
On The Shores: Liminal Liberation for Oceanic Embodiments

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Abstract

In this paper, I present an overview of select moments in finding fat feminine freedom through water. In doing so, I am influenced by Karin Amimoto Ingersoll's decolonial seascape epistemology, embracing a sense of community and self that is transient and dynamic like the waves. I will be connecting bodies of water with fat feminine bodies by building on Robyn Longhurst's theorizing of the body as place. This will be supported by utilizing Matthew Conte's application of Longhurst's work to intersectionally gendered fat bodies. In my inquiry, I theorize a nurturing dynamic between marginally gendered fat bodies and bodies of water that allows for liminal aquatic empowerment. This paper includes a look at the outsider solidarity forged by modern plus size surfing influencers on social media. I will also touch on constructions of "heroic fatness" in marathon and cold-water swimmers (drawing on Karen Throsby), which allows for marginal fat female participation in normative athletic success. Expanding this, I position water as a space for an opening up of fat movement possibilities, which is further supported by an analysis of fat synchronized swimming groups like the Padded Lilies and Aquaporko (Blank, Gurrieri and Cherrier, Wyman). I will further incorporate aesthetic and artistic explorations of aquatic feminine fatness from The Society of Fat Mermaids, photographer Shooget, and poet Mary Lambert. Throughout, the liberation attained is embodied by the idea of treading water: actively resisting and responding to exclusionary norms.

Keywords

fat, femme, seaside epistemologies, water

Introduction

Welcome. I often write about what I relate to (fat weirdos of all stripes), but this paper is special to me. I am originally from what is known as “New Brunswick,” off the Atlantic Ocean’s coast, where I would split time between my mother and father. My mother lives a short distance from the highest tides in the world, and my father lives in a seaside village almost wholly economically dependent on fishing and beach tourism. My father has also spent his life working as a water scientist, designing ways to purify polluted water and decrease capitalist damage to the environment.

In my spiritual practice, water is how I cleanse, a ritual of renewal. There are many parts of my life that evoke memories of water for me: early morning pre-class dew, the endless mist that covered my high school, the chlorinated sting of the pool in weekly lessons, being gifted an umbrella by a former boss who kept catching me in rain, the roaring waterfall I visited on my first real adult vacation. Water has always held a personal resonance, so I loved writing this paper about aquatic fat feminine liberation.

Seascape Epistemology

Water’s human entanglements are fraught, involving environmental harm, war, colonization, and harsh disparities in access. We see this in oil spills, warming ocean temperatures, corporate misuse, struggles for clean water worldwide, and boil water advisories in Indigenous communities across this nation-state. Indigenous water scholarship, like Karin Amimoto Ingersoll’s (2016) “seascape epistemology,” is key to understanding how people connect to aquatic spaces both tangibly and intangibly. While still incorporating some influence from “Western thought” (Amimoto Ingersoll 2016, 28), seascape epistemology is a specifically Native Hawaiian epistemology, created by Amimoto Ingersoll, a Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) scholar (2016, 46). In her book *Waves of Knowing*, Amimoto Ingersoll compares two female surfers, one who is Native Hawaiian (Kula) and one who is not

(Samantha), emphasizing that “The oceanic literacy of surfing can be embraced by both Samantha and Kula, as can seascape epistemology” (2016, 47). At the same time, she underscores that while both Kānaka and non-Kānaka can embrace seascape epistemology, its significance is uniquely Hawaiian, contextualized by history, language, ontology, and genealogy (Amimoto Ingersoll 2016, 47-48).

As a settler and non-Kānaka scholar, I do not feel I have the cultural foundation to fully do justice to this epistemology in my analysis. At the same time, not acknowledging the broader influence and implications of Amimoto Ingersoll’s work when it comes to watery spaces seems both disrespectful and dismissive. This is especially true given the common colonial expectation for Indigenous scholars to heavily read and cite theory by white settlers, theory which often ignores Indigenous people as potential readers. I wish therefore to embrace aspects of Amimoto Ingersoll’s oceanic knowledge creation both to celebrate her brilliant work and also foreground the fundamental Indigenous claim and connection to water beyond borders.

