Girth & Mirth: Ethnography of a Social Club for Big Gay Men and Their Admirers

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Jason Andrew Whitesel, M.A.

Sociology Graduate Program

The Ohio State University

2009

Dissertation Committee:

Professor Townsend Price-Spratlen, Advisor

Professor Amy Shuman

Professor Steve Lopez
Abstract

“Girth & Mirth: Ethnography of a Social Club for Big Gay Men and Their Admirers” documents performances at Girth & Mirth group events and examines how participants use allusion and campy-queer behavior to reconfigure and reclaim their body images. Girth & Mirth started as a national social movement organization in the 1970s in response to weight discrimination in the gay community and provides a social network for big gay men and their relatively few supportive others. This work explores how big gay men experience size as a marginalizing status and how they seek dignity and respect in spite of their marginal position. Gay men, as a subaltern group, have their own hierarchy, and this work questions whether the social consequences of failure to be height-weight proportionate should be so high in the gay community. To explore how big gay men manage concepts of shame and pride, I use interviews with and participant observation of members of Girth & Mirth at charity fundraisers, weekend retreats, pride parades, café klatches, restaurants, and potlucks.

Sociological research provides a lens to understand the role of social organizations in effecting change and reformulating identities. This study builds on the work of Erving Goffman (1963), who examined how stigmatized individuals manage their identities against medicalized or pathologized social categories. Folklore performance research of Mikhail Bakhtin (1968) and others also provides a model for understanding the club’s special events as carnival, which involves rituals of inversion,
exaggeration, and camp. This study provides examples of how performance can be used as a resignifying strategy that acknowledges but resists stigma. In reaction to being treated as a single undifferentiated mass, big gay men engage in performances of reconfiguring the shame of their fat stigma by distinguishing among different kinds of fat “selves.”

This study analyzes the political potential found in the group’s positive and fun-loving approach to size and sexuality, drawing distinctions between the club as a normalcy group and its unmaking of normative groups. It shows how Girth & Mirthers use sexual objectification, status differentiation, and celebrating otherness to reconfigure shame. Often, reconfiguring shame makes big gay men into objects of desire; however, reconfiguring is not always reduced to sexual behavior, but can also be done through one’s level of (fat and gay) “outness” so to speak, through consumer inclusion (status symbols or clothing), or by taking shelter among one’s fellow sufferers. This work also points out differences between Girth & Mirthers effecting “real” structural changes in the external world and mostly the temporary, symbolic performances and status differentiation in which they engage. As the campy-queer performances of many Girth & MIRTHERS have revealed, the road to acceptance appears to be paved with something more than simply managing stigma; it requires an unforgettable performance.
Acknowledgements

If you want to survive graduate school successfully, you need good people on your side. Townsand Price-Spratlen, my advisor of almost 8 years, is one of those people. I took Townsand’s Qualitative Methods class during my first quarter at Ohio State, and I immediately knew this sharp and thoughtful guy was going to help me navigate graduate school. He made it clear to me early on that he would not advise going against the grain and pursuing a qualitative path in a highly quantitative department. But I am stubborn, to which I am sure he can attest, and love to make things difficult for myself. So Townsand gave me his blessing to do qualitative work and the freedom to explore my intellectual interests. He also supported me by looking after me when times were tough in the department. He eventually helped to make sure that I got financial assistance, by getting me hired on to one of his projects. Townsand has been interested in core issues of identity, and I think when I met him, he was a Postmodernist at heart. So his theoretical leanings inevitably rubbed off on me. For better or for worse, Townsand and I both have a tendency to get lost in our craft, in our thoughts, and in cultural minutiae, and we both like to indulge one another in our digressions. And here we are, 8 years later, which says a lot.

Amy Shuman also indulged me in an ongoing intellectual exchange and taught me that there are things that are good to think with, á la Levi-Strauss. I met Amy in one of my attempts to take classes beyond the walls of Sociology. Through her, I ventured into
the world of Folklore, where I met many good people. And I can truly say, had I not done so, I might have settled for less. Amy is a devoted mentor. She has such intellectual breadth and an eye for the big ideas in the seemingly unimportant events, the smallest moments, and rituals of everyday life. In this work, I owe several intellectual debts to her: it is she who suggested that I look deeper into inversion through play, at how Girth & Mirthers try to differentiate themselves in response to fat people being treated as a single undifferentiated mass, the possibility that there are always somewhat predictable limits to transgression, even within the carnivalesque, and how status display and status differentiation play out through tourism. . . . Suffice it to say, Amy understands my work even better than I do, and knows what I’m up to in each page and in every passage. I hope that in the years to come we get to work together even closer as colleagues.

I sought out Steve Lopez’s expertise much later in my academic career and wish I had done so earlier. He boosted my ego in a department that has too little support for many of its talented graduate students looking to be qualitative researchers. Steve taught me how to organize my thoughts, and more importantly, that readers need to be able to follow my line of reasoning; that I need to have an argument. Initially, I was content with just making a good-looking manuscript and knew less about making a well-crafted argument. Moreover, Steve encouraged me to carry out a full-fledged ethnography and kept me straight on the two aspects of ethnographic writing – description and analysis. He also helped me outline my chapters and pushed me to write the opening chapters to identify the heart of the ethnographic story I wanted to tell. I am comforted to know I can rely on his expertise, along with Amy’s, when it comes to converting this dissertation into a publishable book.
After finishing my PhD coursework, I thought I was done with classes. Then in the midst of dissertating, Steve asked me to take his Qualitative Writing class, which turned out to be a good thing. I really benefited from the comments of that particular group of qualitative folks and I became reconnected with some of my old support people like Khosi Kubeka and people who became new colleagues like Sri Thakkilapati. I also benefited in years prior from the Sexuality Reading Group at OSU hosted by the shrewd Liana Sayer. I gained much from my talks with one of the group’s members, Peter Hennen, who is an expert in the world of the Bears, Leathermen, and Radical Faeries. He also came to one of my conference presentations in Chicago. I am grateful to Peter for getting me to look at Leo Bersani’s work and for sharing his expertise on our narrower domain.

Tracy Ore, who also attended my presentation in Chicago, steered me to Halberstam’s article on “Gay Shame,” which totally changed for the better how I thought about my data. One conference colleague, in particular, Susan Alexander, continues to look out for me and lets me be an honorary member of the Saint Mary’s group. She encouraged me to share this work in its various stages in her conference sessions and classrooms. In my book, she is an honorary member of the LGBTQ world. Last but not least, are the Fat Studies scholars who gave me a forum to share my ideas and brought me up to speed on a more radical view of how “fat” is not a four-letter word, but that our sizist society has made it such. I especially want to thank Marilyn Wann, Mychii Null, and Stefanie Snider for their comments on earlier presentations and drafts of my work, for inviting me to sit on panels, and for sitting on some of my own panels.
In many ways, I wouldn’t have made it through grad school without the perfect trifecta of Amanda Kennedy, Stephanie Smith, and Wade Moore. You represent a chosen family to me. Amanda – our long walks and talks helped me work out ideas, gain confidence, and just was the best outlet for stress, for professional release – you always listened to my repeat performances of why I was incapable of writing “X,” and you always let me off easy when I was being my own worst enemy/critic. Stephanie – you helped me overcome psychological barriers to getting the dissertation done, once and for all. You have known me the longest, and where Amanda let me off easy, you gave me doses of reality when necessary. You also are the campiest queen I know. Wade – my partner in crime on the gay scene and the “poor man’s” accountant who got and kept me out of financial trouble while in graduate school. . . . You are one of the few “normal” people in my life.

My “real” family also was patient as their son, grandson, and brother continued to be the perpetual student. Each of them followed “what I do” to varying degrees – most of all, they remained proud of me, particularly my mom. I suspect this wouldn’t be what my grandparents would prefer that I study; however, if I were ever to settle on a dedication, it would probably have to go out to these two dear people who were always there for me, and who exposed me to the world of culture and travel outside Middletown, Indiana.

Brian, I met you when my life had been in a holding pattern for far too long. You brought life back into my home, going so far as to turn my office into a greenhouse. I learned that even growing plants could be manly if they are carnivorous ones. You provided the perfect distraction from my writing woes with the game Mario Party, and
plant shopping and searching for terrariums. Dissertating took so long that my cats grew old, and you helped me care for “geriatric” pets, while all of you tolerated my dissertation ramblings. I appreciate your being so flexible and supportive of your PhDiva.

My research was made possible by several different grants: a Social Justice Research Grant from Coca-Cola and OSU’s Multicultural Center, a departmental award for human rights research, and conference travel grants from the Popular Culture Association and the American Culture Association and the American Folklore Society. Through these monies, I was able to procure the services of Ben Stout and Greg Matthews for their transcription assistance, and Mán Chung for photocopying assistance. This money, in part, also allowed me to seek editorial assistance from Mügé Galin, who taught me the magical power of words. Mügé is an amazingly talented and genuinely wonderful person to work with. She helped me serve as a mouthpiece for Girth & Mirth and in turn, she herself became a champion for their cause. I learned a great deal from Mügé that improved my dissertation – I might have never finished it without her.

