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## **Chapter 12: Walking to heal or walking to heel? Contesting cultural narratives about fat women who hike and camp alone**

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Obesity discourses portray fat bodies as failures of individual ir/responsibility. But such discourses, this chapter shows, have come to transcend their epidemiological origins, informing social imaginaries of obesity and its associated moral opprobrium. Fatness as a social semiotic informs the ways in which human beings are judged and categorized. However, against such a constructed discourse, resistance is fertile. This paper explores the ‘fat girls hiking’ sub-culture, in which fat-identified women stray not from the trail but from the social script. This is framed with Connell’s gender order theory and with reference to a Foucauldian model of self-monitoring in the face of social surveillance. In terms of methods and contribution, the paper uses evocative autoethnography through on-trail streams of consciousness and suggests a queering of mainstream discourses about obesity and about the questionable wisdom (or badass temerity?) of women who hike and camp alone.

### **The bus driver**

I’m the only person on a bus heading to a trailhead, so I’m sitting up front, chatting to the driver. He asks about my plan and I tell him about my hike. In response to my description –eight days’ hiking and camping solo on the Larapinta trail– he responds with: ‘Yeah, one guy I was talking to said he lost ten kilos walking the trail. And then, when you get home, it’s kind of a kick start’. This comes apropos of no mention whatsoever of weight loss as my rationale for hiking.

### **The body-positivity activist**

I’m in the city, on a Sunday morning, going to a ‘body positive’ women’s adventure and outdoors event. I’m excited: I’ve been reading about body positivity for a long time now, and here it is, coming to Sydney. It’s springtime and sunny, and I set off early to walk an hour across town to the event. I’m wearing longish denim shorts and a cotton vest top. My hair is straight and newly cut. I’m very much in city mode: neither at work nor on the trails, where denim and cotton are useless.

I arrive at the expo, find the events stage where the speeches are taking place, and then I’m smiling and nodding along with the presenters. They are trotting out a well-worn but very welcome mantra of wellness and body positivity, ‘you go girl!’ This stuff is all over *Instagram*, but I rarely find it in real life. This feels good. Perhaps, though, my smiling and nodding are misread. Does it appear, from the outside, as if I’m having a transformative experience? Might my inviting facial expressions be read as naivety? Do I look like just another fat, mumsy, middle-aged

woman in city clothes who would dearly like to become a little bit adventurous and outdoorsy and who hasn't, until this point, dared set foot in a national park? Charitably, I'm hoping this is the reason for what happens next.

After the presentations are over and everyone is milling around, one of the speakers comes directly to me, and smiles, and tells me, 'don't let this' –she looks me up and down, indicating with a sweep of her eyes that by 'this' she means my body– 'get in the way of adventure! Don't let *anyone* say you can't do cool, amazing stuff! Just don't *worry* about it. Get *out* there and give it a go!'

I am not often speechless. Indeed, it's a cliché to say, 'I was speechless'. But I *was* speechless. I was silenced. I was un-speeched. The polite me mumbles, 'uh huh, thank you'. The activist me screams, 'seriously?! What the actual *fuck*? I have just been fat-shamed by a *body positivity activist*!' The academic me critiques the irony: this woman peddles an oppressive body-hatred even as she spouts her half-baked 'wellness' slogans. The social me rushes to meet my friend Kirsty, telling the story, laughing, embarrassed, unbelieving, recounting. Turning it into shared hilarity even as it hurts. The guilty, overwhelmed, shamed me looks at my feet and wonders just how many others also looked, and judged, because if even the *body positivity activist* assumed I must be sedentary and unadventurous, then perhaps I do need to try to lose weight again, if only to get this albatross of people's judgement off my back.

[insert illustration 4 about here]

### **The fishermen**

Click, clack. Click, clack. My walking poles mark my walking rhythm. Click. Clack. I walk up, over, towards the plateau. Some steps up, and I'm out onto the rocky platform and the view, oh the view. But I can't linger. It's early spring, and the light is short. I've driven four hours from home and it's already almost lunchtime. It'll be dark by five thirty. And so, although the sun is high, I'm conscious of the walk ahead and what might be tricky navigation. Click. Clack. Click. Clack. I'm fairly confident with a compass and I've got some decent maps. But there's a number of ridges and I need to find just one in particular, Gingra Ridge, to bring me down gently to the Kowmung River.

