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Expansive archives and expanding archiving: a scoping review about fatness in the archive

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ABSTRACT

This scoping review critically examines how fatness and fat people are represented – and often misrepresented – within archival collections. Although scholars are engaged with writing histories of fatness, the archival sources which inform these histories are given minimal attention. In response, this review article seeks to critically explore representations of fat within the context of archive and memory studies, considering *both* how such materials are used within research and community spheres and how they are managed, interpreted and described by information professionals. Drawing on academic sources published over the past 25 years, it situates its analysis at the intersection of Fat Studies and Critical Archival Studies, two fields united by a shared commitment to challenging structural inequalities and pursuing liberatory approaches. The review highlights how archival processes, policies, and archival professionals can pathologise or obscure fat bodies, rendering records difficult to find or absent within archives. I also identify potential interventions, including inclusive vocabularies and descriptive standards and the co-creation of fat archives with communities. Finally, I identify a series for future directions for research in this field.

KEYWORDS

Fat studies; archives; critical archival studies; archival description; memory; fat activism

Introduction

Fat Studies has long been concerned with the politics of representation. Scholars have scrutinized how fat people and fatness are represented and the meanings associated with fat bodies across forms of cultural and media production – including (but not limited to) within literature (Averill 2016; Linder 2011), mainstream media (Kyrölä 2021), digital and social media (Garcia Hernandez 2021; Gibson 2020), photography (Snider 2018) and film (Manigault-Bryant 2013). Following the lead of cultural theorists who have interrogated how meaning is produced and exchanged through cultural practices and texts (Hall 2013, xviii), fat studies researchers have deconstructed tropes which pathologise fat bodies (Monaghan, Colls, and Evans 2015; Murray 2008). Scholars have identified the importance of grassroots cultural production in countering these tropes, positioning cultural work as resistant, powerful and visionary (Averill 2016; Cooper 2016).

These analyses rely upon access to records of fat lived experience and cultural legacies of activism in this field, which form important primary source data for analysis. Histories of fat and fat activism also rely upon the availability of these primary sources (e.g., Cooper 2016; Downing Peters 2023; Matheson 2020). However, scholars have yet to consider how these artifacts exist within “the memory space of the ‘archive’” (Pratt 2018, 227). This is in contrast to cultural and sociological scholarship which has been shaped by the archival turn (Ketelaar 2017; Moore et al. 2017). The archival turn is a paradigm shift in which archives are now viewed as sites of knowledge production and cultural formation (Ketelaar 2017, 228). However, the challenges associated with archiving representations of fatness have been given scant attention. Histories are often written without consideration of the “pre-history” of archival collections, or “the prior conditions of existence” (Hall 2001, 89) which shape the form and narrative of an archive prior to deposit. The influence of archivists and archival practice is also absent from analyses.

This article seeks to critically explore representations of fat within the context of archive and memory studies, considering *both* how such materials are used within research and community spheres and how

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they are managed, interpreted and described by information professionals. Scoping reviews are employed in emergent research areas and when relevant research may be spread across disciplines or investigated using diverse methodologies (Arksey and O'Malley 2005, 20). This scoping review accordingly:

- Explores how scholars have engaged with representations of fatness within archival collections along with the practicalities of finding, archiving and interpreting these representations within the archival profession
- Identifies issues and barriers affecting the discoverability of archival representations of fatness within existing collections
- Identifies disciplinary areas in which there is a concentration of work in this field
- Identifies a series of forward directions to inform future research in this area

Context

This review is located at the intersection of critical archival studies and fat studies. These two fields of inquiry are linked by shared concern with structural inequality, stigmatization, and critical attention to processes and decision-making Rinaldi and Friedman (2022), 39), therefore forming a synergetic pairing for this topic. Within this section, I briefly introduce both fields with emphasis on shared values.

Fat Studies is “a post-disciplinary field of study that centres the fat body and lived experience of fat people” (Pausé and Taylor 2021, 1). This scholarly field emerged following decades of fat activist organizing and cultural work (Cooper 2016). The term “fat” is used purposefully by scholars as a way to reject pathologising concepts of obesity (Cooper 2010, 1021). Rather than maintain that “illusory scholarly objectivity” (Schuchter 2019, 335) is crucial in academic research, Fat Studies emphasizes the political importance of fat people as active agents within research (Cooper 2016, 6). In this manner, the discipline distinguishes itself from broader obesity research which is criticized for dehumanizing and marginalizing fat people (7). Rather than examining fatness from a distance, Fat Studies instead aims to build fat community and culture and work across boundaries between activism and academia (Cooper 2010, 1021).

Critical archival studies is a branch of information studies concerned with “critiquing dominant modes of archival theory and practice, and in imagining and enacting new ways of doing archives” (Caswell 2021a, 29). Theorists in this field employ critical theories to identify and interrogate normative forms of archival practice (Brilmyer 2018, 97). Through a critical archival studies lens, it is possible to situate “the current state of archival discourses and practices in the oppressive structures from which they emerge” (Caswell 2021a, 30). The emphasis on articulating and challenging injustice and oppression within this work mirrors that of fat studies scholars concerned with fat oppression and injustice enacted through social systems (e.g., Stoll 2019). In parallel to Fat Studies, critical archival theorists are also concerned with enacting social justice through archives/archiving and “liberatory memory work” (Harris cited in Caswell 2021a, 30).

Positioning

In line with both fat studies and critical archival studies, both of which emphasize the importance of reflexivity and positionality (Brilmyer 2018; Cooper 2012), I will situate myself and my relationship to this project. Although I am an academic researcher, my background is not in the field of Fat Studies but in the study of archives of grassroots culture through a critical archival studies lens (e.g., Fife 2024a, 2024b). I am a fat, white, working class, neurodivergent, queer and non-binary person. I have a professional background as an archivist, in which I worked closely to describe, develop, digitize and facilitate access to audio-visual and paper-based collections for a decade. In my leisure time, I have engaged in fat activist cultural work (Cooper 2016) including running a fat positive fashion blog, running fat positive clothes swaps, and publishing zines. I have engaged in these forms of cultural work since the late 2000s. My immersion within fat activism is typical within Fat Studies, in which researchers have often undertaken projects from a position of overlapping connections with fat (Cooper 2010, 1021).

