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Queer, fat, and OUTdoors

LEIGH POTVIN & BLAIR NIBLETT

The author team for this paper, Leigh and Blair, are friends, colleagues, and collaborators. Our story begins in graduate school where we met as potential roommates. The roommate-ship never transpired, but we became fast friends, sharing stories of graduate school, life, work, and partnerships. We share a mutual love of big ideas, critical scholarship, nachos, and cross-country skiing (not necessarily in that order). Leigh (she/her) is a fat, queer, cis, white university professor in Canada. She grew up in Thunder Bay, Ontario, a small city on the north shore of Lake Superior, on the Traditional Territory of Anishinaabe of Fort William First Nation, signatories to the Robinson Superior Treaty of 1850. Thunder Bay is considered a northern city in Canada, situated 700km east of Winnipeg, Manitoba, and 550km north of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Blair (he/him) is a queer, cis, white, male, and fat university-based educator and researcher. He lives and works in “dish with one spoon” territory between cities now known as Toronto (Tkaronto) and Peterborough (Nogojwanong) in Ontario. The dish with one spoon is a wampum treaty developed between the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee nations, to which European colonists were later admitted as they settled in this territory. The settlers who were Blair’s ancestors have long been poor treaty partners, and he endeavors to live in ways that acknowledge these failures and aim at a more respectful treaty partnership for the present and future.

This narrative highlights our personal experiences of being in queer and fat bodies accessing (or trying to access) outdoor spaces. We present a brief overview of literature that lays the foundation and helps situate this work’s contribution to understanding the in/accessibility of outdoor recreation and parks. Our narratives present personal stories of mapping our (fat) bodies and our queerness relative to the outdoors and to the systems of power that govern the so-called wilderness and wild spaces we have encountered. We conclude with a series of recommendations for institutions, individuals, and groups who are interested in more queer and fat inclusion in parks and recreation spaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fatness: Moving from vilification to celebration

Fat studies is an intersectional paradigm emerging from post-modern feminism of the 1960s–1970s, critical disability scholarship, and queer theory. It also emerges from the work (and lived experiences) of African American and Black women, whose bodies have been vilified and commodified by white supremacist interests and the rise of capitalism via the Transatlantic slave trade.¹ Fat studies and the work of fat scholars and activists contend that life in a fat body is not one of failure, of moral inadequacy lacking willpower. Vilification of fat bodies stems from white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal interests. Feminists and fat activists situate fat bodies as capable, beautiful, worthy of celebration. This celebration is a form of embodied resistance against the hegemonic forces that seek to regulate and control bodies, especially queer, fat ones.

The Health at Every Size movement emerged in the early 2000s as a framework to celebrate movement for all bodies at any and all sizes.² Depicted as a weight-neutral way to understand health, bodies and movement, many fat-identified people found validation in the notion that a larger-sized body does not directly correlate to one’s health outcomes.

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Criticisms of this paradigm include those launched by disability scholars and fat scholars alike who emphasize that a person's worth and value should not be connected to their health. In other words, many people are not healthy for a variety of reasons, and this does not make them a better or more worthy person than folks who do not exhibit chronic illness and/or other health conditions.

Fat (queer) bodies outdoors

In a paper of the same title, the feminist Liz Newbery asked an important rhetorical question: "Will Any/Body carry that canoe?"³ In this work, Newbery explores her own feminist embodiment as a person who spends time outdoors. Using first-person narrative and her reflections on undertaking a solo portage on canoe trips, Newbery speaks to the ways in which one can move from shame

and blame into celebration of one's body in outdoor contexts. In the same way that the social constructs of capitalism, colonization, and patriarchy inform understanding of our bodies, so too do they inform understandings of the outdoors. The creation of the "outdoors" and/or the "wilderness" is rooted in colonization.⁴ Throughout North America, the creation of national, provincial, and/or state parks was intended to create spaces for the privileged to recreate away from "civilization." It is no wonder the experiences of thin, white men are centered in the narratives of parks and the outdoors⁵—they created it for themselves and in so doing displaced Indigenous people whose Land was often claimed for a national, colonial project; ironically, in the name of land stewardship by the Crown or state.

