

“I Needed to See the Politic Being Lived”: Virgie Tovar on Fat Activism and Digital Platforms

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Virgie Tovar is an author and activist who speaks and writes on the topics of fat discrimination and its intersection with gender, race, and sexuality. She is the editor of the anthology *Hot & Heavy: Fierce Fat Girls on Life, Love & Fashion* (Seal Press, 2012), the organizer of Babecamp, and publishes extensively with online forums, including *Ravishly*, *BuzzFeed*, the *New York Times*, and *Cosmopolitan*.
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Could you start off by explaining to the reader what you do? How would you define your work?

I primarily identify as a public intellectual working around issues of fat politics and fat liberation. I'm a fat activist, but my primary contribution to the movement is theoretically unpacking fatphobia. I use the academic training that I have in order to deconstruct and intersectionally approach issues like fatphobia and fat-shaming. Surprisingly, I've ended up professionalizing my activism, and now I lecture at universities, as well as teach a four-week online class that offers a crash course in fat positive feminism [Babecamp].

And what led you to this surprising career path?

I grew up a fat kid, I come from a fat family, and there was pretty much no way I wasn't going to be fat, with the exception of really extreme intervention of some kind. That means, in this modern age, that I grew up being taught to feel ashamed of my body and to feel a sense of worthlessness. I deeply internalized that education that I think a lot of fat women, and even not so fat women, receive, and for years and years I played out that internalization through self harm, through extreme dieting and exercise.

Through a series of happy coincidences, I ended up getting taken off that path. One of the very first interventions in my education in fatphobia was actually dating men. It wasn't a particularly radical act, to date straight dudes, but they were able to disrupt this narrative that I'd been taught: that I was completely undesirable, that no one would ever want to date me or sleep with me. Then I was introduced to feminism at university, and ultimately went to grad school, where I researched fat women. That became the final intervention, when I was introduced through the research to a community of fat activists—fat-positive queer people in the Bay area. Being introduced to that community became the coup-de-grâce; I needed to see the politic being lived, and that was what this group of activists gave to me.

I wouldn't have come to the research without these really personal, touchstone moments, but through the research I was able to meet all of these people. And it became really clear that I wanted to write a book about them that introduced them to the world. Before I went to grad school, I had pitched a single-authored manifesto called *Fatties of the World, Unite*. At the time—this was 2008 or 2009—there was no market for that kind of work at all. You know, there had not been an anthology published on the topic since *Shadow on a Tightrope* [a 1995 collection of essays edited by Lisa Schoenfelder and Barb Wieser]. Even though the editor really liked the work, really liked my voice, the marketing team ultimately decided that it was not ready for the market—or the market was not ready for it.

As I was completing my Master's degree, I started to hear and see the rumblings of fat activism, and I was like "oh my god, this thing is about to explode." And so I reached out to the editor again and said 'hey, this thing is about to blow up; I don't know if you're seeing what I'm seeing, but y'all need to get on this train now if you want to publish this book, because it's a ground-breaking book and the world needs to meet these women who are doing this fucking incredible work.' The idea of the anthology had really emerged alongside some of my own maturity around writing. The problem with a single authored work is that it's so easy for somebody to read it and think 'this person is special, this person just has some strange thing about her that makes her able to stop dieting forever, but I can't. I felt that, with the anthology, you can have thirty people who are telling you a story. Thirty people is a lot of people! That makes the work they're doing feel more tenable, when there's a lot of people talking about it. So anyway, the anthology emerged [*Hot & Heavy: Fierce Fat Girls on Life, Love & Fashion* (2012)], and even before the book was published, I was getting invited to speak at universities on the topic. It was through the anthology that my work became organically professionalized.

You stepped into the public as somebody who could talk about this thing that people wanted to talk about.

And who could talk about it in an intersectional and a "non-intimidating" way, that wasn't academic in nature. That's why I'm so bad at being an academic. I have the training, but the aesthetic is so deeply repugnant to most people, including myself.

Inside and outside the academy, it seems like we all hate it!