My starting point for this review was an archival encounter in my professional life. I was searching for images in the archive of The Daily Herald photographic library¹ as part of a researcher enquiry. The

collection maintained the original order of the picture library's classification system, therefore also representing the ideology of the originating context, reflected in many uses of descriptive language that would be considered offensive in the twenty-first century.

Early on in my employment at the museum, I was browsing the picture library and came across a folder for “freaks.” Contained within the folder were (amongst other photographs) images of fat children. Although now I cannot recall the precise details of the article the photographs accompanied,² I do remember feeling horrified that bodies that in many ways resembled my own could have been categorized as freakish. The encounter continued to resonate as I moved through my professional life – not least because the categorization of those images was illustrative of ways in which personal and negative ideological associations can infiltrate archival catalogs. Additionally, because of that categorization, anyone searching for images of fat people in the archive would be unable to locate those photographs. It served as a concrete reminder that archival description can render specific histories inaccessible or absent for researchers.

Methodology

I conducted a scoping review using the methodological framework of Arksey and O'Malley (2005). Scoping reviews aim to “identify nature and extent of research evidence” (Grant and Booth 2009, 95) within a specified field. This type of review is also utilized to identify gaps in existing literature (Arksey and O'Malley 2005, 21). As the topic of this review is an emergent area of research and scholarship has been identified across disciplines, this was the appropriate choice of review format.

Inclusion criteria

The scope of this literature review is limited to the representation of fat people within archival collections and the management of these archival traces within routine collection management activities (for example, archival description; providing access to users; digitization; exhibition). It is noted that there is a substantial body of work focusing on histories of fatness – however, these sources have only been included in the review when they contain accounts of archival research.

There is also a substantial body of gray literature potentially applicable to this study (for example, blog posts, journalism, podcasts etc.) (Gilbert and Hanneke 2025). As the focus of this review is on scholarship, searches were limited to academic databases. Future research could engage with a much more diverse range of sources, both as primary sources and in literature review.

This review is limited to scholarship published between 2000 and 2025 in line with the development of Fat Studies. Although the origins of the discipline are unclear and often contested (Zerafa 2023), many scholars position the inception and formalization of the field within the 2000s (e.g., Cooper 2010). The review is also limited to texts published in English, due to the language limitations of the researcher.

Search strategy

Searching was conducted across six databases: Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts (EBSCOhost), Scopus, Sociological Abstracts, Web of Science Core Collection, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global, and Google Scholar. I also employed backward and forward searching through citations (Paulus, Lester, and Dempster 2014) to identify further texts. See Table 1 for an example of a search strategy.

Table 1. Search strategy used for Library, information Science and Technology Abstracts.

Database	Search terms	No. articles
LISTA (Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts)	Fat OR obes* OR “plus size”	N = 58
AND	Archiv*	
Limiters	2000–2024; English; academic journals	

Study selection

Searches were conducted in all databases between December 2024 and February 2025. All citations were exported to Zotero, then reviewed to identify and remove duplicated entries. Following this, I screened the publications by reviewing the title and abstract of all texts against the inclusion criteria.

All information about publications identified, included and excluded can be found in the PRISMA diagram (see Figure 1).

Data extraction and analysis

A template was used to extract relevant data from each study. The following fields were used to appraise each source:

- Author(s)
- Year of publication
- Location of study
- Discipline

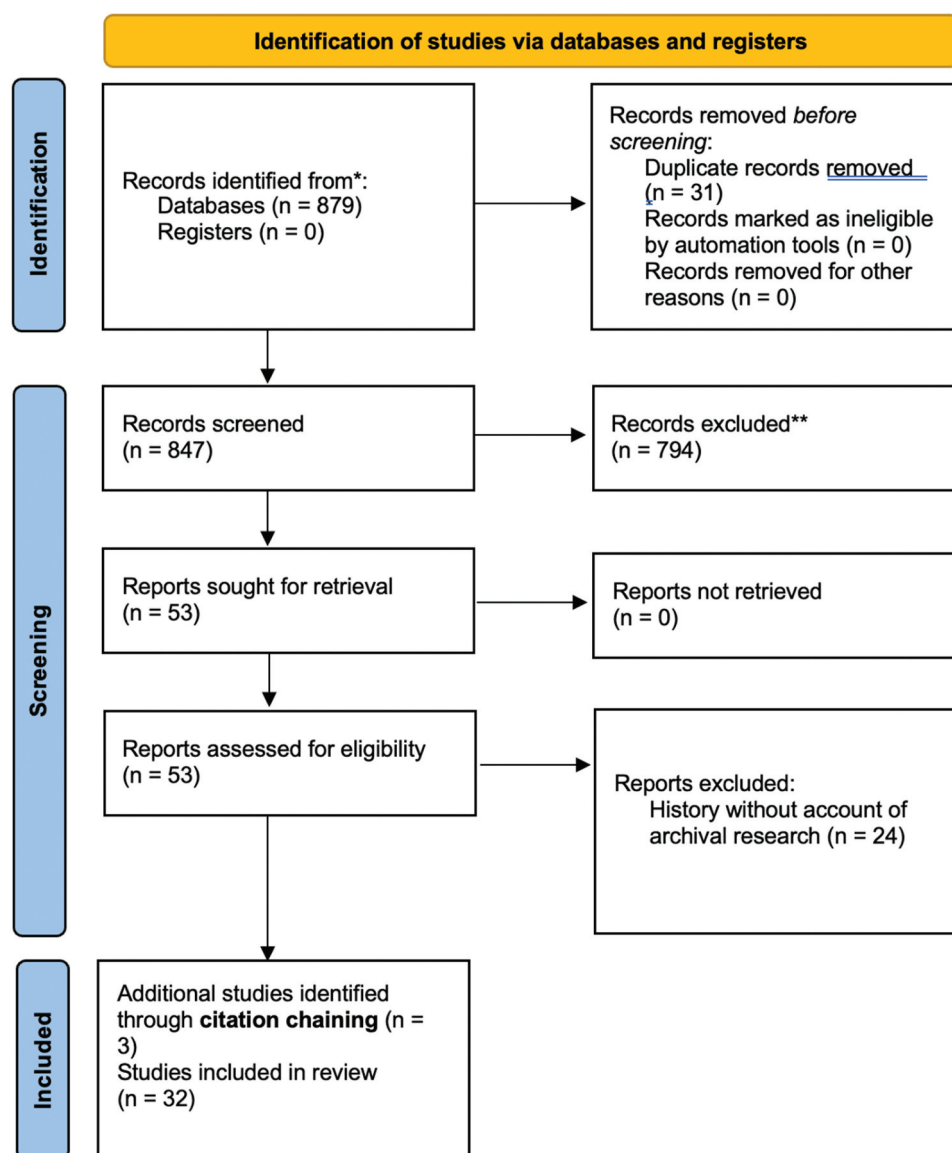


Figure 1. 2020 PRISMA flow diagram of article screening and selection.

- Publication type
- Journal title
- Methods
- Key findings
- Analysis
- Archives mentioned

I analyzed the sources identified through the review following the phases of thematic analysis articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006) - becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the final analysis (2006, 87). Themes were generated, reviewed and finally summarized below.

Findings and discussion

A total of 32 publications were identified. The publication type included books ($n = 2$), book chapters ($n = 2$), conference proceedings ($n = 1$), journal articles ($n = 19$), and theses ($n = 7$). Works were predominantly published in the USA, although other locations included Australia, Canada, Finland, India and the United Kingdom. As illustrated in Figure 2, the literature identified in this review has been published in the last 23 years, with most of the scholarship produced after 2010, after which there has been a small but steady rate of publication. This is demonstrative of both growing interest in the archive within the relatively niche field of Fat Studies.

Emergent themes

The nature of archives and records

The first category identified is the form and nature of an archive or a record of fatness. Within this category, I identified three themes – unconventional archives; archives of creativity; and embodied archives.

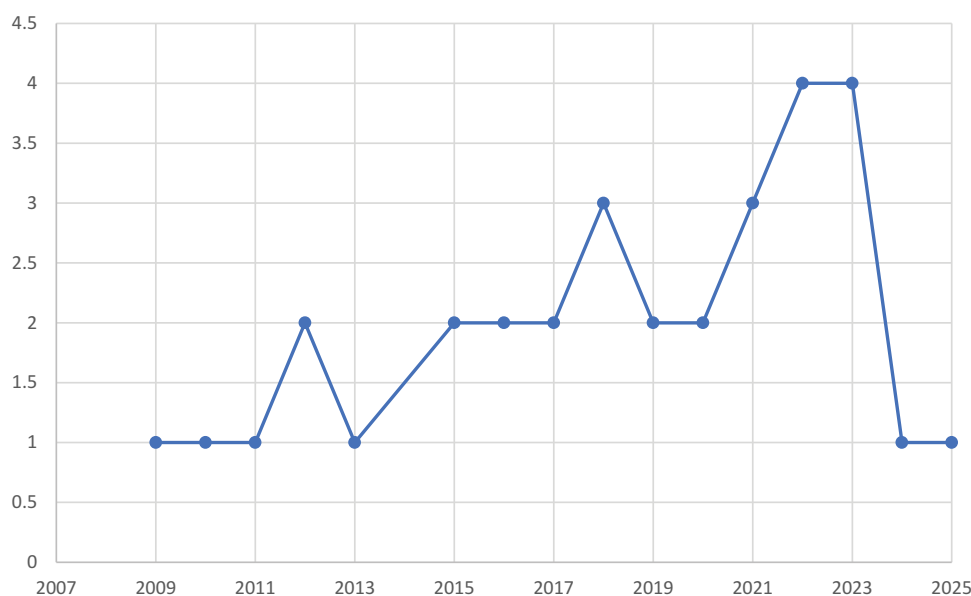


Figure 2. Volume of publications by date. Texts were published in fields including gender studies; fat studies; archival studies; photography; history; publishing; film studies; cultural studies; performance studies; sociology; fashion; literature; communication studies; rhetorical studies; pornography studies; chicana studies; liberal studies; library and information studies; and women's studies. Whilst weighted towards fat studies, the variety of disciplines identified indicates a wide and interdisciplinary reach of this emergent area of research (see Table 2).

Table 2. List of included studies.

Number	Study (1st author, year)	Country	Publication type	Discipline	Format/methods	Collections used
1	Bolden (2018)	USA	Masters thesis	Communication Studies; Rhetorical Studies	Primary source analysis; content analysis	Mayer Collection of Fat Liberation at University of Connecticut; Lesbian Herstory Archives; June Mazer Lesbian Archives
2	Buchanan (2022)	USA	Journal article	Photography; Gender Studies	Primary source analysis	Laura Aguilar Archive
3	Cacace (2017)	USA	Masters thesis	Liberal Studies	Primary source analysis	Not stated
4	Cantrell (2013)	USA	Undergraduate thesis	Women and Gender Studies	Primary source analysis	Not stated
5	Choudhury (2021)	USA	Book chapter	Literature	Theory building	Not stated
6	Cooper (2010)	UK	Journal article	Sociology	Literature review	Not stated
7	Cooper (2012)	UK	Journal article	Fat Studies	Creative methods; autoethnography	Archival source deposited at Bildwechsel (Hamburg)
8	Cooper (2016)	UK	Book	Sociology	Autoethnography	Not stated
9	Downing Peters (2019)	USA	Journal article	Fashion; history	Critical discourse analysis; visual analysis	Museum of the City of New York, Museum of Modern Art, Museum at Fashion Institute of Technology, Drexel University – led to little success. Instead the author utilized trade journals, local newspapers, fashion and style guides, vernacular archives and weight-loss advice literature that had been digitized. Copies were held by Parsons School of Design, The New School and Fashion Institute of Technology.
10	Downing Peters (2023)	USA	Book	Fashion; history	Critical discourse analysis; visual analysis	As above
11	Farrell (2018)	USA	Journal article	Publishing	Interviewing; primary source analysis	Not stated
12	Garcia Hernandez (2021)	USA	Journal article	Cultural Studies	Content analysis; primary source analysis	Not stated
13	Garcia Hernandez (2020)	USA	Journal article	Women's Studies; Performance Studies	Autoethnography	Not stated
14	Gelfand (2021)	USA	Undergraduate thesis	Sociology	Oral history interviewing	Not stated
15	Gilbert and Hanneke (2025)	USA	Journal article	Information Studies	Literature review	Not applicable
16	Heller (2012)	USA	Journal article	Literature	Primary source analysis	Not stated
17	Highberg (2011)	USA	Journal article	Rhetorical Studies; Pornography Studies	Primary source analysis	Not stated
18	Hyrkäs and Myllykangas (2024)	Finland	Journal article	History	Primary source analysis	Promotional materials produced by the Association to Combat Obesity, and representations of the organization within the digital newspaper archive of the Finnish National Library
19	Jones and Pausé (2023)	USA/Australia	Journal article	Fat Studies	Commentary	Adipositivity Project archive
20	Levy-Navarro (2009)	USA	Book chapter	Fat Studies	Commentary	Not stated
21	Luna (2019)	USA	Masters thesis	Chicana Studies	Autoethnography; primary source analysis	Laura Aguilar archives at UCLA; University of Stanford Special Collections
22	Matheson (2020)	Australia	Journal article	History	Primary source analysis	Archives of <i>Western Mail</i> held at Museums Victoria