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Evans and Friedman⁶ consider the notion of being the voice for fat advocacy and activism—the fat person—in a professional or social milieu. Their work focuses on being this presence in academic spaces. Here, we extend that work into the professional arenas of parks and outdoor recreation leadership and management, and pose the question: What does it mean to be the fat (queer) person outdoors? How does being the fat (queer) person shape one's experiences with the myriad of social constructs that color the so-called "wild" or "natural" landscapes that so many of us recreate on? Conversely, or perhaps by comparison, what does it mean to be the fat person who avoids recreating, forgoing a relationship with their body, themselves, and the Land around them? Friedman suggests that she must don her "'academic spanx' in order to rearrange herself and her work, making it more palatable" within academic spheres.⁷ As fat (queer) folks in the outdoors, we often have to squeeze into mentally, emotionally, and physically tight spaces as a condition of participation and belonging. But, belonging in this way will always come at the cost of shrinking one's self, of making one's self smaller, and/or trying to force one's self into a space that isn't comfortable. We explore in the following narratives the ways in which we can re-envision ourselves on the Land and in the outdoors in a way that creates space and room for humans in all their forms to thrive in parks and recreational spaces.

NARRATIVE: LEIGH

There's an ongoing discussion amongst my friend group. Within this group, started by a friend of mine, participants discuss their nostalgia for the (original) Rad pant sold by Mountain Equipment Co-op (now Mountain Equipment Company, MEC). Most of the people in this group, including me, are former tree planters and, generally, folks who spend time outdoors. The creator of the group is on a mission to have the Rad pant stage a comeback, not in its current form, which, according to my friends, does not fit the same way, is not as comfortable, and has many design flaws compared to the original. I've followed this discussion for years—no exaggeration. This is an impassioned discussion of the perfect piece of gear lost. I appreciate the attention to fit detail provided by friends in the group and I empathize with the loss they feel. It sounds silly and maybe it started out that way, but to have the perfect garment for your activities that is

comfortable and useful sounds perfect. It sounds perfect to me. It's also something I have never experienced. So, I follow this discussion of the Rad pant with fascination and a bit of envy.

For context, I am white, small fat,⁸ queer, cisgender woman, an academic with a pear-shaped body. When I planted trees in the early 2000s, there were no outdoor apparel companies that made technical clothing or equipment that fit my body. Not one. At that time I was a street size 14. Most of my tree planting coworkers and friends owned the coveted Rad pants from MEC. Everyone hailed their superiority, they dried easily, had convenient pockets, tight ankles to keep the sticks and bugs out. They were, in fact, the perfect pant. And they were always out of reach for me. They never fit. And so, I opted to plant trees in thrifted “old man work pants.” I duct-taped the bottoms to keep the bugs and sticks out, and carried on. As an early twenty-something deeply embedded in diet culture and self-loathing around my body and weight, I looked forward to tree planting every year because I would lose weight. And for a few months, I would exist in the world in a smaller body that received less scrutiny and judgement. This vocation required that I work 12-hour days for two months straight at a job so physically intense that most live with repetitive strain injury. But, for those months and a couple after, my body conformed. Still, not enough to experience the Rad pant in all its glory. At this time, before the explosion of online retail, a person could buy what was available to them locally. There were no corners of the internet with size-inclusive clothing that one could have delivered to one's home. And I internalized this “not-fitting-in” as a person who dabbled in spending time outdoors, but not as someone who identified with this as my community and/or my space. There are many elements of the tree planting experience that are fraught because of capitalism, colonialism, and environmental degradation. However, in my case, it was a venue where I saw the way in which bodies like mine were excluded from the landscape—or attempts were made to do so—by virtue of what I could put on my body. If I couldn't get Rad pants, how could I ever hike the West Coast Trail, like my friends? How could I learn to rock climb if this body of mine was too big for a pair of pants? How on earth could my pear-shaped body fit into a kayak to explore lakes and rivers near my home? Nevertheless, I continued to access the outdoors, parks, and spaces in ways that I could feel comfortable in doing so. After all, it's just a pair of pants, right? I could make this work another way. And so I went along, figuring out the best gear that fit imperfectly, but didn't fully impede my body's movement. I cross-country skied, I ran, I biked, I hiked, I paddled. All while holding the hope that these activities would change my body (as I did with all other physical activities) so the garments that didn't fit well eventually would, and I would feel as comfortable as my thin-bodied friends. The problem was me; it wasn't the white, heterosexist, capitalist, cispatrilarchy. Now, I can reflect and see that my relationship to food and to my body at that time was disordered. Activity was meant to change one's body, food should help that along. A body that belonged in the outdoors was a thin one. Mine could interlope there, but it needed to change to be legitimate. To be truly “hard core” it had to be thin and hard.