A shriek of black cockatoos flies up on thermals from the valley. Otherwise: silence. Searching, I find the fork in the indistinct trail that drops me down to a saddle, through trees. A short cliff-break scramble then delivers me to a cave-like overhang. There's water here, and although my bottles are full, I'm glad to see it. I get through a lot of water when I hike, more than most. That's OK. Water's good. But on some hikes, on dry stretches, it's a question of planning, organising, knowing to carry enough. Mostly I'm pretty good at figuring it out. I don't often run out.

The trail drops down again, bends around another rocky wall, and, looking at the map contours, I know I'm on track. Yellow wattle is in bloom and I pause, noting how much calmer my mind is whenever I step into a forest.

Walking alone, in silence, is infinitely preferable to imported chatter. I have a couple of good, reliable walking buddies who know how to rein in the rush and the movement, but they're not available this weekend and I am. So I'm going anyway because the only alternative is not to go. Is it weird to camp and walk alone, especially as a woman? But nature doesn't care. Thus, I don't care. Or: I try not to care. I'm pretty safe: I have maps, a Personal Locator Beacon, a smart head on my shoulders. Walking in groups is no safer. There's only the illusion of safety. I

wouldn't walk with those who wouldn't walk alone. (This wisdom also applies to life, of course.)

I keep going, uphill a while, and then I'm resting on a fallen tree when two young guys appear. I'm not really scared of humans this far out onto a trail. Car parks and road-accessible camping areas are much scarier. If someone can be bothered to walk all this way, with no guarantee of running into anyone, they're probably not looking for trouble. We chat, briefly. They're going fishing.

No snide comments, or innocent comments or, seemingly protective comments, or comments of surprise are made. Nothing is said this time about my weight, my fitness, my femaleness, my aloneness, or my preparedness. This time: nothing. But I realise how attuned to on-trail, gendered fat-shaming I have become. I anticipate it, always prepared to defend my legitimacy even as my body says that I must be sedentary, unfit, unadventurous and my gender says that I don't belong out here alone. Fat women's bodies have social meanings, and 'badass solo hiker' is not usually one of them. I feel I have to prove something, and I consciously and constantly perform the role of 'experienced bushwalker' and 'competent outdoorswoman'. Years ago, I was body-normative (slender, fit, and athletic), and I know from that time that this on-edge anticipation of never-far-away body shaming was the last thing on my mind. Now, it is the burden that I carry along with my backpack.

I keep going and, walking, I drift off, meditative, all the while keeping an eye out for the turnoff to Roots Ridge. The trail notes say it's a right turn from a 'small clearing', and I'm wondering, 'how small?' Every clearing could be the right clearing. I re-check the bearing, the ridge, the contours. It should be around here. I poke around in some bushes, and there, carved onto a tree is 'Roots Ridge', with an arrow off to the right. Ah, 'thank you', I say out loud, to no one. There are no trail blazes to guide me. Thank you.

Roots Ridge is undulating, with a couple of little summits. But then the trail is getting faint. I keep losing track, backtracking, taking stock, backing up. I can see the river now, but there doesn't seem to be a trail anymore. What I should do is go back, find the trail, follow it to where it goes gently down to the river. What I actually do is bushwhack, setting out steeply down to the river, which I can see in the distance. It's not that far.

My steps down are ridiculous. Each step down is like coming downstairs, but the loose topsoil brings me sliding down much further with each step. I'm skiing. It's fast, fun, and my walking poles are no longer clicking and clacking but are holding me, balancing me. It's slightly reckless, I know, to be off trail and so steep and sliding, but it's also fun and, before long, these crazy steps bring me to the river. But where exactly am I? I look again at the map and although I'm at the right river, I'm quite far from the bend where there's flat, dry ground with easy water access. This is not that. This is boggy, marshy, and full of close-packed trees. I need to bushwhack some more to get to a decent camping spot. There's still some light and I'm next to the river, so it's all good. If I had to, I could stay somewhere here. I've got this. I self-soothe with logic and chocolate.