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Number	Study (1st author, year)	Country	Publication type	Discipline	Format/methods	Collections used
23	Merton (2022)	UK	PhD thesis	Communication Studies	Survey; digital ethnography; ethnography; content analysis; participant observation	Spare Rib archive; Fat liberation archive and Vivian Mayer collection at University of Connecticut; Feminist Library; Nettie Pollard collection at Bishopsgate Institute; Hall Carpenter Archives; Wellcome Collection; LSE Women's Library
24	Padalecki (2022)	USA	Conference proceedings	Narrative Studies	Autoethnography	Judy Freespirit Papers at the GLBT Historical Society Archives
25	Pratt (2018)	USA	Journal article	Fat Studies	Theory building; primary source analysis	Stocky Bodies image archive; Wellcome Library image archive; Library of Congress photo archive
26	Rinaldi and Friedman (2022)	Canada	Journal article	Fat Studies	Creative methods; thematic narrative analysis	Not applicable
27	Simic (2015)	USA/Australia	Book chapter	History; publishing	Primary source analysis	Not stated
28	Sinha (2017)	India	Journal article	Film studies; history	Primary source analysis	Not stated
29	Taylor and Mitchell (2023)	Canada	Journal article	Photography; cultural studies; gender studies	Theory building	Pretty, Porked and Pissed Off collective archive
30	Taylor, Mitchell and Rice (2023)	Canada	Journal article	Sociology; cultural studies	Performance autoethnography	Pretty, Porked and Pissed Off collective archive
31	Tidgwell et al. (2018)	USA	Journal article	Interdisciplinary	Commentary	Not applicable
32	Torres Narvaez (2015)	USA	PhD thesis	Performance Studies	Performance analysis	Not stated

Unconventional archives and records

In circumstances where records of minoritised groups are hard to locate or absent within archival collections, it is necessary to look toward unusual records and different approaches to research (Downing Peters 2019, 2023; Gelfand 2021). A diverse and unconventional selection of materials are described as archives and records by authors – this includes pornography (Highberg 2011), television shows (Cacace 2017), photography and visual art (Buchanan 2022; Taylor and Mitchell 2023), performance (Taylor and Mitchell 2023; Torres Narvaez 2015), zines (Merton 2022), ephemera (Merton 2022; Taylor and Mitchell 2023), newsletters (Ellison 2019), films (Rinaldi and Friedman 2022), digital content (Garcia Hernandez 2021), publications (Farrell 2018), collections of research data (Griff 2016), and bodies themselves (Quiring 2022). Taylor et al. describe the archive of Pretty Porky and Pissed Off as “unconventional, informal, and personal, and many of the items capture the ephemeral” (Taylor and Mitchell 2023, 2) – each one of these qualities could marginalize records within traditional archives, which historically privilege the organizational records, conventional (material) formats and records which represent majority identities.

The notion of “the record” is an important tenet of archival scholarship. Critically archival theorists have sought to destabilize tradition notions of the record, which privilege persistence, materiality and fixity (Caswell 2016). Instead, it is necessary to forge new and expansive understandings of “record-ness” which recognize that personal and intimate materials can exceed the boundaries of established archival practice and indeed our understanding of the role of records and archives more broadly (Douglas and Alisauskas 2021, 14). The unconventional nature of the records used to write histories of fatness indicates a broader understanding of what is considered archival – the primary sources referenced exceed the limits of traditional archival vaults, yet are necessary sources of testimony, especially when traditional archives contain little or no trace of fat people.

Archives of creativity

Some scholars use the term archive to refer to a body of work and/or an outcome of creative practice (Highberg 2011; Torres Narvaez 2015; Buchanan 2022; Rinaldi and Friedman 2022; Jones and Pausé 2023;

Taylor and Mitchell 2023). These materials are presented as archives for several reasons. Firstly, they contain forms of evidence from which it is possible to learn about culture, identity and community. For example, a series of pornographic films representing fat gay male sexuality is situated as an “archive of the nuanced ways gay couples . . . negotiate their own standards for sex . . . , their own attitudes towards marriage and monogamy and their own definitions of love and fulfilment” (Highberg 2011, 117). In an examination of the autobiographical performance work of Virginia Grise, Torres Narvaez proposes that performance can be used to create records of hidden histories from within communities (Torres Narvaez 2015, 64). Secondly, archives of creative practice can sustain community and validate shared experiences, as well as increasing the visibility of fat bodies in the current era (Jones and Pausé 2023).