And yet, spending time outdoors, on the Land, continued to be a place that filled me up, that made me feel like myself, that helped me connect to my friends, my family, and myself. All the things we folks who like to do these things say it does.

I became obsessed with gear, having the right stuff, looking the part. And when I undertook a significant intentional weight loss program around 2006, as my body got thinner, I could fit all the clothing I'd ever dreamed about. Away went my critical thinking and in came all the “weight loss success story” narratives. It was just about hard work—calories in and calories out—and then, I too could look the part, feel the part. A few years later, as my body returned to its fatter state this gear fell out of my reach again. It felt like a failure. Around the same time, I started

If I couldn't get Rad pants, how could I ever hike the West Coast Trail, like my friends? How could I learn to rock climb if this body of mine was too big for a pair of pants?

to learn about the fat liberation movement. It was a transformative time and it honestly felt a bit like cheating. I could “let myself off the hook” for being fat. Intellectually, I understood that if other forms of oppression were systemic, then it was very possible that weight stigma could also be. My emotional self with a history of food restriction and exercise for weight loss was suspicious. Didn’t this mean I was just “giving up”? Eventually I leaned into it and decided that if I started to put energy into something other than making my body smaller, I would probably be happier. The path toward body acceptance/celebration for me, it turns out, was also tied to my own (closeted) queerness. I don’t say closeted in a way that I was acutely aware of trying to hide. Rather, I was trying to hide my fat body in plain sight under a sometimes flamboyant fashion sense. It’s a paradox that many fat people experience, everyone can see we’re fat, but to accept it, state it, name it means that we feel like everyone will notice. Once I started to accept and identify as fat, I also began to develop the tools to see something else that was (it turns out) obvious to most people in my life: my queerness. My coming out story isn’t terribly compelling, if I’m being honest. Less of a “This is who I am and I’ve been hiding it my whole life” and more of a “Oh, well, that makes a lot of sense.” And so, my queer identity is both new and very old to me. As I step into my queerness (and understand it was always there), I see how it held hands with my fatness at times, causing me to feel discomfort in myself with a push to “play the part” of the good fatty and the good (queer) ally, as I once identified. What better way to play the part than with the perfect outfit? So now I can see how profoundly important (and not just consumptive or superficial) my pursuit of the perfect clothing, gear, and equipment was.

As I write this, in 2023, the landscape of outdoor clothing and gear is changing for fat and queer bodies. And yet, it lags. Very few brick and mortar retailers stock any extended sizes in clothing and most only offer entry level/beginner gear and equipment for fat bodies (e.g., stand up paddle boards, and climbing harnesses with weight limits of 250 pounds). Our local retailers are not entirely to blame for this systemic, supply chain issue. And also, the lack of robust availability of extended and/or plus-size gear sends a clear message. Thin (white, cis) bodies are the ones who belong here and belong “out there.”

NARRATIVE: BLAIR

I am a white, queer, cisgender man. My body is something of a hybrid: My lower body is thick and muscular while my upper body is soft and rounded, my stomach protrudes further than my ribcage, giving me a “barrel-shaped” physique. My body has been this way for most of my post-teenage life, except for a few years where I significantly restricted my intake of carbohydrates (an experiment that began with sorting out the cause of gastrointestinal issues, and continued because I liked the way that it changed my body, and especially the way others perceived my body). In the queer community, many others look at my body and categorize me as a “bear.” Bear is a contested concept that is variously interpreted in the gay community,⁹ but it generally connotes a large-bodied man with facial and/or body hair. While there is a subculture and community of bears within the community and culture of gay men, like in mainstream heterosexual culture, bears as fat people experience marginalization, while thin gay men occupy a more central and valued location within the community. There are also other more or less common animal categories for gay men based primarily on body composition (cub, otter, and others).