There were also many kind people who eased my work along the way. I am grateful to my colleagues on the project into which Townsand recruited me, who arranged for me to frontload hours so I would have the summer of 2007 off to go to the Super Weekend and Convergence: Amber, Elizabeth, Korie, and Kenny – thank you so much. I am also grateful to everyone at the Criminal Justice Research Center, who witnessed and commiserated with me throughout my research and writing years, as I juggled between being a project manager and a student. Thank you so much, Ruth, Laurie, Mark, Debbie, Susan, Diana, Eileen, Valerie, and Lori. Finally, yet importantly, I thank Mary Alice for her support in years past.
Girth & Mirth folks, my travel companions to OKC, especially my roomie in OKC, my monthly Friday lunch date and my travel companion to Convergence, I owe all of you a great deal. For one, you included me, a homebody, in your group, making me feel right at home among you. You even opened up your homes to me beyond the club, making my whole experience of research truly a delight. I hope that you feel I have done justice to you in these pages. While I am at the present time bound by IRB to keep my data and sources anonymous, I look forward to the day when I can properly acknowledge your contribution. As my Friday lunch date pointed out, I would hope that our collaboration might result in greater visibility for this wonderful organization.
Vita

1997................................. B.A. Psychology, Purdue University

2003................................. M.A. Sociology, The Ohio State University

2003 – present..................... Graduate Associate, Department of Sociology, The Ohio State University

Publications


Field of Study

Major Field: Sociology
Table of Contents

Abstract...........................................................................................................ii

Acknowledgments..............................................................................................iv

Vita....................................................................................................................x

Chapter 1: Girth & Mirth – A Normalcy Group ..............................................1

Chapter 2: Injuries Big Gay Men Experience..................................................11

Chapter 3: Performing the Fat Body as an Object of Desire............................38

Chapter 4: Redefining Fat through Play, Camp, and Carnival.........................62

Chapter 5: Big Gay Men Seeking Status Differentiation.................................73

Chapter 6: Girth & Mirth – Shame Reconfigured...........................................92

Chapter 7: Reflections on a Movement for Inclusion......................................118

References.......................................................................................................139
Chapter 1: Girth & Mirth – A Normalcy Group

The coffee shop’s sidewalk seating area is packed with gay men who weigh 225 to 350 pounds or more. A large man texts his “boy toy” on the phone and shares “naughty” messages with the rest of the group. Beside him, a couple of Bigmen scan the personals on their laptops while a few interested parties look over their shoulders, point, and suggest what profiles to look at next. The younger contingent sits off to the side, some reading tarot cards, others discussing comic books. The oldest couple talks about their horse out in the country, while keeping an eye on their Blue Great Dane. One member of this couple, a chubby vegetarian with a wizardly beard, is an animal lover and pulls biscuits from his pocket to give to dogs that walk by with their owners. Later, his partner, the adventurer, shares photos with me he took in Australia. Several vent about work; others talk about movies or celebrity gossip, frustrations with their workout routines, parenting travails, and church; one couple reminisces about their wedding day.

These men have, according to one member, turned this coffee house for tonight, as they do every Friday night, into their own private clubhouse: “It’s our coffee shop when we’re there.” Many have come to this café klatch because it “provides an opportunity to get out of the house on Friday nights.” Most “look forward to it all week.” As one member puts it, “for a $2 cup of coffee, I can spend 5 hours laughing and having a ball. . . It’s a chance to unwind from the stresses of the week.” This is their haven.
These men, who allowed me a privileged look into their group, are members of an Ohio chapter of an international association called Girth & Mirth, which provides a social support network for big gay men and their relatively few admirers.

Girth & Mirth started as a national social movement organization in the 1970s, in reaction to weight discrimination within the gay community, designed to transform big gay men’s experiences of shame (Bunzl 2005; Hennen 2005; Textor 1999). Like the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAFFA) which was started by an average-sized man who was attracted to large women and was married to one (Millman 1980), Girth & Mirth was founded by a Bigman and his thin admirer, the admirer taking the initiative to place the ad in an alternative paper (Textor 1999). To my surprise, one Girth & Mirther I met at a Bigman’s convergence told me, “I think the original New York Girth & Mirth was born out of NAFFA, which started in New York in the late sixties.” I also learned from him that the couple who founded the club had connections with NAFFA. Though this is all speculative, it may provide a clue as to how Girth & Mirth came about: by striking out on their own from NAFFA. Furthermore, the timeline seems to fit – the beginnings of Girth & Mirth in 1976 falls in line with the earlier inception of NAFFA in 1969. Interestingly, both groups were started by the admirers of large people – that is, from the standpoint of an outsider. Thus, objectification seems to be central to both clubs’ inception.

Clubs like Girth & Mirth, Martin (2000) describes as “appearance organizations” that coalesce around shamed physical characteristics, in this case, body shape and size (126). People typically experience “body shame” as a result of “their sexuality or physical appearance” (Martin 2000:125-126). The group is not necessarily an action
group; its purpose is to rescue big gay men’s dignity. Size is highly normatively regulated, and Girth & Mirth members push back against obesity as an epidemic narrative.

Some come to Girth & Mirth for the first time after reading about it online or in an ad in the gay paper or because they have come to the end of the line. As one man told me, he came across the ad for Girth & Mirth when he was looking for a suicide hotline number. As an artist, he worked alone and when his relationship of 11 years ended, he really found himself at a loss. Below is his story of the social injury he was suffering as a big gay man and how he came to join Girth & Mirth, where he found the kind of support he needed:

I had no friends. I was 11 years older, I wasn’t in the same physical shape, I was a little bigger – the grey hair and all that stuff. And I kind of felt, I have to get out and I have to socialize or I’m gonna go insane. And quite frankly, I was having suicidal thoughts. I mean, it got bad – because I thought no one would ever even want to speak to me. That’s not how the bars work. You’ve gotta be thin and have the right clothes and have the right hair and the whole thing. And I was reading one of these gay newspapers, and looking for some kind of support group for suicide prevention, and came across Girth & Mirth, and thought, “What the hell is that?”. So, I called and talked to somebody and thought, “Well maybe I’ll look into that!”. And I’m certainly glad I did. It saved my life quite frankly. Absolutely. I would have, I would have done it.

In my study of Girth & Mirth, I focused on the social injuries big gay men experience, as exemplified in the above quote. More importantly, I wanted to identify the strategies they use to deal with being doubly excluded. In addition to the stigma gay men generally face, big gay men have an added difference that has not been fully explored: exclusion from their own sex role identity group. Gay men, as a subaltern group, have an internal hierarchy, and this work questions the shame doled out to those who “fail” to be height-weight proportionate that is heightened in the gay community. My work examines
how gay men experience size as a marginalizing status and how they seek dignity and respect in a doubly marginal position as both “fat” and “gay.”

This is an inside look at big gay men and their attempts to construct livable and satisfying lives, refusing to be taken out of the running and wanting a fighting chance at being happy and sexually desirable in gay society. My work lends legitimacy to the ordinary culture of big gay men. It extends what we know about the subjective experience of being fat, the interactional nature of suffering, and the human behavioral responses to size discrimination within the gay community.

In describing Bigmen’s efforts at reconfiguring the stigma that surrounds being fat, this work also offers an insider’s critique of the gay movement. There is the exclusion all gay people experience – a group of people who wants equality. Then there is within-group prejudice, which produces the same forms of exclusionary mechanisms – size is a big example – and it forces big gay men to organize in the ways that I describe in the case of Girth & Mirth members. Granted, this is an extreme case study. Sometimes, the men I study choose an oppositional way of dealing with conformity, using excess as their weapon. However, they provide an alternative version of gay society that deserves attention. Within the microcosm of the Bigmen’s world, I tease out the possibilities for responding in ways that promote inclusion and healthy acceptance of difference rather than creating or reproducing new hierarchies of marginalization.

This work is cutting edge on two counts: it discusses Bigmen who provide a positive vision of being both fat and gay. At current rates of “obesity,” we will all be “obese” before too long, and being gay will soon be something completely “normal” and uncontroversial, both of which could really become one’s dream life, or one’s worst
nightmare. At the same time, Girth & Mirth is not a political group with a clearly defined agenda. Are these men insufficiently ideologically transformed or insufficiently liberated? There are also men in the group who identify with people on shows like “The Biggest Loser”; but we are all complicated, with a range of wants and coping strategies. It was in fact difficult to get people to understand why I would deem these supposed “losers” worthy of research. However, it was precisely because of these contradictions that I persisted with this project.

For nearly three years, I spent a great deal of time with members of Girth & Mirth, interacting with them at bar nights, café klatches, restaurants, potlucks, holiday bashes, pool parties, games & movies nights, and weekend retreats. The weekend retreats took me outside of the local scene to regional and national events held in America’s Heartland and in the Twin Cities.

Little reliable information exists on the ratio of big men to admirers. Since gay men fear fat, big men were overrepresented in the local group I studied. Because the role of admirer tends to be associated with a slimmer physique, gay men’s media and limited scholarly work exaggerates the oppositional pairing of Chubs and Chasers (admirers with thinner builds who find big chubby men attractive). My observations of online and actual communities do not support this. Like most partner selection, a reasonable number of big men opted for relationships with physically similar partners; hence, the online personals expression, “chub4chub.” Several men also attended events as romantic couples.

The estimated, “active” membership of the local Columbus group I studied was approximately 20-25 members. This did not include a fair number of peripheral folks who sporadically showed up. Roughly 60 people subscribed to the group’s listserv.
During my research, I witnessed more membership growth than decline. However, because of the small convenient sample, I cannot claim external validity. Moreover, members were largely middle-aged white men. Therefore, the conclusions drawn from this project may not generalize to the entire population of gay men in similar groups.

When I first came onto the big men’s scene, I was baffled by normalized activities like café klatch. Before meeting these men, it was easy for me to idealize them as revolutionaries, rebelling against gay culture fraught with all its body fascism. I was stumped and apprehensive that I would continue to come out of my observations empty-handed. Yet, after getting to know them a little, it became clear to me that many of the men wanted what conventional folks have. Big gay men engaged in normalized activities, meeting in “normalized” spaces like a gentrified residential coffeehouse, where oftentimes, they received better treatment, unlike the treatment they had come to expect at the local gay coffeehouse.

Girth & Mirth appeared to present an uneven kind of normalization. Normalization in the strictest sense, usually involves “community membership” with a capital “C” – it is about mainstreaming folks into the wider (normal/natural) community. Girth & Mirth, however, represented a created community, or what they called a “brotherhood,” “chosen family,” or “urban clan.” It preferred to cast itself as a social club, rather than a sex club. Congregation and shared experiences happened through the club, a special nurturing society for fat gay men. So instead of an explicit community activities model, Girth & Mirth was closer to a clubhouse model, though it did retain some of the community activities feel. For instance, Girth & Mirth brought out socially isolated fat folks (i.e. social integration or the normalization of “deviants”). The club
valued a greater range of gay male diversity and members became valued as a function of their social relationships with one another (i.e. their desire to experience one another’s company). In a body conscious society, we normalize anatomy by changing it, but instead, this group treated the “abnormal” as if it were mostly routine, so that devalued traits like fatness benefited from the acquisition of roles they valued, such as long-term friendships and relationships. Thus, there seemed to be much to gain from sharing time with others of common exceptionality – for the most part, they could be who they were with less fear of failure or reprisal. The Girth & Mirth members were aware of the ways in which they were not validated by the gay community and had figured out that, in lack of validation, they could build a community out of likeness, as fellow sufferers. One member sums up the group’s efforts at normalization very well:

Girth & Mirth does things with people who you can be around and be comfortable with, who won’t ridicule you, or make you feel uncomfortable in any way. As they say, there’s safety in numbers. We do coffee – it’s a circle of friends and there’s not a clunker in the bunch…. You can feel comfortable no matter what. You don’t have to feel afraid because you’re big. It’s a way to have a social group and you don’t have to be stuck at home. It’s nice for the holidays. Somebody has a place to go. When you’re sick, people care. It’s a brotherhood, maybe not like the Masons; we don’t have a secret handshake. My partner and I have become real close to some couples. It is friends to share with – a chosen family. The thing we choose in our life that provides a place for us.