Embodied archives

Records and archives of fatness are also embodied and inscribed upon the body itself (Buchanan 2022; Hernandez 2020; Luna 2019; Quiring 2022; Taylor and Mitchell 2023). Embodied practices – such as burlesque and performance art – have archival value because of their capacity to illustrate how memory can be enacted through – and transformed by – the body (Rodriguez cited in Hernandez 2020, 117). In their examination of the photography of Laura Aguilar, Buchanan describes photography as a way to document action and bring bodies traditionally marginalized into the archive (Buchanan 2022, 56). The absence of the body is also viewed as significant for scholars – for example, in reference to archival traces of actress and comedienne Tun Tun, Sinha refers to a tension between “excess and ephemerality” that determines hypervisibility in one setting (on screen) and absence within archive collections (Sinha 2017, 81).

In their exploration of the archive of Pretty Porky and Pissed Off – a performance art collective – Taylor et al. employ a “carnal methodology” (Taylor, Mitchell, and Rice 2023, 1). This approach to examining their archive allows the authors to document not only the contents of the archive, but their affective and bodily responses to the archival materials along with the responses to the performances documented in the archive. For example, the authors describe experiencing goosebumps when rewatching footage, which is situated as “the body’s testimony, or testifying to its history” (10).

The notion of an embodied archive is also explored by critical archival theorists (Douglas and Alisauskas 2021; Lee 2019, 2020; Rosenberg and Sharp 2018). Douglas and Alisauskas describe how memory can be inscribed on bodies (through body modification practices) and interacted with through the body (for example, wearing poignant objects which commemorate others) (Douglas and Alisauskas 2021, 19). For Lee, viewing archives *as* bodies acknowledges the dynamic inherently shifting nature of records (Lee 2019, 182). The body enables individuals to convey and connect with memory, whilst also acting as a metaphor for the ways in which archives themselves evolve different meanings and interpretations over time.

Interactions with archives and records of fatness

Most of the literature identified was categorized under interacting with archives and records – by which I refer to actions taken by individuals (e.g., researchers, archivists, historians, activists) to engage with archives and records which contain representations of fat people. I identified four key actions in the literature; finding, using, creating/forming and managing archives and records.

Finding

Publications which chart histories of fat activism sometimes contain short sections accounting for which collections were consulted and how scholars located archival records (Levy-Navarro 2009; e.g.; Cooper 2016). This experience, when documented, is often brief but nonetheless provides illuminating data about the challenges associated with identifying primary sources within archives.

Researchers frequently express frustration at absences of fat people within archival collections (Cacace 2017; Choudhury 2021; Cooper 2016; Downing Peters 2019; Sinha 2017). For example, Cacace refers to “chasing the fat female body” in hours of television footage, situating her analysis as an “excavation” (Cacace 2017, 52). Cooper describes her archival research as “a scavenging expedition centred on encounters with the archive” (Cooper 2016, 107). In his analysis of the cinematic career of Tun Tun (or Uma Devi Khatri, a Bombay actress and comedienne), Sinha describes how the actress is represented in “fleeting, often nameless” (Sinha 2017, 94) ways in the archive, often referred to or represented through the opinions of

other (often fatphobic) people. This archival absence is contrasted with the volume of her appearances on film (81), indicating how decisions about what/who is documented in the archive shape the presence/absence of performers in histories (94).

The experience of finding fatness in the archive is described as emotionally charged and strongly affective by several scholars (Cooper 2010; Levy-Navarro 2009; Padalecki 2022). For example, Cooper describes archives as “places of refuge and affirmation” (Cooper 2016, 48). Padalecki describes feeling “a sense of connection to and solidarity with the women on that decades-old VHS tape, even though our union was only imaginary” (Padalecki 2022, 339). The feelings of freedom, connection and affirmation articulated through these accounts can be connected to Caswell’s description of “affective liberation” which occurs when the minoritised recognize themselves within archival collections (Caswell 2021b, 10). This experience of joyful self-recognition happens after prolonged experiences of feeling absent or misrepresented within collections (11).

Several publications document reasons that cause or exacerbate the absence of records and archives of fatness. Historians of fat activism identify issues relating to the internal documentation of activist movements (Cooper 2012, 2016; Gelfand 2021; Padalecki 2022). Activism can go underdocumented, and there are limited opportunities for knowledge to be exchanged between generations (Cooper 2016, 103). This connects to research in other social movement and subcultural contexts, which identify that absences in the archive can be attributed not only to decisions made about what to collect and a related undervaluing of activist/subcultural heritage, but also to limited capacity to document movements during their active periods (Downes 2010; Fife 2022; Withers 2015). When social movements are not documented, and the records that do exist are not collected by archives, fat activism and resistance is represented by historians in more limited, less multi-dimensional ways (Cooper 2012, 62).

So far in this section I have discussed how scholars identify a lack of archival representation of fat people and fatness within archives. However, the records and archives that *do* record these lives and experiences are also harder to locate due to how materials are described, both through archival description (cataloging) and through how language is used in records.

There are few arenas in which the complexity and social construction of fatness is more visible than in the use of language to describe fat people and fat bodies. This complexity is fourfold; *firstly*, euphemistic language is frequently used instead of the word fat (Downing Peters 2023; Highberg 2011). The use of euphemistic language is common, even in ostensibly celebratory environments – this is a tacit acknowledgment that “words carry judgement” (Highberg 2011, 113). *Secondly*, fat people are often described using pathologising or offensive language, especially when represented by others and within original texts (Choudhury 2021; Griff 2016; Matheson 2020; Monaghan, Colls, and Evans 2015). *Thirdly*, the language used to describe fatness and fat people changes over time (Downing Peters 2023; Matheson 2020). For example, Downing Peters examines how the fashion industry utilized alternative terms for what is now described as “plus-size” fashion – for instance stoutwear was used in the early twentieth century (Downing Peters 2023, 16). *Finally*, what counts as “fat” is determined by specific social, temporal and cultural contexts (Cooper 2016; Downing Peters 2023; Matheson 2020; Tidgwell et al. 2018). This means that a similarly sized body may be viewed as fat or not fat depending on time period, location, cultural context, and many other external factors.