And so, I bushwhack along the riverside. This isn't nearly so much fun. It's sweaty and frustrating, and I scramble up and down soggy, boggy earth piled over loose rocks, clutching at clumps of weeds. My right hand tingles from clutching at nettles. I swear a bit. There's what looks like an established track along the other side of the river but it's winter and the river is high: chest-deep, I'd guess. There's no way of crossing, certainly not alone and off trail. I throw in a stick to test the flow and the

current outwalks me. It is too fast to ford. Plus, there's the very real possibility that what looks like an easy trail on the other side of the big river is nothing of the sort. The grass is greener. The trail is easier. The moon is bigger. These are life lessons: be glad even of the most nettle-strewn trails because the other side of the river is no easier, and you'd also have to get there. (This is another lesson that also applies to life more generally.) So I stay on this side and spend a slow, frustrating hour pulling myself along, hand over hand, with loose footing and snatched foliage, towards the ridge that I should have descended.

But I'm making good progress, and I'm almost around the bend when I meet one of the fishermen from before. He's standing up to his thighs, in waders, in the cold river, and seems surprised to see me, my hair wild from bushwhacking, coming the wrong way, as if from nowhere.

--Hey, how ya goin'? Catching anything?

--Yeah, nah. Just started.

--How much further along did you guys come down? The trail, I mean, how far along is it from here?

--Oh, you know. Maybe ten minutes?

--Cool, so I'm about there? I couldn't find the track, so I bushwhacked down to the river.

--Yeah, the trail's not that clear back up there, eh? Pretty hard. There were ribbons and that on some of the trees. Bit hard to see.

--Ah yeah? Didn't see those. Would'a been easier. Well, happy fishing, hope you catch something.

--Yeah, have a good one. You camping?

--Yep. You?

--Yep, along at the clearing.

--Alrighty, have fun.

--Yeah, you too.

Again, relief. Are you, the reader, waiting for the fat-shaming now, too? Do you *see* what it is like? Imagine the held breath and the too-careful listening of anticipation, on every trail, in every encounter, in every conversation in or about the outdoors. Am I too sensitive? Or am I simply inured? Even as I fill my social media with 'body positivity' and my academic days with critical readings that problematize obesity alarmism, I tense as I wait for the combative commentary. This time, though, it doesn't come.

I carry on for another five minutes, pulling up at the perfect campsite: a flat patch of earth a couple of metres above and about twenty metres back from the swollen river. Close enough to hear it and accessible to refill my water bottles, but I'm out of harm's way if it rises. My campsite has an armchair-shaped sitting rock, on which I enthrone myself, getting organised, setting up my tent, making soup. It's cold: five degrees Celsius, according to the thermometer on my pack's zipper. My sleeping bag awaits and in it are the possum-wool bed-socks that I now fetch and put on. I contemplate the river and my awesome luck to be out here, absolutely alone. I'm a heady combination of proud of myself but also not really thinking about anything bigger than the immediate here and now. I'm by a river, sipping whisky from a pewter hipflask. The water rushes by. I think about where it will meet the sea, how far it still has to go, and all the places it will see, the others who will see it. I don't think about defending my right to be here anymore. I'm just here. Here and now.

### **The solo hiker**

I've walked with people whose pace differs from mine. Some are too fast, and I'm panting, feeling emotionally and physically wrecked, and not having any fun as I'm feeling I'm holding them back. These experiences pack the *hauntology* (Derrida, in Buse & Scott, 1999, pp.11-12) of competitive sports at school and the shame and sting of bullying manifested as a 'team effort'. In contrast, some hikers I've walked with are *So. Damn. Slow*. Inspecting every damn tree and every damn bird when, really, I just want to get some rhythm going and feel like I'm walking. It is not easy to find the right hiking buddy. No, it isn't.