As a sociologist interested in gender and sexuality, I was used to reading about groups with the potential to destabilize the normalization of identity instead of those that mostly reproduce existing conventions. How could this group seem so contrary to the current vogue of queer theory, which aims to destabilize the normalization of any identity? To answer, I had to learn what this return to normalcy meant. In the process of doing my research, I discovered an unanticipated politic of normalcy, with deviance on
the flipside, where routine social gatherings represent a stigmatized group’s attempts at recovering an “ordinary” life. As time went on, I also had the good fortune to witness several instances of the unmaking of normative expectations -- the recasting of the normative that I had initially been on the lookout for.

Previous work suggested to me that at social functions the men would depend on “categories of desire,” such as the desire to experience another person’s body or the desire to experience fraternity (Bunzl 2005; Hennen 2005; Textor 1999). Thus, I took fieldnotes on bodily conduct, such as the way the men used their bodies in certain social contexts (Howson 2004). My approach to amassing information about the group was to jot down paper-and-pen notes during, and mostly after, events. Then, I would type up longer memos soon afterwards. I sometimes conducted interviews informally in casual conversation. For instance, I would ask a member over a cocktail if he would be willing to clarify ideas I did not understand or provide me with an interpretation of an event. I also supplemented field encounters with in-depth, tape-recorded interviews.

During my time in the group, I was open with members about my researcher status. I told them of my interest in studying the group and identified myself as a gay man and as an enthusiast of the organization. I was a paid member, active in the organization, and served functional roles for the group such as selling jell-o shots and working the door at charity bar nights. The latter involved checking IDs and handling cover charges, what some members called being a “door whore.” Thus, a total written reconstruction of the night’s events was often necessary because studying performances meant that I had to participate in them. The advantage was that I got to know the men well and could lend a hand at an understaffed event. The proceeds from this volunteer
work went to a local group that provided meals to people living with HIV/AIDS and to a gender and sexuality center for youth.

As a fieldworker who came alone to Girth & Mirth events, I appeared to fit the role of Chaser. As the owner of the bar put it, I was “the club’s little admirer.” My own personal hang up(s) notwithstanding, I am thin, and continue to gain greater appreciation for how my size represents a category of “privilege.” In many ways, I recognize that Girth & Mirth members look for the same opportunities and respect given to other body-types of men in the gay community. I do indeed admire this. . .

I have organized my data from the experiences of Girth & Mirth members, those ranging from injury narratives to joyful tales. Chapter 2 focuses on the injuries that big gay men suffer in mainstream society as well as in gay society because of their ample size. In Chapter 3, I show how Bigmen reconfigure themselves as sex objects in response to the desexualization that they experience. My data comes from participant observation at a Pan-Girth & Mirth reunion in July 2007 and details: (1) the socially constructed space of campy spectacle and joyous carnival; and (2) tourist performances centered on the bodily pleasures of bulky males and their admirers. Chapter 4 is the analysis of the description in Chapter 3. It discusses the consequences of Bigmen claiming sexual objectification in their favor. Chapter 5 offers a comparative analysis of the G&M reunion and a Labor Day convergence. It discusses the way in which big gay men seek class validation and respectability. Held in a mainstream luxury hotel, the Labor Day convergence consists of seminars and a dance, as well as sightseeing and outings to museums. Chapter 6 focuses on alternatives other than the sexual objectification described in Chapter 3, for reconfiguring shame. One of these reconfigurations that I
discuss in depth is the joyful disregard of shame, which remains true to the name these
Bigmen have given their club – Girth & Mirth, reflecting their mission. Chapter 7
reflects on whether Girth & Mirth is a social, sexual, or dining club; whether its members
suffer unique wounds and how effectively they repair them; what contribution this work
makes to stigma theory and fat studies; and whether Girth & Mirth is a political group or
a “play” group.

The research problem I address is straightforward: What are the injuries big gay
men experience – shame, desexualization, exclusion, and marginalization – within
mainstream and especially in gay society and how do they respond to these injuries? It is
my hope that the answers to these profound and important questions will be of interest
not only to sociologists of sexuality and the body but also to a broad sociological
audience.
Boys line up on the field, as the PE teacher yells, “On your marks, ready, go!” They take turns shimmying up bamboo poles except for a chubby kid who lingers.

The teacher gently urges, “Oyeama, try.”

Oyeama shies away from the task: “But I could never climb that pole.” Looking back at it, he hangs his head in shame.

“Oh now, you shouldn’t give up before you try.” The teacher walks over to Oyeama’s best friend, a skinny serious boy, and says, “Komatsu, show him how.”

“Okay.” Komatsu scampers to his friend – the growing crowd of kids stares. In a light voice, he says, “Go on, try.” Oyeama grasps the pole and stares at his feet. Komatsu asks, “Why don’t you try?”

Oyeama dawdles. “I can’t do it,” he says.

Komatsu yells, “C’mon!” The pouty child turns to look at him. Komatsu yells again, “C’mon!” pauses, then, in a soft voice says, “Do it.” Oyeama quickly jumps onto the pole but slides to the ground.

“Once more,” Komatsu tells his friend. Oyeama leaps back onto the pole – Komatsu uses his back to hoist his friend up. He speaks softly as he tries to catch his breath, “There you go… that’s fine… you’re doing fine… use your legs.” Oyeama looks down. Out of breath, Komatsu grunts, “Try again… grip it tight… don’t let go.” Oyeama loses his grip and slides back down the pole moaning, “Oh! ... No!”

Skinny and Fatty [1959] 1965

The complete mortification of walking into gym as a fat kid and finding out that you would be doing something in front of your peers that made you feel uncomfortable: shame. . . In the case of the characters in the above excerpt, the only way out of this shame is through friendship. The above scene comes from a black-and-white Japanese film called “Skinny and Fatty.” The film regularly ran on Saturday afternoons in the 60s and 70s as part of the “CBS Children’s Film Festival.” As the story goes, Komatsu, a skinny poor boy, excels at school and sports, and draws out his fat, introverted friend Oyeama. The two become an unlikely team in athletic competitions. I learned of this
movie from a middle-aged man I met in the big men’s group, who struggles with his confidence over his looks, as do most others in the group. He mentioned having seen it as an adolescent, and how it made a lasting impression on him.

Another Bigman shared his childhood experience of being bullied. His impression of it was cloudy, as he may have blocked the physical abuse, though he could vividly recall the name-calling. As he said, “Every year it seemed like the kids found a new name to call me or something. Or there were days I would go home in tears. It may have come to physical blows or there might have been a physical altercation or a kid hitting me or something like that.” This is not to say that all of the Bigmen who are members of Girth & Mirth were fat as children. However, like the above speaker, other big gay men do not only experience social injuries and bullying, such as feeling shamed and excluded, but also have to deal with the injuries of marginalization and desexualization that they suffer within the gay community. While all of the wrongs endured are hurtful, they are especially so, when they come from one’s own social identity group.

Fatty’s mortification story would strongly resonate with members of Girth & Mirth, whose experiences of “everyday shame” have come to affect their sentient or feeling bodies. Probyn (2004) defines this type of shame as the body’s painful awareness of being out of place in everyday life that occurs when bodies are unable to conform, leaving them nowhere to hide. In sociological terms, fat’s obtrusiveness makes it nearly impossible to pass as “thin” even with traditional strategies like girdling or covering (Goffman 1963). Thus, “fat” provokes strong body policing, particularly among gay men (Whitesel 2007). “Normals” rarely overlook real-life “Fatties” in public.
Injuries Big Gay Men Experience in Mainstream Society

Like heterosexual women, gay men experience conflict with their appearance, physique, and relationship to food more than heterosexual men do. Among the social injuries that big gay men most frequently encounter within mainstream society are the unfriendly and disrespectful treatment in the marketplace and discrimination and denial of healthcare in hospitals and doctors’ offices. Many have come to expect this kind of mistreatment and daily hassles that come with being fat. As one Girth & Mirth member put it, in some cases, “even if Bigmen are not treated different, the perception of being treated different might be there because that’s the way they almost expect it. Every time I had gym class, I almost began to expect the mistreatment. It’s just something that comes by rote.”

One Girth & Mirth member referred to the exclusion Bigmen experience in department stores as “profiling.” He described getting the cold shoulder from the salespeople when he went to buy a suit at the mall, much like Julia Roberts did when she went clothes shopping on Rodeo Drive in her role in “Pretty Woman.”

I really wanted to buy this suit at Elder-Beerman, but I couldn’t get served. I was somehow invisible to the salespeople. I finally gave up and went to J.C. Penney, got good service, and bought a suit. The next day, I returned to Elder-Beerman. On my first visit, I had pretty-much dressed casual. When I returned, I was dressed in business attire. People rushed to help me. I said, “When I was in here yesterday, no one would assist me. I had seen a suit that I really wanted to buy and was planning to drop around $400.” No one offered me service the first day because the salespeople had profiled me as the sloppy fat guy.

This account illustrates how this Bigman was profiled by a combination of his size and dress and was given disrespectful service, as though he did not deserve to be acknowledged as a customer. The salesperson had made an assumption, based on his
appearance, that if he was fat, he must also be poor and could not afford the suit. The narrative became complicated when he returned the next day wearing his new suit, much like Pretty Woman did, and confronted the salesperson. In American society, size often intersects with a class-based assumption that being “overweight” equals being poor.

Fat profiling, broadly classified, occurs when people use physical characteristics such as size and appearance to generalize about an entire category of people as having a vast array of moral failings. Sociologically speaking, fat assumes a master status, where its stigmatizing character becomes a controlling category. Following Goffman (1963), Goode (2005; 2004) argues that “normals” tend to fixate on one negative trait. However, fat takes on a “broad perceived focus” – that is, a stigmatizing trait is rarely isolated to one characteristic without assumptions that the person holds a multitude of other associated “defects.” The one trait – fat – supersedes all others and gets lumped together with a whole host of imperfections. We could also think of the descriptive term “fat” as being reified to the extent that if one is ascribed this status, then one is thought to possess all of its negative characteristics which are socially appointed. Thus, “normal” people assume a wide range of incompetencies for fat people: that “Fatty” cannot perform in sports (or occupations); or as in the “Pretty Woman” example, that there are literally those “suit-able” and those “sloppy.”