Yes. And I was always unwilling to do the work of showing that every single thought I have has a genealogy that begins with white masculinity. I refuse to do that. And there's just no way to succeed in the academy if you're not willing to do that. So I decided we're not compatible.

So let's talk intersectionality. The keywords of this special issue are feminism, publics, and the digital. Let's start with feminism. I wanted to begin by asking if you define your work as feminist, but you already have. So now I'm wondering if you could define the feminism of your praxis. What does feminism mean to you?

That's such a good question, gosh. I actually see feminism as almost an aesthetic more so than an ideology, if that makes any sense. Of course, I'm certainly familiar with traditional definitions of feminism, but when we talk about things like closing the wage gap, we leave out some very important parts of the conversation. There's kind of a silent understanding that we just need to make edits to the system as it exists now, that it's largely a good system. And I don't know that I'm willing to concede that. I was recently asked to do a talk at a historically all-dude college, and the students there were talking about the limitations of the feminism they saw on campus. They were like, 'we only ever talk about the wage gap,' and I was like, 'yeah, I guess the problem with that is it completely obscures the fact that capitalism and misogyny are BFF's!' You cannot interrogate gender inequality without looking at all these systems upon which those inequalities pivot. I think of feminism as an aesthetic because there are types of feminism that are emerging now, that will emerge, that cannot be encapsulated by a definition. And that's what's exciting to me about it.

I think that my feminism manifests in my work in myriad ways. Let's work this from top to bottom. To begin, I have taken my academic training and refused to accept the privilege of being entrenched in the academy. I'm sharing this information and making it accessible to the public on the Internet. I think of that as feminism. The Internet, which at one point in its inception was about nerds and people at the periphery getting together and mobilizing, has become a commoditizable space.

But I still think that even the use of cyber feminism, the use of the Internet as a tool to convey ideas and to demand justice, is a feminist act.

I also think about things like my outfits as feminism. I think of fashion as a deeply feminist battleground. Even something like my nails—my choice of how long to keep them, what colour. What am I conveying with my fashion? Who am I speaking to when I'm wearing certain outfits? To me, that's feminism.

And then, politically, the work itself is ultimately about feminism, it's ultimately about women's liberation, because fat is a women's issue. Yes, absolutely, all genders experience fatphobia, but we're really talking about the second-class citizenship of femininity. Discussing this work in the way that I do is so deeply tied to the liberation of women. Almost all my professional work is with women; specifically, a lot of my work is in conversation with women of colour and queers because my work comes from a queer tradition. I'm a straight lady who was like, hey guess what, queers know everything. Queers are creating some of the best theory in the world, and so let's listen to them. I'm a social justice oriented person, but if I weren't, I think that just based on an objective assessment I would come to the same conclusion: that queer people and people of colour are creating some of the best theory in existence. So I think that conversing with that work, insisting on centring that work, is also deeply feminist.

Those are a lot of things.

And that's wonderful, because feminism is messy like that. But I love your definition of feminism as an aesthetic. I'd like to return to that point when we speak later about Instagram. But first, I want to ask you about your self-identification as a public intellectual. I'm interested in hearing more about how you define your public. When we speak publicly, we generally have an addressee, or an audience, in mind. We know who we *think* we're talking to—and who we think we're *not* talking to, right? You've already framed your public as being non-academic (which immediately means a much larger public). So how else would you define your public? Who are you talking to?

I'm talking to women. You know, this is a bit personal, but I grew up in a dysfunctional home, where I was the hero child, the golden child, and it was my job to save everyone. And I feel like I bring in this deep

sense of needing to protect people into my work. I was also raised by Mexican immigrants who I watched getting humiliated every day; I watched them and I felt it, even before I understood the language of what was happening. So in a lot of ways the people who I'm talking to are the people like me; I'm talking to women, I'm talking to people of colour, I'm talking to fat people. I'm trying to encourage the people who feel they have to apologize.