Amimoto Ingersoll (2016) writes that “[t]he ocean becomes a metaphor for global unity, pulling together and sustaining humankind” (20). She notes poignantly that “[h]umanity is found in the sea. ‘Humanity’: human beings collectively; the fact or condition of being human; humaneness” (Amimoto Ingersoll 2016, 183). It makes sense, then, that for many marginalized communities, the sea (and water more generally) can be pathways to accessing a sense of humanity they may often feel is denied to them. In trying to understand fat feminine freedom through water, I am guided by Amimoto Ingersoll’s (2016) statements that “[t]he salty sea touches everyone in one form or another: the droplets of water lapping on one shore are soon over the horizon, wash up on another’s beach, or evaporate into the clouds that blow over and rain onto another’s valley floor” (153) and also that “[a]ttempting to articulate our relationships with nature, with the

ocean, is to be human¹” (184).

The notion of liminality is present through water’s inherent state of flux. Amimoto Ingersoll’s (2016) theorizing recognizes “the ocean’s transient and dynamic composition; waves are constantly formed and broken, sucked up from the very body that gave it life. No part of this liquid body is ever stable. Yet something does endure within this space and time” (20), pointing specifically to collective relational engagements with water. The dynamic nature of water mirrors the dynamic nature of the self. Amimoto Ingersoll (2016) underlines the importance of “a reading and a knowledge of the self that resists the petrification of its own dynamic character. Identity is always plural and in continual re-creation within seascape epistemology” (16). Learning from this, I aim to present fat feminine aquatic freedom as liminal, helping fat, feminine bodies to “tread water,” continually dynamically resisting and responding to the dominant culture, trying to stay afloat.

Bodies of Water

How do we connect the geography of water bodies to fat feminine human bodies? As Robyn Longhurst (2005) has written, “[b]odies exist *in* places; at the same time they *are* places” (337). Longhurst (2005) describes how corporeal “[b]odies have a weighty and often ‘messy’ materiality, viscosity, and fluidity” (345), not unlike bodies of water. I aim to emulate Matthew Conte’s (2018) application of Longhurst’s (2005) work to the materialities of fat, femme, racialized bodies, wherein he centres a geographic reading of the multiply marginalized body in order to “map the complex relationships that exist between bodies, identities, places, spaces and power” and “understand the body as a space” (32).

Marathon Swimming and

“Heroic Fatness”

Fat feminine water bodies across various domains have been at the nexus of many multi-faceted mappings of power. When it comes to aquatic sports for example, Karen Throsby (2013) has researched the concept of “heroic fatness” through interviews with marathon swimmers, who idealize the athletic benefits of a socially “undesirable” fat body (often normatively seen as a disadvantage in sports) (772). Women swimmers, Throsby (2013) notes, have liminal access to affirmation through “heroic fatness” due to the intersection of oppressive size and gender expectations that deem fat opposed to “normative femininity” (777). That said, certain women interviewed in Throsby’s study did experience a mediated sense of fat aquatic empowerment and freedom.

Fat bodies’ natural buoyancy and insulation in water is well-suited to the needs of marathon swimmers braving the frigid temperatures found in places like the English Channel (Throsby 2013). These advantages make aquatic movement a veritable ocean of possibilities (pun intended) for those who are typically left out of traditional movement spaces, reconfiguring their geographic potentialities. As one woman swimmer said, “I might be fat [...] but my body is amazing. Just amazing. Look what it can do” (Throsby 2013, 778). The advantages offered by higher body fat in marathon swimming can also be freeing for fat feminine people seeking respite from the pressures of the diet industry, of which they are the primary targets.