Not only are Bigmen profiled and ignored by salespeople, but they also get injured when they suffer public indictment for “taking up too much space.” One Girth & Mirth member described being publicly stigmatized and harassed for his size by a total stranger. He said, “The most memorable experience I’ve had was getting on the bus one time and the person beside me just kept complaining, ‘you’re too big, you’re half on my
seat, too.’ I was in my seat, I may have filled it, but, you know, I wasn’t halfway on his seat, too.”

Fat people, men or women, gay or straight, are also excluded from amusement park rides. Often, there are “politically correct” notices like those that one often sees in amusement parks that read something to the effect that “this ride may not be able to accommodate guests of exceptional size.” Furthermore, businesses are cautious enough not to clearly demarcate what exactly qualifies as “exceptional size.” Granted, it is only sensible to forewarn guests of such restrictions, “for their own safety.” To add insult to injury, however, fat people find out that they don’t fit in a particular amusement park ride only after they have anxiously waited in line, sometimes for hours, not knowing whether they will be able to “squeeze in.” And when it is finally their turn, if they don’t “fit” and are turned away because the safety bars on the ride will not lock down on them, they feel humiliated having to exit the scene mortified. One Bigman described his experience at an amusement park as follows:

Now, where I’m from, we have Pride Night at King’s Island. Talk about the stigmas of being big, my God, some of us can’t ride the rides. Face it – we’re too big. The safety features don’t allow us to fit in the thing properly. I don’t blame them, it’s a hazard, but it’s humiliating. A lot of times, we’ll go with a group of people and it gets to be a big joke, “How many rides did YOU get kicked off of?”

This Bigman may have good-humoredly called such humiliation “a big joke” only because he has developed some immunity to “the stigmas of being big,” though he still must live with the repercussions of felt sizism.

Sizism is unfortunately present among health care providers. For instance, medical professionals may deny care altogether, or may provide it differentially to fat
patients. They may fixate on size and ignore the presenting symptoms. Furthermore, they may make gross generalizations about whether a person is healthy or unhealthy. One Girth & Mirth member spoke of three different Bigmen who were rejected for surgery (gastric bypass, bad knee, and back). He said,

they went to the doctor, and they told them, well you’re too big for us to operate on. Your heart will be crushed by your own weight as you lie on the table, open. So we refuse to treat you until you lose weight. And that’s pretty much paraphrased by each of the 3 different guys. So what they’re left with is a health problem and a weight problem and nobody who will help them along with the rotten judgmental treatment that they walk out the door with from the doctor’s office, because they just feel that much worse from what was said to them. And if they had no way out when they walked into the office, they would feel that much worse when they walked out.

Another Girth & Mirth member shared the following encounter he had with the medical community, in which his size became an obstacle to his receiving medical treatment.

I’ve had knee problems in the past. This one surgeon I went to, who was like the top orthopedic knee guy in the city, said that he wouldn’t replace my knee at that time because he says, “My table only goes up to 320 pounds for physical therapy and you my friend are over that.” And that sort of pissed me off. My retort to him was, “Okay, I understand where you’re coming from and I appreciate your position, but, if I were brought into an emergency room from a horrible car accident and my knees were crushed because the engine went back into the passenger compartment, would you replace my knees?” He said “Yes.”

In other words, the treatment he received from the orthopedic surgeon was discriminatory: the surgeon responded to him differently because of his size. He humiliated him by telling him he was too big for the table. Incidentally, at 6’1” and 305-310 pounds, he was under the weight limit, and he knew that the surgeon was brazenly denying him healthcare as a condition of his size and of the circumstances.
The same Bigman related an encounter he had in ER, where his weight and size overtly took precedence over his presenting symptoms. His being visibly “overweight” caused doctors to fixate on his size and ignore his symptom of intense pain in his abdomen. Blaming his weight, the ER personnel assumed he must have been having a heart attack. They consequently re-categorized his presenting symptom of abdominal pain as “heartburn,” which is one of the symptoms of heart attack, though atypical. As he related,

I knew I was passing a kidney stone. . . . We go to the hospital, I’m in pain, I’m in agony, I’m sitting there, I can’t stand up, I can’t walk, they had put me in the wheelchair and they keep asking me if, if I was having a heaviness in my chest. I said, “No-o-o, it’s in my gut. It’s an abdominal pain.” And you know, they keep asking me things indicating that they think it’s a heart attack. They say, “Well sometimes a heart attack can disguise itself, as abdominal pain.” I’m like, “Oh, okay, I’ve never heard of that.” And so, the first thing they do is they run an EKG on me. . . . Then, finally, they admit that I am NOT having a heart attack; it must be something else. So then, they put me back in the emergency room, and take me back to do all these other tests, and find out, yes, that it’s indeed a kidney stone.

In this encounter, the patient knew where his pain was located and what he had, but he could not get the ER staff to hear him. His frustration on top of the excruciating pain of passing a kidney stone was that they assumed “it’s a heart attack,” thereby ordering a battery of unnecessary tests and needlessly prolonging his pain. The particular doctor-patient interactions recounted above represent a larger social problem: the difficulty of getting doctors and medical professionals to pay attention to anything other than fat. It is the classification of patients into “fat” versus “normal” that creates everyday shame. The patient cannot be an ordinary patient. He is always and already profiled as a “fat” patient, first, and his fatness becomes the primary object of scrutiny and diagnosis.
Injuries Big Gay Men Experience in Gay Society

The examples in the previous section focused on injuries that Bigmen experienced within mainstream society. This section focuses on big gay men’s experiences of exclusion and the consequent injuries they suffer within gay society. One Girth & Mirth member shared how in heteronormative society, they are at least recognized as “gay,” whereas in gay society, they are only seen as “fat”: “In society as a whole, I don’t think people focus on the fact that if they see a group of big gay men it’s not that it’s BIG gay men, it’s that it’s GAY men. What society still sees is just a bunch of gay men. But within the gay community, they see us as, ‘Oh, it’s a bunch of big guys’.” Bigmen told me in so many different ways how it hurts worse to be excluded within the gay community, because it is done by their own. They shared how they feel more hurt when they fall off the “gaydar,” than when they are simply ignored in mainstream society. As one of them said, “In the gay community it’s the most troubling because you’re treated differently and you’re overlooked. People can be pretty cruel, sometimes. You’d think we’d be the ones to know better because as a group, as gay people we’ve been criticized or harassed plenty. We should know better than to treat our own that way.”

In her book, Such a Pretty Face: Being Fat in America, Millman (1980) discusses at length women’s worries about and struggles with their weight. The fitting words in Millman’s title in fact came up in one of my interviews with a Girth & Mirth member. Making the connection between heterosexual women’s experience of disembodiment and that of fat gay men, he said to me, “Oh, that’s the most horrible thing [to say], ‘lovely girl, such a pretty face,’ you know, ‘big as a barn.’” While in her 250-page tome Millman does not address issues fat men might have with weight (except for a 10-page
appendix), she does remark that “if any group of people worry about their weight more than American women, it is probably gay men. . . . overweight gay men share with all overweight women the burden of imputed psychological interpretations” (244-245). Gay men do not retain the benefits of fatness that heterosexual men did historically. They are marginalized for not conforming to strict bodily standards that are used to stratify their community by size.

Like other body aesthetics, the gay male aesthetic rewards those with a lean, taut, and muscular upper body, and visual elements of gay culture such as clubs and commercial representations reinforce this standard. The oppressive content of gay visual culture centers on body worship of male models in homoerotic media like pornography and physique and fashion magazines. As in mainstream society, gay obsession with fat is exacerbated by advertisements that cater to the ideally slim and muscular frame, playing an irresponsible role in the construction of boundaries. One Girth & Mirth member shared his self-consciousness about not fitting the gay mould.

I feel like an outcast in gay society. I don’t feel comfortable at all. To me, it’s for young, thin, gorgeous people, and I don’t fit in there, it makes me feel uncomfortable. I’m older, I’m heavier, I don’t fit the gay mould as you would say, you know, every time you look at a gay magazine, you see a hunky, muscle-bound, young, gorgeous man, I don’t fit that mould. So, I’m gay, I’m big, and I can’t help who I am.

Because many gay men prioritize personal appearance, they spend an inordinate amount of time and resources trying to change their appearance through gyms, cosmetic surgery, tanning, and hair restoration and removal (Blotcher 1998; Drummond 2005; Padva 2002). Commercial images exclude imperfect gay bodies, namely fat, old, or
disabled, and divide men along these lines. And out of this litany of obsessions that gay men have with their appearance, fat tends to remain a constant.

Fat gay men find it difficult to identify with the monolithic image of the gay body. There is little to no representations in the media or in any gay clubs of fat gay men as being sexy. It is harder for a Bigman to make his sexual debut when he cannot easily recognize anyone in the gay scenes who looks like himself. For instance, one Bigman told me about his discomfort in the leather club where he felt like a sexual outsider or a misfit, since there was no one else around with his body type. As he said, “I had previously done the ‘leather thing.’ The leather clubs were ok, but not many big guys were there. A Chub tied down to a bondage table would be hot with the flesh bulging between the ropes but I never got to see it, it was always me. That was fun and everything, but as a big person, I was not exactly comfortable there.” He went on to share with me that in fact, his discomfort as a sexual outsider within the gay scene led him to form the local chapter of Girth & Mirth for a band of outsiders together with his friend, another Bigman.

One Bigman’s story of Gay Days at Disney World provides another example of discomfort with existing images of gay men that do not easily invite a fat gay man to identify with them. Even as he could finally be in an environment where he could freely hold hands with his boyfriend, he is deterred by his weight. In our interview, he elaborated on his disappointment with Gay Days. The story he shared illustrates how his fatness was not a detriment to him as a straight man; however, now as a gay man, it restricts him.
The bar that we go to has videos of Gay Day celebrations, and it’s like a giant dance party at one of the water parks or in the park after they’ve closed. And I watched the video thinking this is gonna’ be great. I was never so uncomfortable in my life as watching this. Everybody there was toned or muscular in speedos, there was hardly anybody in a boxer-style swim trunk; there were no bellies to be seen. The music was great, the lights were great, everything was great, but it’s like as a fat guy, “Would I feel comfortable going to that?” No, because there were no other fat guys there. And if you’re the only fat guy who goes to something like that, people are gonna’ stare.