One of my own critiques of my work is that sometimes the people I want to be speaking to don't actually need to hear what I have to say. They may not be benefiting from it in the same way that people who are less well versed in all of these issues might. In my mind, I'm speaking to the group of people who are the victims of the things that I'm talking about, like sexism and racism and fatphobia and xenophobia. I understand that other people see my work, but I'm not necessarily talking to them. You can sit at the table, you can listen, but you're not my primary audience, I'm not as invested in discussion with you. Last night, for example, I gave a lecture [as part of the Berkeley Public Library's 2016 Fat Positive Summer Festival] to a room full of women and queer people and people of colour. In those moments, when the room is exactly what you want the room to look like, I think, I did something right in advertising this. I don't know what I did that was special, but this is exactly the room that I wanted.

It's like your community has heard you.

Yeah! Totally! There are so many cultural forces that seek to gaslight marginalized people into believing that we're overstating things or that we're being paranoid or that we're just not understanding reality as it actually exists. For me to be able to get up there and, I think quite articulately and succinctly, convey that there's evidence to back up people's experiences – that means a lot to me. In that way, the work is deeply therapeutic for me and also, I hope, for others.

This is an aside, but have you by any chance listened to the most recent episode of *This American Life*? [589: Tell Me I'm Fat]

Yeah, I just wrote an article about the whole thing! [<http://www.ravishly.com/2016/06/23/take-cake-american-life-really-bad-talking-about-fat>]

Did you? I found it really moving, and I'm trying to figure out how to send it to my parents because I think it will help them to understand me better. But what struck me was the lack of space that they gave to gaslighting. It seemed to be justifying of the experiences of living in a fat body, to be saying, 'you're not imagining it, it is happening.'

Well, I'm biased against the episode because I feel like *This American Life* has wasted a lot of my time. I literally got an email from Sarai Walker [author of *Dietland*] just a few minutes ago, and she was like 'they wasted my time too!' They just keep pre-interviewing a few people. And for me, those are billable hours. You got two interviews, NPR, you're never getting another one for free. But I think my issue—and this is what I say in the article—is that I was troubled by the position of Elna Baker's story as the central narrative. Of course, I understand that it's NPR and the personal story was always going to be the central narrative. But they end up repeating this framework that I find deeply sexist in which the marginalized person—the woman—is the one on trial; they're the one whose privacy is always presumed as non-existent. The result—and this is a big problem I have with NPR in general—is this kind of white male voyeurism, this idea that there's an invisible listener who's not actually being indicted even though it's their complicity that's primarily responsible for the suffering being described. My boyfriend is an NPR-listener, and I often ask him: what is it about this violence and poverty porn that you enjoy so much? Because there's no call to action. It's just you, listening to marginalized people talk about their lives so you can discuss it over dinner. This is sociopathic to me!

And of course then you feel good about yourself for listening. It's the catharsis of the middlebrow reading experience.

Yeah! So to expect, or even encourage, this woman who I think is a producer of the show [Baker], in the name of truth or in the name of justice, to humiliate herself—that's horrifying to me. I know about political strategy, how people will choose these really moving narratives of victimization because they're affecting, but NPR doesn't intend to act on this in any way! It's not like there's going to be legislation now, or a demand for human rights! That's not what's happening!

The listeners just get to move on. I keep thinking of a Roxane Gay quote: "the only thing women are allowed to be experts on is themselves." Women's voices are framed as only ever speaking autobiographically. And yet! NPR produces texts that I can send to my middle-class white parents!

Yes!

Alright, sorry, we got off script. But this topic of gaslighting brings me to my next question. The Internet is both an amazing space that allows us to do things we wouldn't be able to do otherwise, and a garbage pile. Let's start with the garbage. I'm interested in hearing you speak about the kinds of resistance that you might have encountered to your activism, specifically in online spaces.

In general, I would say I don't have to deal with a lot of it online. I do have a dedicated Reddit hate-page, which I never really thought I'd have! I have a theory that being a woman of colour, a cyberfeminist of colour, is actually a protective factor. I find that most of the people who are extremely awful online are actually white men, and there's kind of this idea that women of colour don't matter. The culture already understands women of colour as always already marginal and disinteresting and dehumanized. White men are particularly invested in policing and engaging with white femininity. So honestly, I was shocked that I got on the Reddit radar, because I assumed I was like a proto-human, even lower than a white woman to them.