Walking clubs are also not my scene. When I've camped at organised campsites on trails, such as on the Overland Track and the Thorsborne Trail, I been surrounded by the yip and natter of carping, competitive hiking-club groups whose 'conversations' seem to consist of comparing gear and establishing trail status (after Sorensen's 'road status', 2003) by bragging about other, harder hikes they have done. Nor is this the company I seek.

My friend Miko and I walk well together: when I'm fit, we walk in sync. When I'm less fit, we each walk alone and I'll round a corner and find him waiting for me, sitting on a rock, reading a novel. My other walking buddy, Matthew, is a keen photographer. Where he slows to compose a shot, I'll slow because I'm slow. And so we walk mostly in sync, too. With Miko and with Matthew, I feel no pressure to prove anything. However, neither one lives in Sydney. And so, my tripartite choice is this: I go with someone whose company does not add to my experience. Or I do not hike and camp at all. Or I hike and camp alone. Faced with this choice, obviously, I go alone.

Hiking and camping are 'flow' activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The mind calms and the clatter and clutter of life become quieter, further away. It is like putting day-to-day worries into a smaller font. Connection with nature is foregrounded.

But is it safe? Well, no, not entirely. (I also cross roads in cities, which is manifestly unsafe, too. Silly me.) Arguably, in some ways, it is safer to hike alone, because in a group it is easy to assume that someone else has the know-how or the map. And also: being perfectly alone in nature is, quite simply, a thrill. Like an addict, I return for the 'high'. While solo, wild camping, I wrote:

It is dusk. I've been walking all day. It is still warm. The swimming hole [in the river, by my wild campsite] is perfectly calm and inviting. I go down to the water's edge to collect water and realise I want to swim. So I strip down and I swim. There is no-one else around. I float on my back, looking up at the bats and the tree tops and think: I am lucky. I am grateful.

(Trail Notes, Megalong Valley, 2015).

### **The theorists**

At a scholarly level, how are we to make sense of the discourses in the above scenes? This section teases out the various ways in which these narratives contest cultural scripts. First, there is the discord between 'hiking with a buddy' and 'sleeping alone in the woods'. Then, there is the question of gender and the 'marked' status of women in the outdoors. Finally, there are the symbolic interactionist (mis)readings of fatness. Importantly, these are inseparable strands of one felted, fabric. I am a woman, hiking and camping alone, and I am fat. (I am also over 40, and white, and middle class, and educated, and able-bodied. While ageism, racism, classism, and able-ism also all push powerful narratives that adversely affect diversity on hiking trails, I do not deal with these identity markers here.)

The question of hiking alone is perhaps least controversial: Coble, Selin and Erickson (2003) found solo hiking offered autonomy, reflection, communion with nature, and a chance to experience 'flow', which Mills and Butler (2005) identify as most often experienced when walking alone. In part, the benefits of lone hiking may be attributable to the spiritual dimensions of the experience, and Fox (1997; cited in

Heintzman, 2010) reports that going alone is particularly important for women as it provides peace, tranquillity, an ‘inner journey’, and space for reflection.

But while its benefits are manifest, hiking alone is a gendered pursuit, of which Trimble (1994, p.60) writes: “Cultural barriers and fears keep many of our daughters away from the woods... women may crave solitude but many fear being alone on the landscape.” Fear causes women to be underrepresented among solo hikers, and Chasteen (1994) found that almost all her women participants would never hike alone because of feelings of vulnerability and isolation. Specifically, they were worried about being attacked by men.

But it is not just about fear. McNeil, Harris and Fondren (2012) analysed representations of women in wilderness advertisements, finding that as well as being underrepresented, women are also represented in very particular ways: in limited and passive roles, being instructed or guided by men, or lounging passively in nature rather than engaging in active pursuits. Importantly, also, women are rarely depicted as spending time alone in nature. Whereas men are taught from a young age “to use their bodies in skilled, forceful ways, which allows them to successfully perform masculinity” (p. 42) women’s gendered performances seem to be threatened by association with this kind of ‘rugged individualism’. For this reason, even where professional women athletes are depicted in outdoors advertising, their images are often accompanied by back stories that safely ‘feminize them’ (p. 49) for the benefit of the normative gaze.