Within the community and culture of gay men, like in mainstream heterosexual culture, bears as fat people experience marginalization.

I remain uncertain about adopting this identity grouping of “bear,” but I recognize that I fit the bill physically. I am also a person with outdoor affinities, both for the “groundedness” that I feel when enjoying time outdoors, and for the physical and mental engagement that I feel when participating in outdoor activities like running, climbing, swimming, skiing, cycling, and paddling. For me, many of these activities take place in the context of parks, conservation areas,

and other protected outdoor spaces. As both a queer person and a fat person, I have experienced alienation from the sociocultural milieu of the outdoors. That is to say, while nature itself has always accepted me just as I am, the people in and around natural environments with whom I have been in groups have (mostly unintentionally and without awareness—often not even my own awareness) positioned me in a sort of insider–outsider marginal status—even though I have had a long and successful career largely focused on outdoor learning. My enthusiasm, maleness, and whiteness have “greased the wheels” of my inclusion, but my fatness and queerness have often (independently and in collaboration) attached a kind of “otherness” to my participation in outdoor social and professional groups.

On being named a bear. It is deep winter in northern Ontario. I am around 28 years old, and have recently started exploring my queer sexuality in earnest—though I am still in the closet in most aspects of my life. I am standing at a bus stop in the cold night air with the fellow that I’ve just spent the evening on a date with (dinner and a movie at his house). He insists on waiting for the bus with me, as it extends our time together and offers a measure of safety given the uncertainty of both the security of the neighborhood and the bus schedule. The residential street is quiet, except for the occasional passing car. We chat idly as we wait, and he frequently steps toward me to canoodle, retreating back as we might be observed by passing cars. I cannot recall the context or content of our conversation, but at some point he makes a comment in which he identifies me as a *bear*. He says it in such a casual way, as though I would obviously know that I was a *bear* and that this label would be understood as a term of endearment. Our idle banter stops abruptly as I absorb his labeling me in this way. New in the gay community, I had only a vague understanding of what being a bear might mean, but I knew instinctively that I didn’t self-identify as such—I had already internalized the social superiority of the “twink” or “fit” body (a twink might be understood as the opposite of a bear in the gay community—lithe and slender). I can’t recall if I objected outright to this pigeonholing, or if I took a sideline around his comment, but he could tell that I wasn’t down with the label he had just pinned to me. It was quiet for a few minutes, and then the bus came. I saw him one or two more times in the next few weeks, but shortly after this snowy scene at the bus stop, the flame of our romance fizzled out. I’m not sure if I ended things specifically as a result of him naming me as a bear, but it is the primary thing that I remember about our brief situation almost 20 years later. While, in the moment, I felt insecure and vulnerable about having my body categorized (even amorously), I am now very thankful for that fellow; he was unashamed of his body and mine, and in his own way he helped me along my journey of accepting both my body and my sexuality.

My enthusiasm, maleness, and whiteness have “greased the wheels” of my inclusion, but my fatness and queerness have often attached a kind of “otherness” to my participation in outdoor groups.

Bear at the beach. I have spent much of my life working and playing around the water, both as an outdoor educator and as a patron of aquatic recreation facilities, both indoor and outdoor. In my experience, aquatics has been a unique milieu in the recreation sector, because of its greater than average acceptance of all kinds of bodies.¹⁰ I can remember taking my swim and lifesaving instructor course at a pool when I was in high school, and our trainer insisting that we not stand with our arms crossed across our bodies, or with a kickboard held against our torsos. “We work in an industry where half or more of our bodies may be exposed—we are recreation leaders and need to model comfort in our bodies so that our participants can feel comfortable learning to swim in their bodies,” she shouted across the pool deck. I’m not sure that the depth of her message was clear to my 18-year-old self in that moment; in fact, its power may not have been known to me until just now as I recorded it for this narrative. I’m also not sure if she was aware of the complexity of what she was demanding of us, asking us to simply shake off the fat-phobic social conditioning that is the “water” we “swim” through all our lives. But, even if it was neither

immediately impactful or implementable at the level of cognition, I suspect that this messaging has been very important for me in the intervening 25+ years at the level of simply being in my body and using my body for all the water-based recreational activities that I felt passionately drawn to.