As an analytical person who always brings a scholarly lens to things, I find the mechanism they're activating on Reddit really interesting. They got really mad at me for a blog post I wrote about deciding to block an old friend of mine. I'd met him when I was living in New York when I was very young, like 22, and it was clear that we were interested in each other, but also that he was holding back. And then, a decade later, he ended up with this thin, white, upper middle-class woman who does marathons and has made him thinner and all these kinds of things. And I thought: I've sensed you since I was 22 and now I get to see you! So I wrote about the decision to bet on my intuition about what the fuck happened instead of betting on the possibility that this was a nice guy and I was interpreting it incorrectly; I decided to act on my intuition rather than gaslighting myself. So I wrote about the decision to block

this guy for what I called stealth bigotry. And that was what broke the camel's back for Reddit.

The mechanism they used to attack me wasn't based on my looks; they actually attacked me based on my interpretation of reality. They tried to collectively gaslight me. It wasn't comments about whether or not they found me attractive, whether or not they felt like they could fuck me, or whatever the typical male method of policing women is, which when you're a fat woman is usually about you being ugly or disgusting. This was more sophisticated. It was literally the desire to undermine my interpretation of facts; they used words like 'delusional.' My moniker on Reddit is 'The Queen of Delusion.' From a linguistic standpoint, I found that super interesting, to be honest. But of course Reddit is a space that's for bratty white boys with privilege, so I don't think it's any coincidence that they activate this particular kind of sexist tactic. It's a tactic that men of influence, white men of influence, have often used. The psychological has long been the battleground that white masculinity has fought against the feminine.

It's reminiscent of accusations of hysteria.

Yes, exactly. So, that's one example of the garbage online. In general, I haven't dealt with a whole lot of stuff. In part, that's just because my platform isn't as big as other people's. I think that, if I was dealing with a volume of 100,000 people versus my 10,000, that would be different. And also, as I mentioned, I think being a woman of colour on some level grants me this kind of stealth status because white dudes aren't as invested in policing women of colour's femininity, I think. Anyway, I've deeply internalized the idea, at this point in my life, that other people's bigotry is their problem.

For example, recently Fox News did a story on me in which they claimed that I'd said something that I didn't in fact say. I was doing a telecommuted lecture with another person for a university—she had a medical background, and was an academic, and was like a white, thin, straight woman. And Fox News said that I talked about thin privilege. I actually didn't even use the phrase 'thin privilege,' it was the other woman who did, and they didn't even mention her. I'm not that invested in discussing thin privilege. I don't discuss thin people in my work, it's not of interest to me. But I think for her, as a thin person, she was able to discuss this in a way that was very personal to her. So they used her words

and said that I said them, and this created this incredible deluge of intense misogyny and hatred on Twitter. It was fascinating because I was just like, whoa, you look really foolish, sirs! That was my reaction—all I can do is sit back and be amused and horrified. I don't need to substantiate or deny anything you have to say because you're clearly a sociopath, and I don't have to do the labour of exposing you as one because you've already done it.

I feel like that's generally my attitude: just sit back and watch the crazy theatre, because there's nothing else to be done. What's hard is that a lot of fat activists, a lot of fat people are encouraged to deeply internalize the idea that we're inferior, and we behave sometimes out of that sense of inferiority rather than just being like 'you're a bigot, and that's your problem, and I'm sorry that you exist, I'm sorry that you're a bigot.' You know, there's nothing to be done about it.

The last thing I'm going to say is that, because I'm on more 'feminine' platforms—Instagram is probably my favourite platform—and these men are such misogynists, they wouldn't dare post anything because it would threaten their sexuality or something. They wouldn't post something on Instagram because it's a feminized platform. I actually don't like Twitter because I have to be terse, and that's totally not a feminine thing! I am a highly superlatively ridiculously feminine person, so I have no interest in a platform that seeks to limit my ability to speak to 140 characters. I see Twitter as a coded masculine space. I know a lot of feminists are on Twitter, and I'm not trying to belittle their work. But for me, I interpret the medium or the platform as very masculine, and the idea that you have to convey thoughts in a short, quippy way is a very masculine thing to me. It smacks of utility and all that fucking masculinist bullshit that I don't care for. And the fact that I don't like Twitter is a protective factor because these men are such homophobes, they're unwilling to actually come to me, in my house.