These factors also affect how easy it is for users to find archives and records of fatness, and how complicated it is for archive workers to describe these materials. Archival description is a routine task of archival work in which archive workers create catalog entries for archival materials. Freeman situates description as “a process of mapmaking: the creation of a representation of the archive – a tool for orientation and navigation” (Freeman 2023, 449). The catalog records created by archive workers, the knowledge structures they become part of, and the professional standards that dictate how they should be produced have historically been positioned as neutral – however, under paradigm shifts in archival theory, archival description is now understood as a fundamentally subjective act which is shaped by and mediated through the identity and cultural background of a cataloger and the information systems which make records accessible (Charlton 2017; Cifor and Rawson 2023; Gooding, Terras, and Ames 2025; Han and Han 2021; Ortolja-Baird and Nyhan 2022). Through this practice archives “exhibit power and control over marginalized lives through documenting and categorizing stigmatised people” (Brilmyer 2018, 98). Information professionals can apply subject headings or tags to records which may

(intentionally or unintentionally) further pathologise fat people and render materials less easy to find (Gilbert and Hanneke 2025, 123).

Scholars document strategies employed to find the “unfindable” records and archives of fatness (Downing Peters 2019, 2023; Matheson 2020). Downing Peters proposes that “an eclectic approach, an open mind, and a great deal of patience” (Downing Peters 2023, 14) is needed to construct histories of fatness in the face of these barriers. Matheson describes how it is necessary to “look beyond explicit languages of resistance” (Matheson 2020, 125) when searching for records of activism which pre-date twentieth century social movements such as fat activism. Beyond this, users seeking records and archives of fatness may need to build their own vocabularies of search terms which reach beyond contemporary language. This parallels the information seeking strategies of queer historians encountering similar barriers (Freeman 2023).

Using archives and records of fatness

Histories form a dominant cluster of scholarship which make use of archives and records (e.g., Cooper 2016; Farrell 2018; Matheson 2020; Stearns 2002). These publications predominantly rely upon the primary source analysis of archival sources (Bolden 2018; Cacace 2017; Griff 2016; Highberg 2011; Hyrkäs and Myllykangas 2024; Luna 2019; Matheson 2020; Simic 2015), sometimes utilizing additional methods including oral history or interviewing when working with living histories (Farrell 2018; Gelfand 2021).

Although – as discussed previously – it is challenging to find traces of fat people within collections, this review did also identify the specific collections that are used within existing historical research. These include explicitly LGBTQ+, feminist and/or fat activist collections including the Mayer Collection of Fat Liberation at University of Connecticut (Bolden 2018; Merton 2022), the Lesbian Herstory Archives (Bolden 2018), the June Mazer Lesbian Archives (Bolden 2018), Christine Donald’s archive at the ArQuives (Ellison 2019), the Stocky Bodies Image Archive (Pratt 2018), the Laura Aguilar archives at UCLA and University of Stanford Special Collections (Buchanan 2022; Luna 2019), the Judy Freespirit papers at the GLBT Historical Society Archives (Padalecki 2022), the Feminist Library (Merton 2022), the Nettie Pollard collection at Bishopsgate Institute (Merton 2022), LSE Women’s Library (Merton 2022), and the Hall Carpenter Archive (Merton 2022). Within general collections, researchers have made use of the Wellcome collection (Merton 2022; Pratt 2018), the Library of Congress photo archive (Pratt 2018), magazine collections held by Parsons School of Design and the Fashion Institute of Technology (Downing Peters 2019), and newspaper collections at the Finnish National Library (Hyrkäs and Myllykangas 2024).

This selection of approaches to conducting research about fatness through existing archives indicates three dominant approaches to using primary archival sources:

- Using the archives of known fat activists
- Finding traces of fat people and fat activist within collections which are perceived to have aligning ideologies, for example LGBTQ+, feminist and women’s history collections
- Writing histories of fatness using more “mainstream” primary sources, for instance mainstream news media or gray literature, in which traces of fat people can be found within a broader context

It is important to note that this selection of collections is located predominantly in the US, with smaller concentrations in the UK, Australia and mainland Europe. Although this bias can be partially attributed to the limitations of this review (which is conducted by a researcher who can only speak and read English), it is also reflective of a wider dominance of white, Western narratives within fat studies, history writing and archival collections (Choudhury 2021, 246).

Some researchers acknowledge this limitation of existing primary sources and seek to employ additional strategies to surface hidden histories – for example, Gelfand identifies how the documentary traces of fat activism which have been archived predominantly highlight white women as the originators of fat activism, which has subsequently challenged by contemporary activists (Gelfand 2021, 27). In her oral history of the fat liberation publication *FaT GiRL*, Gelfand asserts that the limitations of primary sources necessitate researchers to reach “beyond the bounds of the publication to document the stories of the collective that produced it” (5). In this case,

oral history interviews are needed to create a more complete history of the publication. Oral histories are employed in combination with ephemera and short-lived publications by other scholars (Ellison 2019).

Historians of fatness may rely upon primary sources representing fat in a negative or pathologising manner, particularly when tracing the development of social perceptions or discourses (Griff 2016; Matheson 2020). This is not exclusive to this field of history but a frustration shared by many historians tracing marginal histories across cultural contexts, and who rely upon sources produced by hostile authorities (Romain 2017, 5; Sexton and Sen 2020, 199). In her biography of Patrick Nelson, Romain describes “reading against the grain,” which refers to archival interpretations which also consider “the reasons for the collection’s creation and the methodology used by the creator of the collection, [and] . . . read the archive in a different way to that intended by the creator of the document or archive” (Romain 2017, 5). This approach has significant value for researchers within this field, who may find fat people documented within sources which pathologise fatness or which otherwise position fat in a negative light.