This was evident when another swimmer that Throsby interviewed expressed the “unexpected pleasure she found in the solidity of her heavier body, its occupation of space, and the unanticipated freedoms of no longer ‘obsessing over food’” (Throsby 2013, 779). Similarly, a different woman swimmer reportedly gave up her self-admittedly obsessive self-weighing after she gained weight for her marathon swimming

¹ Although I do not wish to invoke the notion of humanity in an anthropocentric sense, I am interested in using the language of “human” when investigating the fat feminine

connection to water in order to subvert common derogatory comparisons between fat bodies and aquatic creatures like whales, manatees, etc.

pursuits. This negotiated freedom is backgrounded by anti-fat Western societal norms for feminine bodies, wherein “self-surveillance, guilt and obsession are a normalized aspect of femininity” (Throsby 2013, 779).

Fat Feminine Swimming

In her book *The Unapologetic Fat Girl's Guide to Exercise (And Other Incendiary Acts)*, Hanne Blank (2013) sings the praises of aquatic spaces as affirming and freeing for fat feminine bodies. She writes, “If I could, I would throw every fat girl who reads this book straight into the pool. Why? Because water is fantastic! It is soothing and centering and nurturing to be in water or even be near it [...] it is well worth finding ways to get your fat, fabulous, ferocious self into the pool, lake, river, pond, or swimming hole at least occasionally.” (Blank 2013, 104)

At the same time, this watery healing is also tempered by the persistent normative exclusion of fat femininity from public life. Blank (2013) makes sure to assuage her reader about their presumed struggles in finding and buying plus-size swimwear with enough coverage to feel comfortable, implicitly nodding to the dominance of a culture that prefers to hide away fat feminine forms. Adding to this backdrop of marginalization is the section's ending guidance about potential inaccessibility when entering or exiting the water, with narrow pool ladders serving as a physical reminder of the ways ableism and fatphobia reinforce each other. These factors show clear examples of how even though swimming can seem like an oasis for big bodies, fat geographies are still heavily constricted by spatial oppression. These water bodies face exclusion through both social and economic (in the case of swimwear) as well as physical (in the case of ladders) barriers.

Despite this, fat feminine swimming has a long, liminal history that goes beyond pure athleticism. From like-minded gatherings to campy performances, swimming has been an important means to negotiate embodied resistance to exclusionary narratives. Communal fat swimming has existed alongside activism at least as early as 1969, when the National

Association to Advance Fat Acceptance held a group swim at a convention (Chunky Dunk 2010). For decades, swimming groups for fat women and femmes have been instrumental in creating room for feminine aquatic movement beyond size barriers. This includes notable synchronized swimming groups like Aquaporko and Padded Lilies, both of which have been subject of research and documentaries (Blank 2013; Chastain 2013). More casual gender-minded, fat-positive swimming communities have also popped up in various locations, including Chunky Dunk and Mrs O's, providing pockets of relative freedom for heavy swimmers (Blank 2013, 64-65; Ellison 2020).

However, the freedom these groups have offered has always existed on the margins, directly responding to exclusion and stereotypes. Again, the complex interlocking of fatphobia with systemic injustices like ableism creates an environment where bigger watery bodies can *only* be liminal. Reviewing *Buoyant*, a documentary about Padded Lilies, Ragen Chastain (2013) details the ridicule the group faced on late night TV and neatly sums up the contradictions involved: “Despite constantly being accused of being lazy and chided that they clearly don't get enough exercise, when fat people do move their bodies in public, they often find themselves the subject of ridicule and mockery” (110).

The patriarchal, male-dominated athletic scene amplifies this denigration of fat movement for those perceived as feminine, doubly excluding them both due to gendering and size (Ellison 2020). Blank (2013) has compared the defiance by fat feminine athletes in refusing to apologize for their physiques to queer pride, encouraging the shared attitude of “We're here! [...] We're fabulous! Get used to it!” (18). Scholars like Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013) have specifically highlighted a similarly queer resistance in swim groups like Aquaporko. They describe how Aquaporko make a splash with their outfits, performance, and aesthetics in order to intentionally play with size-based cultural images of aquatic feminine embodiment. By destabilizing archetypal imaginings like “the bathing beauty,” they are able to tread water at the

edges of visibility (Gurrieri and Cherrier 2013, 283-284).