So tell me more about the platforms that you *do* like to engage on. What platforms do you use a lot?

I use Instagram and Facebook almost exclusively, but I'm starting to feel a little bit out of fashion! Like everybody is on Snapchat now, but I'm kind of slow to change platforms.

And what has drawn you to those platforms?

Well, Instagram is visual, and I love to tell stories with photographs. I'm very image driven. It's also a platform that, perhaps because it's visually driven and not verbally driven, has become less of a forum for opposing opinions. I feel like I can more easily find the community that I'm interested in creating and watching. Facebook, on the other hand, I treat like a microblogging platform. Most of the time at this point, I can't afford to microblog because in general I have so many writing deadlines that, if I have an idea, I need to turn it into a 500-word essay. But I like that I can have this not-all-the-way half-baked analysis, or instead of having an argument driven or nuanced discussion, I can just vent in all caps. For example, I was just venting about the Brock Turner case in all caps. Especially considering the specificity of the work I do, and what people have come to expect of me writing-wise, I'm not gonna write a piece on Brock Turner, because I'm not in the best position to do it. There are plenty of other feminists who should be writing about it and who could do it better than I do. And yet, I would like to discuss it, I would like to discuss how it endangers me, and the specific ways in which it does so. So Facebook has become a platform where I can experiment with ideas that have not been fully developed; I use it as a sounding board in general. If I need advice, I go to Facebook and I ask people what they think I should do. It's also great as a dissemination tool. I would say like almost every person who's taken Babecamp found out about it through Facebook.

I find your comments on Instagram really intriguing, because I've noticed something similar about it. There seems to be a greater possibility for creating communities on there. Even though, logically, it should work in a way very similar to Twitter, it really doesn't. I would like to talk a little bit about your interest in visual platforms. When we look at the history of the Internet, we see that it wasn't always a visual medium, and it wasn't inevitable that it turned out to be so driven by images. I'm wondering if that aspect of the way that the Internet looks in 2016 might account, in part, for the acceleration of body positive activism online. Is there a link between the visual and this particular kind of activism? How has Instagram as a platform been connected to the rise of a more mainstream fat activism?

This goes back to something I mentioned at the beginning of this interview. For me, the coup-de-grâce of getting involved in fat activism was meeting people who were doing the thing I was interested in doing that had only been theoretical before that point. It's the embodiment element, it's the witnessing element. When someone has a body that is like yours, or close enough to yours, and you see it doing things that you've been told you cannot do, that bodies like that *do not do*, it becomes part of a body of evidence. The embodiment itself is so important: seeing people in amazing outfits, seeing how people use jewellery or use makeup, those kinds of things, are extremely important. As somebody who has watched this newest, Internet-focused iteration of fat politics emerge from nearly the inception to now—and again, fat politics isn't new at all—what's so neat is that, when it first started, there were a lot of women who didn't know any single human being, as a friend or in their community, who did that kind of activism. But when we go to the Internet and we see women, they become part of our community. I can be emboldened through their behaviour because I know that somebody else is doing it, and if I forget that, I can go back to the Internet and look, and see, and remind myself. That lone person who didn't know a single other fat girl who wore short shorts or whatever, I think that that is changing. I think that a lot of it is because people can look to somebody else and get inspiration. And to return to the feminism conversation, I think it's this deep act of intimacy between women, often, or between feminine people, that you can get inspiration from what they're doing or wearing, and make meaning for yourself.