We might still go to Gay Days someday, but it’s gonna be a while. I wouldn’t, I would love to be able to go to Disney World ‘cause I love to go to Disney World, I used to go 2-3 times a year with my wife, honest to God. You should see all the Disney crap sitting here in the apartment. I would love to be able to go to Disney World and walk hand-in-hand with my partner down Main Street, and go on the rides with him, but now that I’ve seen what the Gay Days things are like, I don’t think I could go.

The Bigman’s story above illustrates the layers of injury that big gay men suffer. First, for being gay, he cannot freely have a romantic time at Disney World except one day per year. Furthermore, for being fat, he and his partner cannot fathom attending that one special day, either, because they would become a spectacle. He continued to elaborate on the complexities of being doubly marginalized.

I mean, we feel comfortable in certain areas of town walking around holding hands. We held hands at Bat-n-Rouge [the drag queen softball game during Gay Pride]. We have no problem with that in certain areas of town. We wouldn’t do it everywhere, but we’re very comfortable with that. But in Disney World, where I would want to be able to do that, I would not; I would not go there normally to do that because of the stigma, and during Gay Days, I wouldn’t go there because of being big.

Some Bigmen feel forced to make the decision to settle for an asexual existence. Feeling desexualized for being fat and not fitting the gay mold, they choose to pass their time at their jobs, and spend more time with their parents and children. As one Girth & Mirth member said,
I was at that point in my life where I was just over the whole gay scene. I would go online and talk to people, and they were like, “Oh you’re too big, I don’t want to talk to you.” Then you’d start feeling like you’re not part of that scene anymore. So I just disconnected myself from everything, and I started spending more time with my family. And I ended up getting a second job and I worked 7 days a week because, what else was there for me to do? I didn’t feel comfortable going to a bar because I was big. I didn’t feel like I was there for a purpose. Nobody was going to hit on me, why should I be there? So I threw myself into my work, my family, and my friends and I let that be it. That’ll be my life.

Another injury fat gay men share with fat women is their experience of desexualization, in which they are deprived of sex appeal and are not allowed to express their sexuality. What is worse is that unsexy associations are linked to fatness. As Millman (1980) hints in her book, Bigmen feel they are out of the running in the sexual marketplace. One Girth & Mirth member spoke about living in “a college town where people are at that age where they’re discovering themselves. If you’re gay and skinny, your prospects are better. You’ll be popular, new meat as it were. But, if you’re fat, chubby, husky, you’re not as popular; you won’t get the looks or cruised as often. People don’t acknowledge large people. It’s harder to be big and gay.” Another Bigman lamented that desexualization leads to dehumanization. As he told me, “Being gay and being big, the discrimination is horrible. People won’t talk to you because you’re big. I mean you don’t want to go to bed with me, you might not be attracted to me, but my God, I’m a human being and you can’t treat me like one? Just because you don’t want to go to bed with somebody doesn’t mean you can’t talk to them?”

And if a Bigman does get acknowledged and enters a relationship with a gay man of a socially acceptable weight, sometimes his partner will be reluctant to be seen with him in public because he will be ashamed of his size. This is not unlike the heterosexual
version we witness in “Sex and the City”: in one episode, called “Secret Sex,” Carrie’s reluctant boyfriend Big, who is married at the time, takes Carrie to a restaurant across town where married men are known to take “the other woman.” In both versions, the relationship is kept on the down low, because there is shame associated with owning up to it in public. One Bigman shared the following on the subject:

It’s sort of like a straight guy wants to have sex with a gay guy – at least, allegedly straight. And, they don’t want anyone to know they’re having sex; they’re embarrassed, it’s like, “I’ll date you in private, we’ll go home to your house, or to my house, but not to be seen in public.” It’s like that with dating big guys too. Some guys will date you in private because they don’t want people to know they like bigger guys. And I had a guy who approached me who was very enjoyable, but once I made the comment of, “hey, let’s go out to dinner at this gay restaurant,” he backed off. It seemed to always be, “well, if we’re gonna go out somewhere to eat, let’s go way up north, way out of the way to where nobody will know me.”

One Girth & Mirth member remarked on the assumption that if one is a fat gay man, he is a beggar who can’t be a chooser. As he said, “Little gay guys think, ‘You’re a big guy, so therefore you probably don’t have a lot of guys who pay attention to you. So you should be okay with any kind of attention you get. Be happy you’re getting attention, because you don’t get that much.” One Bigman described the dehumanizing experience of this beggar-chooser dynamic.

When I was much bigger, I had one guy who was after me because his comment was, “You got a fat ass, and you can’t get any so you’ll enjoy my cock.” Little did he realize; I didn’t need his dick. Those are the wrong intentions as far as I’m concerned. It’s the same principle as, “oh that guy, he’s MRDD [mentally retarded/developmentally disabled], he’s an easy prey.” It’s the same thing, and to me that’s a deplorable action. Unfortunately, there are guys who will look at it as, “oh, they’re a big guy, they don’t get much sex, this is a guaranteed port of entry. I’ll just use their mouth or ass as a port of entry.” It’s like, okay, there’s a front side to me and there’s also a brain to me.
Luckily, in the case of this Bigman, he was strong and self-assured enough to recognize and avoid being dehumanized as a mere receptacle. When gay men impose the submissive role on Bigmen simply because they are fat, the talk gets loaded as in heterosexual discourse, corresponding with active-submissive gender role ideas. Heterosexism perpetuates the myth that gay men are effeminate and that effeminate men must be gay; simultaneously, it assumes that same-sex relationships include a masculine role and feminine complement, and in this case, fat amounts to degradable femininity.

Likewise, Millman (1980) mentions how fat women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. She writes, when a “fat woman falls outside the parameters of ideal sex object, . . . [she] is often viewed as . . . an easy lay, a suitable target for lewdness and degradation” (168). According to Gailey and Prohaska (2006), college men who prey on fat women and brag about it to their buddies call this “hogging,” which can escalate into a degraded sexuality, another form of gender violence. This tends to happen in the gay world, as well. In other words, fat gets gendered when gay men, like heterosexual women, fall under the male gaze and get sexually evaluated by men. Interestingly, as Millman observes, even straight men, if they are fat, are emasculated by other men, and oddly not in the eyes of other women. That is, both for heterosexual women and for straight men, and as I am arguing, for gay men, being fat as it affects one’s sex appeal, is most frequently judged by men, which has long been recognized by feminists to be an oppressive arrangement.

Given these dynamics, gay men marginalize those who do not conform to strict bodily standards. They use these boundaries to create gender inequality (Giles 1998). Gay personals, for instance, reflect these negative images and they specify body qualities
which they link to gender: “Should be in shape and please, NO fats or femmes!” Based on this personal ad lingo, failure to be “height-weight proportionate” exceeds the bounds of how a gay body “ought to look” (Goode 2005:328). Fat produces stereotypical feminized features that threaten masculinity and its archetype of the disciplined, muscular body (Bell & McNaughton 2007; Durgadas 1998). It reinforces the effeminate label when men develop breasts and hips and fat diminishes the visibility of their genitals (Millman 1980). To gain acceptance, gay men often adopt rigid gender roles, such as the straight-acting, masculine male, to create a border between themselves and the stigma surrounding the “fats” and the “femmes” (Bergling 2001; Connell 1992). Thus, gay men use gendered dimensions of the body to make in- and out-group distinctions.

Also, like Millman found in her study of fat women, fat not only renders the whore, but also the mother figure, as it gets negatively associated with effeminacy. This is exemplified in this Bigman’s holiday tryst with a small man. As he told me, he prefers men smaller than himself, though he sometimes feels as if he were typecast in a motherly role.

For instance, cuddling – I’m the one who’s holding onto the other person. I’m not really sure how to describe that dynamic. But it seems that, if it’s not a gender thing, then what is it? It’s almost like a motherly role. Like last year on my cruise, I met this guy and this dude was tiny. I mean, five foot nothing, just tiny. And we were sitting outside on the ship and it’s like, two in the morning. I’m sitting down and he’s literally sitting against me in my lap. It was kind of cute actually. But like, I’m this big guy and he’s this little dinky guy, but he’s literally in my lap, I’m sitting down and he’s cuddled up like a koala bear would grab onto a tree.

This kind of narrative was in fact rare, since the local group of Girth & Mirth that I studied tended to consist of Bigmen who preferred Bigmen, and this kind of oppositional pairing was outside their immediate experience. Big gay men can certainly associate
bulky males with masculinity; however, among the larger gay community, they tend to negatively associate fat with effeminacy. For example, one interpretation of “drag” is that it is a mockery of women. This interpretation relies on the notion that the classic queens displayed “fat tits” and “big hips.”

Then again, even big gay men are of two minds with regard to fat. For example, as one Girth & Mirth member told me, “There are Chubs, and then there’s the ‘Superchub’ – the guy Richard Simmons wants to get his hand on and save.” In Chub-Chaser culture, this is simply a “really big” Chub. When I asked him, “Do you see Bigmen being more closely associated with femininity or masculinity?” he acknowledged that he sometimes does a doubletake when a Superchub whom he would normally peg as “effeminate” presents as masculine. He articulated how he waffles between judging men much bigger than himself as effeminate and judging them as masculine. He said:

Some of the big Superchubs are usually very effeminate, but not always. If you go to the Bigmen’s Super Weekend, you’ll see some guys who are just big and VERY effeminate; flaming queen from the word get-go. Then there’s Bobby from Texas. God, I hope he shows up this year. He’s big and he’s just, he’s all man. That’s the only way to put it. He’s all man, but sexually, a bottom. But to look at him, you wouldn’t think so.

Along those lines, though, I do not find the Superchubs attractive. Bottom line: personality-wise, you can have the best personality in the world, but if you’re very, very, very large, a lot bigger than I am, I probably would not be attracted to you. I’ll still be you’re friend, you’re a human being, you know I believe in that kind of thing, but….