It is also important to note that most identified sources focus on “pre-digital” organizing and activism (e.g., Bolden 2018; Cooper 2016), relying upon paper-based collections. However, sociological work in this area identifies the importance of digital spaces and cultural production within the development of fat activism and body positivity (Garcia Hernandez 2021; Gibson 2020, 2020). Web archives are maligned by historians as primary sources, which can further perpetuate the absence and exclusion of minoritised communities in history writing (Verhoef 2025). Early examples of digital cultural work (e.g., blogs) are no longer accessible to view (Gibson 2020, 93) – although it is unclear whether these sources remain accessible using web archives, this nonetheless signifies an urgent need to write histories which trace fatness through the early decades of the internet, or at least not to malign web archives within contemporary historical analyses.

Forming and making fat archives

Cultural work is a key aspect of fat activism (Cooper 2016). Activists have sought to challenge the dominant ideological associations between fatness through creating alternative forms of culture, including zines, podcasts, events and blogs (Pratt 2018; e.g., Gibson 2020; Garcia Hernandez 2021). These cultural practices are informed by a desire to resist and counter dominant harmful representations of fatness within mainstream media (Averill 2016). The creation of archives by fat activists can also be situated within this legacy of cultural activism.

When records are in limited number or absent from archives entirely, Caswell proposes that archive workers intervene through “catalysing the creation of new records rather than searching for pre-existing records to digitise [or collect] alone” (Caswell 2021a, 119). This drive to create rather than simply collect records and archives is shared by fat activists, including Cooper who describes “the act of assembling an archive of my fat feminist origins . . . as activism, a resource from which to develop critical awareness (Cooper 2016, 107). Similarly to broader patterns of cultural work, the creation of archives, records and documentary sources is often underpinned by motivations for justice and self-determination (Gelfand 2021; Rinaldi and Friedman 2022; Taylor and Mitchell 2023; Taylor, Mitchell, and Rice 2023).

There are a small number of accounts of the production of archives within identified scholarship. These include examples of research projects which produce small “archives” as an outcome – for example, Rinaldi and Friedman employ critical digital storytelling methods to co-create microdocumentaries of gender non-conformity and weight (Rinaldi and Friedman 2022). Although this article refers to the 10 films produced during the project as an archive, there is no further information about how the collection is preserved or if the resulting films were deposited somewhere for long term preservation.

Community-led projects are also documented and instigated through research projects (Cooper 2012, 2016; Taylor and Mitchell 2023; Taylor, Mitchell, and Rice 2023). For example, Cooper describes provides an account of the development of *A Queer and Trans Fat Activist Timeline*, a grassroots documentation workshop facilitated with groups of fat activists which involved the co-creation of a shared timeline of fat activism (Cooper 2012). The project concerned itself with documenting personal and individual memories within a collaborative space – therefore, as Cooper writes, it was “based on an idea of history that is not concerned with facts but with fuzzy memory and community collaboration (Cooper 2016, 210).

Taylor et al. utilize collaborative auto/ethnography to explore the archive of Pretty Porky and Pissed Off (2023). This research project involved collecting materials and forming an archive, digitization and publication in an online archive. In another article, these authors describe “representational and affective

possibilities” associated with the production of “fat archives” (2023, 523) – by “creating an archive for the *archived*” (13) (rather than retrospectively archiving the work of an artist, as is common), it is possible to “thicken” the existing representations of fat people within archives (Taylor and Mitchell 2023, 524).

There are also digital community-led archives established within the fat liberation movement (*Welcome to Fat Liberation Archive* 2024). These projects have not yet been engaged with through scholarship – however, it is critical to note that the act of archiving from within is happening in some fat activist spheres, outside of the bounds of scholarship and formal archive institutions.

Managing archives and records of fatness

Although this review has identified scholarship which discusses and interprets records and archives of fatness, the act of *archiving* – and all associated processes (e.g., cataloging, arrangement, appraisal, digitization, access) – are remarkably absent from research. The absence of scholarship relating to the management and description of archives and records of fatness could be attributed to the disciplinary concentration of the research identified in this search. Although the existing body of scholarship identified for this review is interdisciplinary, there is a minimal amount of research situated within archival studies or information studies – these fields have traditionally been more concerned with archive organizations, archival practice and archival processes.

There are only a few exceptions to this. Pratt’s article “The (fat) body and the archive: Toward the creation of a fat community archive” is the first to note this research gap (Pratt 2018). The author explores how fat bodies are represented in several digitized photographic collections held by the Wellcome Library and the Library of Congress, identifying examples of pathologising description, before exploring how community-led alternatives including the Stocky Images archive resist these harmful tropes of visual representation (Pratt 2018). However, although this article succeeds in identifying a research gap, the analysis of existing archival description and digitization relies upon a very limited sample. This indicates potential for a much larger scale study, perhaps employing content analysis to examine how fatness is represented across archival collections. This study’s focus is also on digitized images and future work could consider catalog metadata in addition to digitized materials.

There is no scholarship which explicitly focuses on collecting records and archives of fatness. However, some scholars hypothesize about the reasons why relevant materials have not been collected. In *Fashion Before Plus-Size: Bodies, Bias, and the Birth of an Industry*, Downing Peters proposes that fat stigma and bias against fat people within the fashion industry may result in material objects being considered less historically significant, therefore unworthy of long-term preservation (Downing Peters 2019, 2023). In this case, a historical and cultural bias against fatness within the fashion industry means that clothing designed for larger bodies is often maligned by collecting initiatives. The impact of the absence on history writing is “a deeply entrenched survival bias that has naturalized the notion that fat women have been excluded from fashion or, worse, that there were no large-sized women in the past” (Downing Peters 2023, 14). Researchers examining fat activist publications similarly account for how fat bias may affect whether texts are published at all (Farrell 2018, 141), and subsequent re-prints and archiving of volumes (Cooper 2016, 103). These accounts indicate that the decision about what is or isn’t collected (made by archivists) could be influenced by bias against fat people, which is worthy of future investigation within research.