There has also been some critique levelled against the fat activist communities on Instagram. Of course, there have been critiques from outside the community that I'm not interested in, but there have been critiques from within the community, particularly from queer women and people of colour, saying that the form that body positivity takes on Instagram is overly focused on consumerism and normative gender presentations. Many fat celebrities, as public figures, still play into a lot of traditional notions of gender performance. Do you agree that that is a face that body positivity has taken on Instagram? Or do you take issue with that critique?

I see the validity of the critique. I have problems with the consumerism argument because I don't think that consumerism and the deployment of fashion as a political tool are the same thing. Certainly, queers of colour know this. Queers of colour know that fashion has long been deployed as a political tool, especially within queer communities. In some ways, though not exclusively, queers are one of the communities that have most proactively and through necessity created codes and gestures through fashion.

I'm actually about to write about this for a journal, so this is like the preview of it: I did a very small content analysis looking at fat dyke literature in the late 1980s and the 90s and comparing it to some of the representation of largely straight white cisgender women in the fat movement now, and fascinatingly enough, these women are deploying the some kinds of aesthetics as fat dykes from the 80s and 90s. They're deploying this unapologetic use of food as a way of conveying anti-assimilation, the insistence upon sex positivity, an open sexuality, and the use of clothing—short clothing, loud clothing—except that they've de-queered it. It's funny to me, but when I look at some of the visible fat straight white women online, I see a look that is wholesale coopted from queer high femininity, and I think that a lot of people are doing it without any understanding of the political lineage of the look. This is all part of the history of straight people misinterpreting queer gestures. We know the history of that, that's a thing. And I don't think that it's done with malice; it's done with complete ignorance of the gesture.

But I thought you were gonna ask me about the homogeneity of the size of the people who have become the face of the fat movement. I have some things to say about that: it's fucked up, and it's cyclical.

Yes, it's like the body positive movement has sort of expanded acceptable bodies by one or two steps only; you can be fat, but you can be *this* fat and no fatter. It reminds me of what you were saying earlier on about the wage gap, as in, if we continue with the system of 'some bodies are okay and some bodies are not' and just slightly expand the circle of what bodies are okay, we haven't actually done anything to the system.

Right! And I think that's what's so hard—there's almost a depoliticization of fat politics that's happening. When something that had been deeply political becomes

unseated from that politic, becomes something you can take on or take off like a garment, that's when things become really scary. What I've noticed getting a lot of traction specifically within fat visibility is a focus on beauty. For example, I was tracking different hashtags and I was fascinated to find that #effyourbeautystandards has over a million tags on Instagram. It's interesting to linguistically break down the phrase "eff your beauty standards," like the choice of the infantilized "eff" rather than "fuck," which is kind of this weird nod to respectability, and then "your"—it's talking to somebody outside the movement, I guess. And then this invocation of beauty. If you're trying to get justice and your vehicle is beauty, then that's not going to work out for you.

On the one hand, I'm *not* surprised that the beauty thing is happening. On the other hand, I sort of see this as part of an ideological progression. I think there are some people who will always be obsessed with the beauty thing, and they're not going to move past that. And they're always going to be the ones who get the most traction, because they're activating a tenet of our current society that's very powerful. But the people who really resonate with that beauty message for a few years might become the people who ultimately identify more as open feminists later on.

I just wanted to tease open, at least to some degree, the fact that even within the community of body positivity on a platform like Instagram, there are still forms of conflict and resistance. There are politicized debates within the community about what it means to be fat positive or what it means to be fat or what it means to fuck with beauty standards. So, my last question is: is there anything that you think is pertinent to this topic that I haven't brought up?

One of the things that I found really cool, when I really looked at what fat activism was doing online: from the most assimilationist gestures to the most radical, they all had one thing in common, which is that they demanded the fat body is permanent. And I found that really surprising! I was kind of amazed. It's arguable that they're saying that but they're conveying a different thing visually. I could buy into that argument or be convinced. But largely, it's a big deal that all the way from the top to the bottom, they're all saying that fatness is a thing that's not going away. That's a thing that just kind of struck me. I think we've hit a pivotal tipping

point in fat politics now; where there had been maybe a few traceable ideologies I think there's going to become even more and I'm a little excited and a little scared to see what's next.

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