Connell’s gender order theory (2005) provides a toolkit with which to unpack these issues. Hegemonic masculinity critiques the configuration and modalities of practice that legitimize men’s dominant position in society and which work to justify and normalize women’s subordination. Accordingly, a woman who exhibits normative ways of performing femininity is an acceptable foil to masculinity, even as she is irreducibly constructed as other, as lesser. However, in a social script based on hegemonic masculinity, there is little conceptual leeway for women to undertake idealized ‘masculine’ pursuits and ways of being. These might include traits like strength, toughness, independence, adventurousness, and self-sufficiency: a Man-Versus-Wild-type taming of and survival in/against the forest, and a conscious swallowing of fear in order to behave agentially in pursuit of one’s own chosen path (literally as well as metaphorically, here). For women who hike and wild camp alone, there is necessarily an explicit pushing back against the machinations of power that inscribe how women *are supposed to behave*. For these reasons, outdoorswomen (including those who are fat and those who go alone) disrupt normative cultural discourses:

What is an unlikely hiker? It’s ironic, tongue-in-cheek, reclamatory. There is nothing *unlikely* about wanting to enjoy and explore nature. It’s one of the most natural things any of us can want to do. Yes, the outdoors and public lands belong to all of us and sure, no one is getting a handwritten invitation to our National Parks and trailheads, but exclusion isn’t always verbal. A lot of the time, it’s about representation. Representation matters! Who is being targeted for outdoor recreation? Who has a seemingly natural sense of access? I was so tired of seeing the same kind of person on seemingly every social media based hiking community. The *image* of the outdoor adventurer is white, thin, “fit” and straight-looking. Often, moneyed (read: top of the line gear). Often, a man. The typical woman featured fits an even narrower set of guidelines. ...*Unlikely Hiker* encompasses anyone who doesn’t fit that image. Bigger body types, people of color, queer, trans, gender nonconforming folks, differently-abled people and so on. The people you don’t see in the outdoorsy ads.

(Bruso, *Unlikely Hiker*, n.d.)

Countercultural pushback, like this, finds support in efforts to ‘diversify outdoors’, both in terms of gender and fatness but also along other identity axes. Queering the

trail online are activists such as *Fat Girls Hiking* (2015), *She Explores* (2014-2017), and Jenny Bruso's *Unlikely Hiker* (2012-2017).

But challenging normative discourses also necessarily entails a more generalized challenging of mainstream constructions of fatness. The 'conversation' about obesity, between epidemiologist-led public health officials and media (the 'obesity alarmists') and countercultural obesity 'sceptics' (Gard, 2011), is one in which fatness stereotypes are either re-inscribed or contested. On one side, Australian media discourses portray fat bodies as:

[P]hysical manifestations of individual (ir)responsibility and psychological dysfunction, [which] contributes to the ongoing stigmatisation of obesity.

(Monson et al, 2016, p.524).

As a result, fat people are pitied and patronised, ridiculed and reduced (Monaghan et al, 2013), often in what Gard (2011, p.38) calls a 'shame-led public health agenda. Largely unfettered by critical scrutiny, media tropes of fatness include headless fatties, face-stuffing fatties, sofa-bound fatties, self-loathing fatties, in-denial fatties, and poor, dumb fatties. There are also 'good' fatties, such as those who submit to *Biggest Loser*-style bullying (Monson et al, 2016). In this vein, medical discourses pathologize 'overweight'. But 'overweight' relies on a sense of 'normal' (otherwise, it begs the questions: over what weight? And why that?) And then there is the statistic that 63% of Australians are 'overweight' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015)? So, what does 'normal' mean, if most people are not 'normal', according to normality's own norm? In fact, 'normal' is less a *norm* than a *normativity*. That is, 'normality' is an aspirational 'should' rather than a descriptive 'is'.