As this Bigman articulated, fat at its extreme skews gender perceptions, and one’s taste for body types bigger than oneself has its limits. Apparently, this Bigman, who is himself just over 300 pounds, drew the line at “Superchubs.” In other words, there appears to be a hierarchy even among big gay men.
Some seem to suffer from fatphobia; they want to disassociate themselves from other people who are fat, as if it were contagious. The dread of becoming fat renders some people reluctant to associate with fat people lest they contract “fatness,” most likely fueled by self-hatred. Some big gay men also choose to deny their weight and remain in the closet, although it is clearly difficult to hide such a visible body. Nonetheless, as I learned from the Bigman in the following quote, this Big-on-Big rejection can be hurtful. As he related to me, he was incredulous that a man who weighs 425 lbs would reject him, who weighed at least 100 lbs less.

I had somebody online say I was a fat slob. But he weighed 425 lbs. and that’s a lot more than I do. And he wasn’t interested in me? And I was just mortified that somebody who was larger than me had made that comment. And I blogged about it, but I guess that’s not uncommon. People said that probably after he did that, he put me on “ignore” so I couldn’t contact him any further.

It appears that this Bigman was not only hurt because he was rejected by a gay man, but also because his ego was bruised, since the rejection came from someone bigger than himself. People generally expect that they will be able to date those who are physically similar to them. They tend to assume they will be attractive to those who look like them. By the same token, the speaker had assumed that he ought to be able to be desirable to at least those fatter than himself. Therefore, he was astonished to be rejected by someone who weighed about 100 pounds more than he did. As he told me, he assumed that the other Bigman “probably talked to one of his skinny friends about how this big guy was chasing him or whatever. Who knows? It really hurt me. It really hurt me.”

Similar to the personal rejection above, there also appears to be a Big-on-Big public rejection. Girth & Mirthers reported to me that when they try to recruit other
Bigmen to join the club, they sometimes are equally shocked that some Bigmen do not want to join. This may be that these men disidentified with a group that celebrated being fat and happy, and they may not have wished to be linked and seen with a group of fellow sufferers. Therefore, big gay pride is a difficult subject position to sell, and those attempting to do so expose themselves to public rejection on behalf of the group, as if it weren’t already hard on them to be personally rejected.

A lot of people don’t identify with G&M. I talked to a guy online one time, and he was my height, and weighed 350 pounds, and I’m like, “Oh, you know this is Girth & Mirth,” and I explained about the club. And he was like, “I’m not a big guy,” And I’m thinking, “Okay, if you say so…” I wanted to type back, “Yeah, you are – you’re in denial.” But then I thought, “Well, maybe he doesn’t see himself that way, and whatever his issues are and whatever his reasons are, they’re his.” They see us at these events, and see us being who we are, but some still won’t cross the line and accept, “Yeah, I’m a big gay man.” That’s their loss.

Indeed, as the speaker guessed, self-denial can be a real impediment to Bigmen trying to organize. In their efforts to promote their club by handing out their cards to big gay men on the sidelines, Girth & Mirthers are surprised and hurt that some Bigmen seem to be insulted by being pegged as “one of us.” As one member said,

One year, we tried to hand out our cards along the parade route to big guys that we saw standing there. We’d say, “Hey, come march with us, you’re a big guy, you’re good looking, get out here,” and you know, people were offended. Some people were just shocked that we had identified them with us, and they didn’t want to be.

Their appears to be a club you can’t get anyone to join so easily, given the stigma of being fat within the larger gay community. To keep any group alive and growing, members have to find a way to get younger people involved. Yet, club members believe that “a lot of younger gay men view our club as gross, disgusting, too big, I don’t want anything to do with them.” The speaker’s reference to younger gay men’s revulsion also
has something to do with fat symbolizing getting old and, by association, their fear of getting old.

Not only is recruitment a challenge, but Bigmen also run into verbal assaults on their club, becoming targets of derision. At a Girth & Mirth pride-planning meeting, after discussing plans for the group’s participation in the annual Gay Pride, one member shared his experience of shaming that took him by surprise: “I was in a chatroom the other night and some users started attacking Girth & Mirth, saying we’re an embarrassment to the gay community. They said the only reason people clap for us at the Pride parade is that we’re such a spectacle.” Indeed, as Millman (1980) observes, “when a homosexual man is fat, he is often viewed in the gay community as not having sufficient ‘self-pride’” (245).

If Girth & Mirth members are denied claim to Pride, then as Probyn (2004) explains, the shame of being fat “makes apparent the ways in which radically different positioned selves are [deemed] contagious” (328). At times, for example, my thinness stood out at such a polar opposite to the bigness of the men I was studying, that one guy remarked on how I needed to “eat a pork chop or two,” and others wondered whether I had gained weight yet from hanging out with them.

More often than not, the belief that fatness has contagious powers can get ugly. The following story from a Girth & Mirth member in the Pride parade illustrates how extreme and wacky the fear of contamination can get. At an annual Pride celebration, a religious protestors, himself a big “straight” guy, heckled with a loudspeaker from the sidelines at Girth & Mirth members in the parade: “Oh my God, here come the fat guys. No wonder you’re gay, there’s no woman who would have you. . . No wonder there are
so many lesbians in the community! You guys don’t know how to take care of your bodies.” Triply contagious! Apparently, big gay men can not only make people fat, but also gay and lesbian. Sadly, unlike Britt and Heise’s (2000) suggestion, this shame does not diffuse positively. It does not create empathy, nor does it recruit new members through emotional contagion, nor is it about crowd contagion. Rather, it inspires onlookers to further humiliate and perpetuate the shame.

Bigmen are also left out of media coverage of Pride. For instance, when it came to coverage of the annual parade in the gay rag, among a total of 34 snapshots, there were no pictures of the Girth & Mirth bunch in the festivities. In the words of one member, “In the local gay publications, they had pictures from Pride, but there were no men from our group in any of the pictures. The only men they had in the pictures were drag queens or muscle guys, but not everybody is a drag queen or a muscle guy.” Consequently, as far as this member was concerned, it was as if his group was not part of the parade.

The Big-on-Big rejection is experienced even more acutely when it is committed by another Bigmen’s group, the Bears, a splinter group of Girth & Mirth. At one point, Bigmen who were hirsute, bulky/beefy “lumberjack” types broke off from Girth & Mirth, calling themselves “Bears.” They packaged themselves as rugged masculine men whose natural habitat is the “wild” woods, typically recognized by their cut-off flannel shirts, tight faded jeans, and their “woof” greeting followed by a bear hug. The Bears became quite successful because they marketed themselves very well as “real” men, saving the gay man’s gender reputation (Hennen 2008). In fact, because of this success, one Girth & Mirth member was told in a chatroom that Girth & Mirthers “should just disband and let the Bears do their thing because there’s no reason to encourage large people.”
Girth & Mirth members also reported feeling unwelcome at Bear events: “It just seems as though we are being dismissed as non-existent.” They feel tolerated, though not fully accepted by the Bears. One Girth & Mirther told me about a joint bowling event, where most of the Bears “just kept to themselves and had their own conversations and more or less tolerated the fact that we were there; they wanted to bowl among themselves, instead of with us. It wasn’t as comfortable as I think it could have been, had they included us.” The following speaker likewise bemoaned the Bears’s insincere inclusion of the Girth & Mirthers.

I have been to two Bear club meetings, and at neither meeting did anybody come up and say, “Hi, how are you? My name is Joe. I’m glad you’re here.” or “Welcome. Let me introduce you to some other members.” That didn’t happen. They’re a big group and their membership numbers in the hundreds, if not thousands of associates because of their Bear Camp run. That just struck me as if they’re not willing to reach out, why should I bother? Had I been a more hairy guy, in better shape without a belly, or just being big all over or something, I might have been more welcomed, you know, an “A-list Bear” or a “Trophy Bear” or whatever you want to call them. But I was not comfortable there.

Another Bigman shared the injury he experienced at the Bears booth at Gay Pride. While he himself believed his physicality fit the bill, he was ignored and came away feeling snubbed.

I was interested and I wanted to talk to ‘em. I’m a big, hairy guy; this is who I think I am. The guys working the booth more or less blew me off they weren’t interested in me or answering my questions. I don’t know if that’s colored my perception of the Bear community, but I just didn’t feel welcomed. They didn’t care who I was or anything like that, though it could have been the people they had manning the booth that day.

That said, Girth & Mirthers still have more of an affinity with the Bears than with the wider gay community, feeling more at home in a Bear bar that accommodates their size than in a “trendy” gay bar. After all, they share a history that bonds them, Girth &
Mirth being the parent group. They also share the same experience and vantage point from being part of a subculture within the gay community. From my field observations, I gathered that when Girth & Mithers go out as a group to a nightclub, they find it difficult to move beyond the walls of Bear bars and dance clubs. In trendy gay space, they are not only emotionally snubbed, but also feel physically excluded. It is easier for them to go out to a Bear bar or eat at a restaurant or buffet in the mainstream community that accommodates big people. This is not to say that there are overt signs at the entrance to gay facilities saying “NO Fat Fags Allowed!” However, they generally do encounter spaces and furniture in which “big girls” don’t fit.

Dramaturgical sociology teaches that boundaries constrain the movement of individuals between different regions. To indulge in an example from the heterosexual world’s discrimination against fat women . . . Years ago, I would pass by this dive bar on my way home from work. A mural on the outside of the building depicted a laughable group of big white hens. The accompanying notice said in bold red letters, “NO Fat Chicks Allowed!” In effect, the sign dissuaded if not prevented fat women from entering a public drinking establishment. In this context, the sign degraded all women as “chicks” and singled out fat women for their failure to meet male expectations of an “ideal” woman’s physique.

According to Goffman (1959), social actors create boundaries to control access to certain performances. “NO Fat Chicks” (as well as the admission of the right kind of “thin” chicks) represents aggression toward all women. Therefore, the sign was not just controlling access and excluding fat women; it was telling the thin woman that to qualify as “chick,” she had to be under an unspecified weight. Thus, the sign was ambiguous
enough that it made it potentially dangerous for even a thin woman to enter. In essence, the sign implied that even a thin woman would be regarded as a particular kind of sex object (a degradable one) – and with that came the fear that she could be harmed for belonging to that category. Moreover, the sign informed the passerby that a fat woman could not audition at this bar for the gender role stereotype of “chick” without being rejected for her size.

Exclusionary front-entry designs like this, which categorize people and blatantly prohibit them from entering, serve as boundary-ordering devices. They humiliate and force one to agree to an inferior status; they may humiliate those permitted entry as well. Any woman of any weight who enters an establishment that announces “NO Fat Chicks Allowed” would have to check her self-respect at the door. Likewise, especially when the gay community tacitly agrees to shun big gay men, members of Girth & Mirth feel dehumanized and socially injured.