Although several articles call for different approaches to archival description as one intervention against misrepresentation or erasure of fat people within archival collections, and (as explored earlier) many scholars identify challenges affecting the discoverability of records and archives of fatness relating to how collections are described (e.g., Downing Peters 2019, 2023), alternative approaches receive limited exploration. Taylor and Mitchell coin “feminist description” to describe collaborative and expansive forms of description which document both a description of what is happening in an image and the affective impact on the viewer (Taylor and Mitchell 2023, 518–519). This descriptive practice allows those represented in records to document their experiences through archival description, adding voice and depth to an individual record. This deeply subjective and affective practice contrasts greatly with professional archival training, which has historically insisted that archivists should seek to “mitigate, rather than embrace” their subjectivity (Caswell 2019, 6)

Although *archival* cataloging receives limited exploration, one text does address information organization through classification systems (Angell and Price 2012). Angell and Price examine how Fat Studies texts

are categorized by the Library of Congress, identifying “information bias” occurs through the assigning of subject headings. In this example, texts were classified as medical despite grounding in sociology – which consigns fatness to an association with disease, rather than broader human experience. The authors call for “major revisions [to these systems] to ensure that fat studies texts are findable and described appropriately” (Angell and Price 2012, 163). This work indicates the potential for larger scale action research designed to adapt or create new descriptive models – which could be informed by work done in disability studies and queer history (Brilmyer 2018; Cifor and Rawson 2023; Freeman 2023). For example, the Homosaurus is “a controlled vocabulary of LGBTQ±specific terminology that enhances the discoverability of and improves access to LGBTQ+ resources held by archives, libraries, and museums” (Cifor and Rawson 2023, 2169). This approach could inform similar work within fat studies.

The influence of archivists on records and archives of fatness is underexplored within identified scholarship. Although historians and sociologists do account for ways in which their positionality shaped their interpretation of sources (e.g., Ellison 2019), it is uncommon for researchers to consider the archives they use as shaped by the subjectivity and positionality of the collecting archive organization and archive workers involved in the acquisition and subsequent management of materials. As Stoler writes, complete histories also account for “the hands and habits of those charged with the writing, recording, sorting, and proliferation of documents” (Stoler 2010, 22). It is critical for this field to engage not only *what* is archived, but *who* archives it and *how*. By addressing *who* archives records of fatness, it is possible to understand how values and ideology shape what is and isn’t collected in this field. By attending to *how* these records are archived, researchers can understand the context in which records are interpreted and made available for use.

Conclusion: forward directions

This scoping review has identified and synthesized scholarship engaging with archives and records of fat people and fatness. Working between the fields of critical archival studies and fat studies, this analysis has pinpointed areas whether there is a concentration of research and topics warranting further explorations by future scholars.

I have demonstrated that archives and records of fatness are of immense value to scholars and activists alike – when located, archives can have immense liberatory potential (Caswell 2021a). Fat activist scholars have described how immersion within the histories of social movements can allow current activists to create “alternatives to what sometimes seems like an all-too-oppressive present” (Levy-Navarro 2009, 15). Histories can also be used to identify and critique ideological constructions of fatness (15). Archives are spaces of “refuge and affirmation” (Cooper 2016, 48) for researchers and activists alike, which enable dialogue and knowledge exchange between current and previous generations of “defiantly fat” people (Levy-Navarro 2009, 20). Archives provide the opportunity for current fat activists to “(re)conceptualize fatness – in the past, present, and future – in liberatory and hopeful ways” (Taylor and Mitchell 2023, 525).

However, records and archives of fatness are rare and often difficult to locate for researchers. The reasons for these absences are multiple; historical bias and stigma about fat people can influence whether their records and archives are preserved (Downing Peters 2023; Farrell 2018); there is limited documentation of fat liberation within broader social movements (Cooper 2016); fat experience cannot be easily categorized due to perpetually changing linguistic terms, cultural, geographical and temporal contexts (Downing Peters 2023; Matheson 2020); records and archives can take unconventional forms (Taylor, Mitchell, and Rice 2023); and archival description can further pathologise and exacerbate the inaccessibility of relevant collections (Gilbert and Hanneke 2025). This combination of factors requires intervention to prevent the erasure and invisibility of fat bodies within archives and the historical record more broadly.

In her examination of colonial archives, Stoler argues that it is crucial to consider both “archiving-as-process” and “archives-as-things” (Stoler 2010, 20). Most of the scholarship in this review attends to the latter with limited or no consideration of the former. It is imperative that future scholarship scrutinizes how records and archives are created and managed, who manages them, and the value systems and ideologies through which they are mediated to wider user groups. This is especially important given the many ways in which fat people are stigmatized and pathologised within other cultural forms. To attend to this gap, I have identified the following future directions for research in this field:

- *Archival description*: analyzing existing catalog entries and digitized materials to identify patterns of representation and descriptive bias, using the catalog itself as research data (Gooding, Terras, and Ames 2025); working collaboratively with fat people to co-create alternative descriptive standards and controlled vocabularies, informed by similar work led by queer communities (Cifor and Rawson, 2023).
- *Finding aids and guides*: addressing challenges which hinder discoverability of records and archives of fatness by creating resources which provide those searching with strategies and terminology to support discovery.
- *Engaging in liberatory archival work* (Caswell 2021a): co-creating archives with fat people, to counter patterns of dehumanization and envisage liberatory futures with those represented in this light in existing collections.
- *Fat people as archive users and information professionals*: examining the influence of lived experience on archival practice and research, by researching how fat archive users and information professionals shape interpretation of records of fatness.

While there is growing recognition of the value of fat histories and cultural production, archives and records of fatness are still deeply shaped by systemic fatphobia and descriptive biases. However, critical archival studies is a theoretical vehicle through it is possible to both examine the extent of these issues and to enact interventions which can prevent future absences in the historical record. By working directly with fat people as record subjects and archive creators to build inclusive and collaborative processes, and through treating archives as dynamic, affective and political spaces, it is possible for archives to become tools for fat liberation.

Notes

1. The Daily Herald Archive is a photographic library held by the National Science and Media Museum. The archive contains around 3.5 million images published by The Daily Herald newspaper dating between 1911 and 1965 (National Science and Media Museum n.d.)
2. Unfortunately, at the point of writing this article the National Science and Media Museum is closed for refurbishment with collections inaccessible to researchers. As a result, it is not possible to consult the folder in question to confirm the exact details of the images.

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