This counter position, which Gard (2011) calls that of the 'obesity sceptics', critiques this mainstream 'obesity crisis' narrative. Positions here vary hugely, from the libertarian pushback against the nannyng state to empirical sceptics pointing to the dearth of evidence that overweight *in and of itself* is deleterious to health. There are also feminist critiques of body shaming as the 'extension of patriarchal science's centuries old persecution of women' (p. 44), and critiques of the obesity panic as a coded morality, produced 'in an attempt to discipline people's desires, behaviours, relationships and subjectivities' (p. 43).

Drawing on these latter discourses, the body positivity strand of the 'diversify outdoors' movement regards fatness neither as something to be battled ('trails not scales!' says *Fat Girls Hiking*) nor as something to be uncritically celebrated. It is still the case that fat people experience multiple, interconnected negative outcomes in areas of life including mental health and a lowering of socioeconomic status (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012). Fat bodies also experience specific challenges, including the frustration of sourcing plus-size outdoors clothing (e.g. *The Heavy Hiker*, 2016) and fat-phobic comments from mainstream commentators, including other hikers (e.g. Summer & Lezley, 2017). There are also physical challenges: breathlessness and foot pain, for instance (e.g. Fleming, 2015). These are real challenges, and although they may affect other body types too, the reality of hiking while fat is that it is harder for fat bodies than for non-fat bodies: carrying a 20kg (44 lbs) pack is tough. Carrying a 20kg pack *and* 30kg (66lbs), or 50kg (110 lbs), or more of extra bodyweight is tougher.

But, crucially, rather than telling fat people simply not to hike, thereby confirming and compounding the reduction of fat identities to an aesthetically distasteful, confirmatory, slothful stereotype, the fat-positive, 'small' culture (Holliday, 2013) helps fat hikers find ways around potential issues. Because hiking in nature lowers stress, lowers pulse rate, and lowers blood pressure, enhances mood,

promotes self-esteem, and combats mental fatigue (Barton et al, 2009; Park et al, 2010). Given hiking's myriad health benefits and its comparative accessibility by people of all levels of fitness and fatness, the erasure of all but young, white, heterosexual men from social imaginaries of hiking is counter-productive.

This 'obesity sceptic' discourse is therefore subversive: it questions and rejects stigmatizing, limiting, surveillance discourses of *what fat bodies can do*. Instead of reinscribing reductive, homogenizing, and deterministic narratives of what fatness *means*, this discourse allows for the possibility of fat people who are adventurous, physical, and, indeed, happy. This is empowering. Fatness, in body-positive discourses, is not something that needs to change before real life begins. Rather than self-loathing, the message is one of self-acceptance.

But why not just diet? Isn't it irresponsible to 'encourage' obesity? Why should we 'glorify' fat? To those bored and lonely people who seek to set strangers 'right' on the internet, the equation may appear simple: *eat less, move more*. As if fat people were stupid. As if this was all there was to it. As if solving the global obesity 'epidemic' –a discourse of contagion– were as simple as awareness raising and individual self-determination (Lupton, 2014). It isn't.

While sustained caloric restriction, through diet and/or exercise, inexorably produces fat loss, for the previously-fat, maintaining a bodyweight significantly below the previous, 'obese', weight is significantly more difficult than it is for the never-dieted body (Mann et al, 2007). Specifically: if yours is a body that has been obese, and if you have successfully lost weight, you can eat and exercise exactly the same as a never-fat person, whose body composition is exactly the same as yours, and yours, the dieted body, will retain significantly more weight (Fothergill et al, 2016). Thinning a fat body is therefore a near futile exercise in hyper vigilance, because relaxing into 'normal' eating patterns is to slide back to fatness (Mann et al, 2007). This is before eating disorders, hormonal imbalances, and other psycho-social and socio-economic weight-gain contributors are factored in.