Years later, after having worked in aquatics and summer camping for more than a decade, I decided to earn the waterfront (as opposed to pool) certification of the National Lifeguard award. I showed up to the beach on the morning of the first day all prepared for a week of learning and demonstrating skills in a beach waterfront environment (wetsuit, sunscreen, extra towels, snacks, etc.). The course was a very small cohort of learners—myself, the 32-year-old gay bear, and four skinny teenagers who were barely 16 and earning the award for the first time (no wetsuits, no sunscreen, no extra towels, etc.). A hallmark of Canada’s National Lifeguard Waterfront award requirements was the “run, swim, tow” element, in which the candidate completes consecutive 100m legs of running and swimming, then tows a victim 100m to the start point in 4–6 minutes (based on prevailing waterfront conditions). We practiced on the first day, and I was well over time. Some of the skinny teens were also over time. Debate ensued with the trainer on whether the conditions we were in warranted the full six-minute time allowance. I contended under my breath that my bear body was a prevailing condition that warranted consideration! Over the following days, we practiced this grueling element multiple times a day. By the end of the course, I had cut my time to just the 6-minute mark, and earned the certification. Some of the skinny teens did also, but some didn’t. It turns out my bear body had some advantages. I had good relative buoyancy, which is especially helpful when towing a victim, a skill which skinnier and more muscular learners struggled significantly with. I also have strong body awareness and coordination developed through years of experience in the water. These “bear assets” helped me overcome the challenge in ways that simple slightness of body couldn’t. That week, and many other times, my bear body performed enviable feats of physicality, upending normative stigmatized assumptions (sloth, laziness) of what someone in a bear body might be able to accomplish.

That week, and many other times, my bear body performed enviable feats of physicality, upending normative stigmatized assumptions.

THEMES ARISING FROM OUR NARRATIVES

Two common themes arise from our individual narratives of navigating recreational places and spaces as fat people: experiences of marginal inclusion in outdoor spaces emerging from the stigma of fatness and queerness, and the capability of fat and queer bodies to engage in meaningful participation in outdoor activities in ways that enrich the persons’ lives individually, and also enrich the broader community. These themes align with and contribute to the literature that we reviewed at the outset of the paper, and we believe that they justify the recommendations that we will offer in summation.

Marginal inclusion of fat and queer bodies. Our stories each contain elements that highlight marginal, partial, or conditional inclusion of fat and queer bodies in outdoor recreation spaces. Leigh’s struggle sourcing just the right pair of pants that she could *fit into* in order to *fit in* within the culture of a tree planting camp may on the surface be read as a simple inconvenience of retail manufacturing for the law of averages—and we don’t deny the reasoning behind this understanding. However, we also understand her story as a deeper cultural complex in which a particular garment serves as a token of social capital by which people can be included or excluded.¹¹ The subtle quality of the kind of exclusion demonstrated in Leigh’s story contrasts with an explicit example of marginalization recounted in Blair’s narrative of discovering the bear community amongst gay men—a cultural program that directly names people who experience the marginalization of fatness by categorizing them from “slim” to “fat” using a metaphorical animal taxonomy.¹² In these ways, both of our narratives highlight the hegemony of thin privilege¹³ that is pervasive in contemporary North

American society—including in parks and recreation spaces—and which places an oppressive burden on people whose bodies transgress the thin archetype.

Fat and queer bodies are variously capable and inherently valuable. Each of our narratives highlights embodied accomplishments that we have felt proud about: Leigh’s years of tree planting, and Blair’s lifesaving physicality. We point to these accomplishments not to suggest that all fat bodies are capable in these kinds of ways—though some are. We acknowledge that many people existing in bodies along the spectrum of fatness may have physical limitations resulting from their particular body composition, and that those people are nevertheless as deserving of respect and inclusion as anyone. The point that we hope to illuminate here is that fat people experience health along a continuum just as thin people do,¹⁴ and likewise have a range of bodily capabilities and limitations that are simple realities of existence within a person’s individual body. And, furthermore, that these capabilities and limitations are not the result of any kind of value-laden personal characteristics that are so frequently ascribed to people who are fat.