The felt experience of everyday shame makes Girth & Mirthers even more sensitive to the social and bodily exclusion that plays out in architectural space, furniture design, and bathroom layout. Over coffee one night, the men of Girth & Mirth mentioned unfriendly architecture at the new location of a local gay bar & grille, which was a long-time hub of their city’s gay scene. They said that big gay men feel uncomfortable at the new location with its long and narrow entrance ramp enclosed by metal railing, and pub tables that virtually knock against the booths lining the walls. This design may be intentional, after all, to create a hopping atmosphere. Nonetheless, it makes it difficult for large men to move around. Crowds stand crammed into the space like sardines, and the bathrooms are tight for Bigmen.

33
In contrast, the bar & grille at the former location, with its large and open concept, had a seating area with movable, high, round tables that provided plentiful flexible gathering space. Some members used to go to Sunday brunch there. Additionally, its bathroom was spacious and included a roomy, accessible stall. In contrast, the Bigmen commented how at the new location, fat bodies cannot fit comfortably into the “thin” space. As one Girth & Mirther said, “aside from lucking into empty patio space, the new design cannot accommodate us big girls.” Others speculated the new design to be a deliberate attempt to keep them out: “They don’t want us there.” Soon after, the group that had this discussion in fact developed a new tradition of frequenting an architecturally more accommodating restaurant, which happened to be a mainstream one.

Unlike the bar under debate, the Bear bar that hosts the group’s charity fundraising events provides a fat-affirming space. The Bear bar is meant for gay bears, leathermen, and cowboys. Its interior space differs, in that patrons enter through a painted oversized metal door: the bottom is flush with the large parking lot out front. Inside the spacious, wide-open club is a huge, often unoccupied dance space, two bars that push off against the outer walls, a comfortable seating area with an oversized loveseat and chairs, and a few high tables with sturdy metal stools. The enormous bathroom includes an oversized stall with a homemade, doublewide plywood door. Out back, a patio spans the entire length of the building, complete with a large wooden bar, and a variety of seating and easy-to-move bistro tables, all of which add up to a big gay man’s haven, welcoming, rather than humiliating him.

Women who encounter the “NO Fat Chicks Allowed” sign must grapple with exclusion and even a whole other issue of potential violence if they accept the terms of
entry. The remedy for exclusion would readily be inclusion. Yet the discomfort that big gay men may feel at the cramped new bar & grille is one of everyday shame. Despite having such visible large bodies, they are rendered invisible by the design of the space that clearly overlooks their needs, thereby keeping them out. However, Bigmen do not want to be embarrassed in gay spaces for having special accommodations made for them, either, which would single them out as if to say, “FAT People Sit Here.” Thus, for big gay men, the remedy is more one of accessibility without stigma than one of plain inclusion. Bigmen would like to have accessible public spaces that do not humiliate, even while including, them.

Discussion

This chapter unpacked the social injuries big gay men experience: shame, marginalization, exclusion, and desexualization. For example, it suggested how size and sexuality, though different issues, do intersect for big gay men. While these injuries often overlap with those that all fat people experience, this chapter focused on the injuries inflicted by gay men on big gay men, and furthermore, the injuries inflicted by big gay men on other big gay men, exposing their internalized fatphobia.

Indeed, it is difficult for big gay men not to internalize the shame that they experience in mainstream society, and particularly within the gay community. One Bigman from Girth & Mirth described his daily struggle with being “overweight” as follows:

There are days when I think I’m huge and there are days I KNOW I’m huge. There are other days when I’m like, “I have a good job, I have a man who loves me, I love him, I’m comfortable, I have everything I could possibly want or need.” In the big scheme of things, yeah, I’m 50 to 70 pounds overweight, but it doesn’t control my life. Then there are days I
just can’t look at myself in the mirror because I’m just thinking, “My God, you’re so hideous,” and [chuckles] I turn the lights out.

While this Bigman admitted to self-loathing that sometimes drove him to turn out the lights so he would not have to look at his fat body in the mirror, at other times he said he tried to avoid letting his weight run his life.

Being in the company of Girth & Mirthers could be a double-edged sword. In some cases, it could be that, since misery loves company, Bigmen could indulge in self-deprecating “fat talk.” However, Girth & Mirthers will more often help each other in their efforts to override their discouraging dialogue and negative thoughts. The club brings Bigmen out and engages them in normalizing activities and commensality rituals, such as coming together for coffee, potluck, game night, or a pool party, or going to the movies, out to dinner, or brunch.

Big gay men often bemoan the overriding category of “fat” being forced upon them, because it denies that they are sexual beings. Ironically, about the only time big gay men feel they are identified as “gay” first and foremost, takes place within mainstream society, even as this acknowledgment is meted out in the form of harassment. In contrast, within the gay community, they are labeled as “fat” first, because of their failure to meet the gay mold.

Simply recounting tales of abject defeat and humiliation or fat people’s sob stories could amount to little more than making the empathetic reader feel good for the duration of the story. However, it is important to understand the particular nature of the various injuries inflicted on big gay men in order to appreciate the excessive lengths they go to, to reconfigure themselves. The Bigmen who participated in this study provided a laundry
list of complaints of being harassed, shamed, brushed off, rendered invisible, profiled, bullied, excluded, and degraded. Out of this list, it is those injuries that correspond with weight discrimination within the gay community that are the focus of this study. It is these injuries that cause big gay men to work so hard to boldly repackaged themselves as human beings and as sexual beings who deserve to experience the same pleasures that other gay men do.

This is what Girth & Mirthers are all about: they nurture one another’s joy in being fat and happy. What makes their everyday shame of being fat worthwhile is that they take the next step to reconfigure it. Though they are constantly confronted with humiliation, they manage to sustain the integrity of their everyday lives by persisting to look for creative responses to the shame that comes with being a fat gay person. Beyond individually internalizing shame, and beyond normalizing it with the help of fellow sufferers, Bigmen launch bolder comebacks, that range from sexualizing their hurts to reconfiguring their injuries and aestheticizing and performing their fat bodies unapologetically.
Chapter 3: Performing the Fat Body as an Object of Desire

Every summer, Girth & Mirth holds a carnival reunion with other Bigmen’s Clubs, allowing big gay men a safe and supportive environment in which they can sexualize the injury that they experience as Bigmen in the gay community. In the sexed-up celebration of the Chub-Chaser community and culture, big gay men gather at the Cabaña Inn, the largest gay resort in the Southwest, to rekindle old friendships as well as make new ones. Within the confines of this alternative space, they feel free to disrupt the categories of status and privilege based on body shape and size, by displaying their goods and acting out forbidden sexuality. In this space, they redefine themselves as sex objects: embodied, sexual beings who are motivated by the desire of other men. While the injury big gay men experience is one of being perceived as “disgusting” and “sexually repulsive,” their response to that injury is to construct and perform their fat bodies as objects of desire, at least for one “Super Weekend.”

Being “big” is not sexually desirable especially in the gay world, rendering Bigmen “sexual second-class citizens,” so to speak. Yet sexuality is one of the essential markers of adult humanity; it connects human beings to one another. The Cabaña provides a fat-affirming sanctuary where Bigmen need not be embarrassed, surrounded as they are with other men like themselves and their admiring playmates. The Bigmen’s over-the-top behavior at the reunion is a reaction to forms of desexualization and devaluation that places them at a disadvantage to other gay men in the sexual
marketplace. It is understandable that in so doing, Bigmen are purposefully excessive, as they happily affirm the sex-object piece and give themselves the license to play and be naughty in ways that they are not allowed to, the rest of the year. This is one precious weekend in which big gay men can amp up their sexual selves and have the pleasure of transforming themselves into sex objects. The Super Weekend at the Cabaña illustrates how big gay men highlight what has been missing in their lives through displaying it to an excess and how performing the fat body using carnival aids in the mission of the weekend.

The two-story 60s style motel set in Oklahoma City’s “gayborhood” is a self-contained world with a restaurant, three bars, gift shop, and rooms arranged in quadrangles around two pools. About 175 guys from all over the nation descend upon the motel’s pools as they do every July for this devilishly fun Super Weekend. Several huddle in groups and talk, some relax along the water’s edge, while others play with styrofoam pool noodles. Most wear traditional swim trunks, a few parade around in thongs and speedos, and one or two don nothing but underwear. For one weekend a year, campy water spectacles and splashy fun wash away the conservative, homophobic and fatphobic messages these men battle daily.

It takes a lot of hard work to engineer a multi-group festival like this. Guests rave about the combined effort of the four different Bigmen’s groups who sponsor this event. The key is for the guests to feel that they are free to engage in behavior that they would not dare to undertake without the camaraderie that they find at this annual event. Groups of big gay men get together once a year to have a party and to maintain ties from around the country. What makes a weekend ritual like this one difficult to orchestrate is the
added need for these performances of “various supportive expressions” (Goffman 1971:73).

The vibrant carnival and burlesque infrastructure of the Super Weekend gives big gay men an outlet for their desires with less of the stigma. It enables them as part of a collective to put themselves out there, something fierce, with a sense of humor and defiance. For Mikhail Bakhtin, this is “the feast of becoming, change, and renewal” which “celebrate[s] temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it mark[s] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (1968:10). The planned events for the weekend support a kind of theatrical performance mode in which the guests feel accepted for who they are within the carnival setting, where time in one’s everyday life is suspended. Unlike out there in the larger gay society, here, Bigmen feel just as attractive. Chubby men come out to bask in the comfort and freedom of campy-queer behavior and profane talk that are the order of the day. As Sontag (1964) defines it, “Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much’” (59). It is privileged tongue-in-cheek humor that allows these men to feel they are “insiders.” They enjoy exchanging witty barbs used affectionately both to “praise and abuse” and to “crown… and uncrown…” one another all in one fell swoop (Bakhtin 1968:166). Here, they are both undone and revitalized; suffering and fear are reduced, albeit temporarily.

During the day, the main pool fills with Bigmen who cause the water to overflow the rim. The spillover pushes all of their cocktails along the edge further and further out of reach. These flirty Chubs like to strike up deals with poolside folks to retrieve their lost drinks. Fat activist Marilyn Wann (1998) writes that big gay men have “wonderful…
extensive network[s].” She considers these men “freedom fighters, in the sense that living well is the best revenge”; she pictures them partying, getting laid, and having a good time (168). Big guys expressing sexuality and sensuality, just as other body types of gay men do. Without Chub-Chaser networks, fat gay men may well internalize the belief that others could deny them such fun because of their weight.