Fat Feminine Artistic Engagements with Water

The creativity of fat synchronized swimming groups is part of broader fat feminine artistic engagement with water in various mediums. One example is the Society of Fat Mermaids, founded by model and performer Mermaid Chè Monique, which organizes mermaid meet-ups and sells plus-size apparel featuring artistic renderings of heavy merfolk. Her personal website states that, “Mermaid Chè is a fat, Black Mermaid with natural hair. People who look like Chè are often told that they are less than and unworthy. Mermaid Chè Monique is here to remind you that you are more than enough and deserve to live a joyous life full of magic.” (Mermaid Chè Monique n.d.)

The Society’s merfolk apparel designs feature a wide spectrum of mostly feminine-presenting figures, especially merfolk with darker skin tones. On the Society’s web shop, many of these merfolk are specifically described with identifiers like Black, Latina, Asian, and/or nonbinary, with the web shop also featuring slogans like “#MerfolkForBlackLives” and “Gender is Fluid” (Society of Fat Mermaids n.d.). Beyond uplifting fat aquatic bodies, the Society of Fat Mermaids claims it aims to “help you decolonize your mind” (Society of Fat Mermaids n.d.), using feminine water fantasy to combat systemic oppression.

While creators advocate for diverse fat bodies *in* water, they also advocate for diverse fat bodies *as* water. Photographer Shoog McDaniel is well known for capturing underwater images of larger fat queer bodies that are generally “excluded in the mainstream” (Song 2017), with special care paid to the fluidity and ripples of the fleshy physique. They have stated that “our bodies are vast and beautiful and like an ocean, they’re filled with diversity,” conceptualizing fat bodies explicitly as bodies of water through “liberated” queer-centric nature projects such as *Bodies Like Oceans* (Song 2017).

Still, for others, watery spaces are messier and

not as neatly aligned with liberation. Mary Lambert’s (2018) poetry about the complex body judgements she has experienced as a fat woman navigates the ocean as an ambiguous affective space:

Shame is an ocean I swim across
Sometimes I call it drowning
Sometimes I call it Moses
Sometimes I say Good Morning
and sway to its murky dirge (31)

Water in Lambert’s (2018) poetry is able to hold contrasting feelings simultaneously, mirroring the dynamic complexity of fat feminine subjects. She writes, “I looked over the boat at my reflection in the water. / I looked kind of happy / for someone who was drowning” (Lambert 2018, 67), illustrating both the nuanced plurality and humanity that Amimoto Ingersoll associates with the sea.

Staying Afloat

The oceanic body, whether flesh or fluid, repeatedly appears across fat feminine movement and expression as unstable and liminal. Whether through swimming, performance, mermaid fashion, photography, or aquatic poetry, there is a fundamental ebb and flow between claiming complex humanity and fighting against an oppressive tide. Fat feminine water bodies are continually resisting multiple hegemonic currents by carving out their own communities on the shores of liberation. In these examples and more, through aligning with the aquatic–dynamic and flowing–marginalized bodies have learned to tread water, staying afloat despite society’s undertow.



Fig 1: A collage of images featuring Mackenzie and bodies of water. Shown during her presentation at *Liminal: The Second Annual Critical Femininities Conference 2022*.

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Author Biography

Mackenzie Edwards is a PhD candidate in Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies at York University. Her academic work focuses on fatness and popular as well as social media. Her PhD dissertation research centers on a multimodal exploration of the body positivity Instagram community in Toronto. She uses influences from intersectional feminism, critical disability studies, and queer theory, generally with an anti-capitalist framing. She has previously been published in *Screen Bodies* and *Fat Studies*. Mackenzie has received awards including a Sherill Cheda Scholarship, Jean Fewster Award, and an Ontario Graduate Scholarship.