In thinking about this beautiful array of physical capability across the range of fat-identified folks, we return to Newbery’s¹⁵ question: Will any/body carry that canoe? And we respond enthusiastically, “We might!” But, we reserve the right to carry it alone or in tandem (perhaps depending on the day, or the weight of the particular boat), or to suitcase carry it with many of our co-travelers, or to strap wheels to the bottom of the canoe and pull it along. We may also decline sometimes, and offer to carry a few paddles or lifejackets. We’re happy to contribute to our shared adventure based on our specific capabilities. Also, we might insist on some modifications to the boat itself—maybe a proper seat could be installed the middle so that some of us can sit comfortably at the widest part of the boat? We might also benefit from some outrigger style floatation or other strategies that could improve stability of the canoe. Paddling a big canoe, which is often deeper and designed with greater floatation and secondary stability than a smaller tandem canoe, could also facilitate our enjoyment.

Our intention is to point to the ways that any outdoor activity common in parks and other managed outdoor environments can be adjusted to meet the needs of people across the spectrum of fatness.

Here, we’ve played out a response to Newbery’s question regarding the portaging of a canoe, but our intention is to point to the ways that any outdoor activity common in parks and other managed outdoor environments can be adjusted through universal design¹⁶ or accommodation to meet the needs of people across the spectrum of fatness. Our hope is that readers will take this as a template for thinking through how any outdoor activity could be designed in a way that is optimally inviting to people of all sizes. We wish to emphasize, however, that these kinds of physical design characteristics, while important, are only relevant if the social environment of the recreation space is also fat-welcoming. We conclude our paper with some specific recommendations on how park leaders might make such invitational changes within their own spheres of influence.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Managers of parks and protected spaces: evaluate your representation of fat and queer folks in your promotional materials. Do you have fat and queer people on your staff teams? Do fat and queer visitors come to the park? Are there activities like hikes, walking paths, and interpretive opportunities that are navigable for all bodies?
2. Providers and consumers of size-inclusive gear/clothing: if you are a retailer, push for it; if a consumer, ask for it; if a thin ally, add your voices because they will be welcome. If you aren’t sure how to do this, create community that will inform it. Many retailers have running, hiking, and biking groups that create community around their stores; why not create a fat-focused or size-inclusive group? One that does not have a weight-loss agenda.

3. In Canada, many of the provincial and national parks are located rurally. They are far from city centers and require that one have a personal vehicle to get there. If you are a manager in a situation like this, lobby officials to expand services that make public transport an option, and in doing so, make sure those services are both financially accessible and physically accessible to people of all body sizes.

ENDNOTES

1. Strings 2020
2. Bacon 2010
3. Newbery 2003
4. Stanley 2020
5. Mitten et al. 2018
6. Evans & Friedman 2022
7. Evans & Friedman 2020: 130. For a definition of “spanx,” see <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=spanx>.
8. For more on the spectrum of fatness and/or “fategories,” see Gordon 2023 and Fluffy Kitten Party 2021.
9. Moskowitz et al. 2013
10. It is important to note that I do not intend to generalize my experience here. I have worked predominantly in learn-to-swim, lifesaving and lifeguarding, recreational aquatics, and summer camp aquatics. This is only a small slice of the broader aquatics arena. I suspect that other areas, particularly competitive aquatics activities, may impose strictly normative templates of the ideal body, but these are generally outside my own experience.
11. See Currie et al. 2011 for a broader explanation of symbolic interaction in outdoor recreation.
12. Advocate.com Editors 2014
13. Bacon et al. 2016
14. Bacon 2010
15. Newbery 2003
16. Herwig 2008

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“Strength,” a Tarot illustration representing a radiation of power coupled with inner understanding and love. | [HENRY CRAWFORD ADAMS](http://henrycrawfordadams.com)