitalism and patriarchy churning along, being fed by those disconnections and discords.

The book's organization, unfortunately, leaves much to be desired. I often wondered who the intended audience was and found myself lost in statistics I had read in previous chapters or that felt outside the scope of the thesis. I also kept wondering why, if the call to action is to create systemic change, there is so much focus on the individual—Gordon's personal stories in particular, which often focus on the individuals she interacts with in her life. This is a struggle many of us have when doing this work: how do we use personal stories (ours and others') to evoke empathy and create a narrative that

calls for change while taking the focus off individual behaviour and putting it squarely on the cultural systems that create those stories?

With much of this information being new to many readers, the least we can hope for is that this book will become an important first step into the entire existence of and need for a fat justice movement. At the next level, we can hope that the data and statistics Gordon uses so freely finally offer the needed proof that our institutional and individual beliefs about obesity and health are one hundred percent incorrect.

And still, there is a deeper narrative here. It is less overt, and the greatest hope of impact we have, from this book, is that it does not get lost. This narrative positions anti-fat bias as a volatility in the eruption of the moral panic that created the obesity epidemic. Like all moral panics, the narratives around the obesity epidemic are one hundred percent based on imagined threats, center around a moral consensus that fat people are to blame and that something must be done, and disproportionately harm a not-small particular subset of our population.

If the reader sees this narrative, it will be easy to believe in the visions of a better world, and the first steps to achieve it that Gordon lays out in the final chapter. For these readers, answering her call to action, the last line—"So let's get to work"—will be a given.

Endnotes

[1] From her "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" speech, delivered at the Second Sex Conference, 1979.

[2] From her "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" speech, delivered at the Second Sex Conference, 1979.

BEING FAT: WOMEN, WEIGHT AND FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN CANADA

Jenny Ellison
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020

REVIEWED BY ANGELA STANLEY

This book is an excellent historical review of fat activism in Canada. Once you familiarize yourself with the many acronyms used, the book is an easy and informative read. Jenny Ellison discusses tensions within the fat activism movement, from its origins to the growth of the fat acceptance branch of the movement. She then goes on to discuss the movement's impacts on and responses to health, healthcare, femininity, sexuality, and sexual expression. The book also looks at exercising and purchasing clothing, taking these seemingly simple acts and filtering them through a fat activism lens.

Ellison introduces the book with an overview of fat activism and locates it within feminist ideals about body liberation, human rights, and femininity. She is explicit in stating that this book only examines the time period of 1977–1997. She acknowledges the movement in later years, but her analysis focuses on the early decades of activism. This serves to ground the reader in the historical moment under discussion.

It is particularly interesting to this reader that even as the book offers an important and critical historical analysis of fat activism, Ellison's work was criticized for not being rigorous enough due to the time period covered. But the author contends that 1980s fat activism coincided with second wave feminist activism in Canada, a time when fatness was largely overlooked as it was deemed to be an individual failing and not a social justice or human rights issue. This thread of dismissal runs through each chapter as the author shows repeatedly that fat bodies have always been marginalized in healthcare, fashion, and other facets of life, and even in feminist organizing, despite the majority of fat activists being female.

The term fat oppression, defined as a form of stigmatization, marginalization, and discrimination experienced by individuals in their everyday lives, is used by the author as the foundation to traverse this twenty-year time period. The author questions the overwhelming whiteness, the absence of men, and the middle-class nature of this activism. Because she uses interviews with key activists throughout the book, she is also able to reflect this narrow focus in her questions to them; what emerges are not pat answers about historical context, but instead an awareness of exclusion that the reader is also invited to sit with and reflect on.

Chapters One and Two highlight important milestones in fat activism. Weight was not seen as an important part of feminist action in the early years, as discussions about femininity and sexualization did not address size and sizeism. The four approaches to weight as outlined by fat activists—"fat oppression," "weight obsession," "weight preoccupation," and "performativity"—not only permeate the rest of the chapters but also show the shifts in feminist activism, its impact on fat activism and the subsequent shift to fat acceptance. However, Ellison notes that regardless of what approach was being used, axes of oppression, gender, and body size were at the heart of the movement.

Of particular note is the author's discussion of fat exclusion in lesbian spaces. The links between fatphobia and dating are taken up more explicitly in Chapter Three. This chapter discusses the complications of fat