For this reason, weight loss through calorie restriction and exercise is almost entirely futile. Citing a longitudinal, 25,000-people-strong, cohort study, Adams (2011) reports that "only 10% [of dieters] manage to lose a significant amount of weight. Of those that do, most will put it back on within a year". In addition, and more importantly, the much-vaunted linking of obesity with ill health is less causal than the 'obesity crisis' rhetoric suggests:

"Success" in dieting interventions has traditionally been defined as weight loss. It is implicit in this definition that losing weight will lead to improved health, and yet health outcomes are not routinely included in studies of diets. ... We examine[d] whether weight-loss diets led to improved cholesterol, triglycerides, ... blood pressure, and fasting blood glucose, and test[ed] whether the amount of weight lost is predictive of these health outcomes. Across all studies, there were minimal improvements in these health outcomes, and none of these correlated with weight change.

(Tomiya et al 2013, p.861)

Just as problematically for the panicked fat-phobic 'obesity crisis' discourse, a 35-year, 100,000-participant Danish study (Afzal et al, 2016) found that 'overweight' adults actually lived *longer* than those in the 'healthy' category, and that those categorized as 'obese' had *no more risk of premature death* than those categorized as 'normal' weight, even controlling for variables of age, gender, family medical history, socio-economic status, and smoking. It appears, therefore, that the alarmist obesity discourse is more to do with aesthetics and demonizing a constructed 'other' than it is about public health.



These discourses, then, of obesity alarmism, of gender conformity, and also of the perils of hiking alone, together form a larger assemblage of social control (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). Much like Foucault's panopticon (1977, pp.195-228), in which prisoners come to self-monitor lest they be caught out by official surveillance, these norms work together to get individuals to knuckle down and follow the social rules. However, as these norms are constructed, they can also be contested. When hiking as a lone, fat woman I stray as much from the script as I do from the trail.

### **Mother Nature and Pablo Neruda**

The route up looks vertical.//Once I get up there, there won't be water, so do I have enough now, or should I fill up one more bottle here? Nah, I'm OK.//Pause. Breathe.//My sunscreen is melting, running from the creases at the sides of my eyes down my cheek. It looks like tears, and isn't.//I concentrate.//I am totally in this moment.//I wipe my face with a bandana until it feels red, raw. But I cannot see the colour of my face: it is sunburn or abrasion? Maybe both. I won't see a mirror for another few days. By then I'll be nut brown, so who cares?// The cliff *is* kind of vertical.//Now, though, I notice handholds and, looking closely, there are also rock platforms. It would suck to fall here, but it wouldn't be fatal.// Pause. Breathe.//Look out over the valley.// Galahs swoop in formation, their red bellies catching the light.//Back to it. Handhold. Pause. Foot secure? Pause. Handhold. Pause. Long reach, foot, in the gap, made it. Handhold.//Breathe. Pause. //Move foot. Handhold. Getting there.//Hey, this is easier than it looks.//Don't look down.// Pause. Breathe.// I am completely in this moment.//It's hot.//I feel so freakin' capable.//Almost there.//Pause. Breathe.//Scramble. A few more steps.//Top! Ahh! Pack off. Swig water. Look around.

It's my 43<sup>rd</sup> birthday and I'm on top of a hill in outback Australia. I'm perfectly alone, hiking for a week straight, carrying everything, camping. Maybe twice a day I run into another hiker and we exchange pleasantries, but mostly I'm alone.

I prove to myself I am capable. I am strong. I may be fat, but also I am quite fit. I am determined. I can keep going. I push through foot pain, the fear of falling, the fear of failing. Here, it is just the landscape and me. Mother Nature doesn't care. Mainstream culture is a cacophony of voices telling me hateful things about my body. But out here those voices are so much quieter, so much further away, quietened by the wind. On the hilltop, I pause, and look around, and read a Neruda poem aloud to myself from my notebook. Poetry is as necessary as water here.

The poet's words fill the air. They fill me. Like the wind, they hold back the critiques, the hatred, the scorn. Instead of the self-loathing of hating my fatness, my body, *myself*, I am choosing to find wonder and calm and beauty in nature. My body is the interface, the only one I have, and it lets me walk in forests. Here I am, embodied, reading aloud to myself on a hilltop because the sun is shining, and because I can.

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