Last year, several Chubs lined up in the pool and spread their legs. Meanwhile, a handful of Chasers, or admirers with thinner builds who find big chubby men attractive, got ready for the underwater swimming competition. The object of the game was to have Chasers swim across the pool and pass through the Bigmen’s legs, carefully dodging their leg locks, with a few scrambling underwater to find their lost swim trunks. Chasers popped up at the end of the line one by one, as more Chubs joined the fun. The Chubs also told all of the Chasers to get in the pool and kiss and make out for them. The aquatic sports parody and the make-out session between the Chasers reversed roles and portrayed them symbolically beneath the Chubs.

After lunch on Thursday, a group of Bigmen who have arrived early for the weekend spray on sunscreen as they get ready to relax in the hot sun. An observer in the pool jokes that it looks as if they are greasing up with PAM cooking spray. Another observer razzes me – a new face and also one of the early arrivals – about my slender build and sunburn and calls me a twink: “You need to eat a fried Twinkie, but you can’t because that would be cannibalism.” I flash a nervous smile and say nothing.

This year, the Midwestern chapter of Girth & Mirth is co-hosting the event, and I have been asked at the last minute to serve as one of the coordinators, since one couple had to cancel due to an injury. My functional role as coordinator gives me the
opportunity to gain a richer understanding of what Super Weekends are all about. As a first-time coordinator and an inexperienced ethnographer, I am happy to keep busy. The leaders of the Midwestern Girth & Mirth group that invited me think it best for me not to go around advertising the fact that I am a researcher.

To the guests, I look like a Chaser. But, by my skirting this subject position, what else can they do with my size but pick on me? If I can’t be out as a researcher and therefore can’t be placed in the position of an ally, then the only option left for me is to be perceived as “aberrant” in my thinness. As a group of us gets out of the pool to have dinner before the coordinators’ meeting and heads up the stairs, one of the coordinators turns and asks me if I am feeling okay after being razzed in the pool. Telling him I am fully aware that thinness is not necessarily a category of privilege in this setting, I say, “I’m fine.” I am, in fact, negotiating my position as ally-outsider-within.

We are supposed to put together the Chub and Chaser contest and sell raffle tickets for the 50/50 drawing. In the 50/50, a ticket is drawn at the close of the contest. The winner receives half of the ticket sales, and the host groups split the rest. As a coordinator, I am also expected to enforce the rule that no bottles or glassware enter the pool area, remind guests to close the curtains to their rooms while having sex, and alert security if hustlers cause trouble on the premises. In addition, I am asked to do a couple of two-hour bartending shifts and make sure that guests show their passes as they enter the hospitality suite.

The Hospitality Suite

My first shift begins at noon on Friday. I start as a barback, gradually taking over as the bartender becomes tipsy. The bartender is a fun-loving, young looking twenty-something,
with a round face and oval-shaped glasses that accentuate his chubby cheeks. His body harness draws attention to his belly with a large center ring in the front fastened together by chunky black straps. He shows off his plump derrière in leather chaps and a Stars and Stripes jockstrap, revealing, rather than camouflaging his fat body.

Super Weekend guests come from all walks of life. Across the room is Bubbelz, a big and tall older dandy in a long lime polo shirt with a bouncy personality graciously holding out his hand to the man working the door, for a kiss. I refill a young and beefy guy’s white ceramic Buddha mug – his companion looks twice his age. The group I came with also picked up in Indy a popular Black Bear Cub – a hairy black teddy bear with a braided rattail and dark scraggly beard, young and not that big. He does stand-up and d-jays for events like this and has been slated to emcee the Chub contest, but for now, he just hooks up his iPod and speakers to play music.

My second shift begins at six. I help to set up the hors d'oeuvres table for the Welcome Party, which takes on a distinctly carnival atmosphere. The carnival showman, who goes by the name of Tex, is an older Superchub, who is all too used to the challenge of finding comfortable seating. I saw Tex place a sturdy chair without arms at the carnival entrance for the greeter during my first shift. He told me that his folding travel stool from Living XL has been a lifesaver for him. Here in the hospitality room, he monitors the rented “squishee” machine that mixes a popular carnival concession: frozen strawberry margaritas, a bright red slush with a Texas-size punch. For years, Tex has been the “waist or double inseam” ticket seller. He runs a good old-fashioned carny game reminiscent of the weight-guessing one at amusement parks. Tonight, the local leader of the Midwestern chapter is an apprentice to Tex. He is shirtless and wearing a
carnival costume consisting of crotchless suspender shorts. Going commando, he is letting it all hang out.

There are two ways to be fitted for raffle tickets that both cost the same. The first uses ticket tape to measure the buyer, or if he prefers, the seller’s waist. A variation on this theme, “waist of your choice,” was discontinued this year, as it was awkward for the largest guest. NOLOSE, (previously the National Organization for Lesbians of Size), also did body wraps at their 2007 “Big Fat Queer Prom” and sold tickets by waist or bust measurements (Rogers 2007). A carnival entertainment like this, thoughtfully performed, signifies an advantage to being big, where the greater the girth, the more tickets the buyer can get, and the greater the odds that he will be a winner. The second way of being fitted for raffle tickets is a carnival celebration of sexuality called “the double inseam.” The seller takes inseam measurements by running the ticket tape up the buyer’s trouser leg, through his crotch, and down to his other ankle. The carnival trick is that the seller also loops the tickets around the buyer’s scrotum.

Tex performs a special double inseam for a shy, first-time visitor. In his deep voice with a southern drawl, he gives his opening shtick on getting fitted for tickets; his sidekick reassures the buyer that Tex can retract them without leaving any paper-cuts. Up the visitor’s pants he goes, stopping to rub the blushing man’s penis and giving a carnival call-out to the other guests in the room, “I think we’ve got a wiener!” After he pulls out the tickets, he holds them up and says, “I bet you didn’t know your inseam was this long.” As for the sleight of hand, the secret is that everyone gets about the same number of tickets.
Mardi Gras closes out the final hours of the Welcome Party – the most elaborate event in the hospitality suite. A short and fat old man in leopard print underwear asks me for a diet soda, parks his motorized wheelchair by the bar, then sits back to take in all of the festivities. By this point, the bartender I worked with earlier has returned to replace me. He brought in party beads for us to detangle before we go. This time, he came in shirtless, wearing white football pants, his black rubber jock visible through the skintight spandex, a label on the center of it that reads “Nasty Pig.” He boasts his playgear (chaps and jockstraps) and uniform as if to say, “I am a real pig who likes it dirty.”

Here in the carnival-like atmosphere, fat exhibitionism like this is welcome and supported. As one of the Midwest coordinators and co-emcee for the contest told me earlier, in the Super Weekend environment, “you can feel attractive. Three hundred sixty-two days a year, people make jokes about you, but here you can go into the pool and an admirer may say, ‘Look at that [fat] guy,’ in a positive way.” These remarks remind me of how, at a similar event, the door attendant for the hospitality suite kindly announced each guest’s arrival by saying, “Hot man coming in!”

Friday Evening Falls over the Cabaña

The lighted pool shimmers by night, though its cerulean blue water will soon turn cloudy. The influx of guests slathered with tanning oil fouls up the pool’s filtration system. Plus, a few locals just buy daily passes over the weekend, and renters and those gay transients tolerated by the hotel come to have fun at the pool with the Bigmen, free of charge.

At night, most of the men lounge around the pool and carry on quiet conversations. A stick-thin local dangles his legs in the pool. Tan, peroxide hair spiked
with gel, this young man rarely gets into the water the entire weekend, but flirts alongside the edge. Tonight, the three Chubs who linger in the pool gather around his legs like a trio of dolphins who bob close to the pool’s rim, their heads just above the water’s surface, their bodies lit up indistinctly below it.

Past the concrete walkway around the pool is an arbor bench that makes a good poolside cabaña. Sitting there is a shy, Cherokee Superchub, talking to his friends. I take a seat next to him on a chaise lounge. He rubs my baldhead, my source of body anxiety; the lucky fellow himself has a full head of thick chin-length black hair. Then, he asks me if everybody does that and if the men here hit on me. His friends for the weekend call him Pocahontas. He goes to a Cherokee Baptist church, though two weeks ago he ventured off to a Two-Spirit meeting. He works outside of Tulsa doing Cherokee family services. J.B., a short and fat man full of life sashaying around the pool in a silver wrestling singlet, owns a chain of salons. As he passes by, he tries to draw out Pocahontas saying to me in his honey-dipped Carolinian accent, “She’s been in that same spot all night workin’ it, her best angles and poses.” Both of these men have been to this event before.

I leave the poolside and meander back to my room. Each room at the inn has a large picture window like in Amsterdam’s red light district. A hot pink sign in the window designates a coordinator’s room. Others tape up club banners to their windows. I am told that one year, a group hung the club’s Pride Parade banner over the upstairs balcony railing, and behind it, they put up plastic flamingos in the window.

I also learned that there used to be a carnivalesque window dressing contest. The motel, well-known for balcony bingo – a type of gay cruising or voyeurism where men
stroll by different room numbers in search of chance encounters – ironically shut down one window for being too suggestive. Balcony bingo is reminiscent of carnival behavior that has its roots in gambling and in street fairs. The label on the window read “Peepshow.” The lodgers covered it in black paper and cut out a glory hole. When people walking by looked through the peephole, they saw yellow marshmallow Peeps, the kind that parents put in their children’s Easter baskets. The peepshow window suggests that carnival is more than just mere show; like with the raffle ticket sales, the window requires the guests’/viewers’ active participation. However, the motel thought the peepshow window sent the wrong message. Other guests decorated their windows with paint or items arranged on the ledge, such as twinkle lights, inflatable dolls, and stuffed animals.

Back at my room, one of the other coordinators stirs in his sleep. Last year, he was unhappy with his room because it was too close to the scat room. This year, he has been up off and on throughout the night to answer salacious phone calls and drunk dials. Coordinators are supposed to leave their phones on all night. Guest phone numbers correspond with their room numbers and though most calls are random, the guys do know the rooms occupied by those men they are pursuing. Last night, a heavy breather kept calling our room; by 4:00 a.m., he drummed up the courage to speak in sexually explicit terms. Tonight, I answer the phone and tell my roommate jokingly that the call is for him. He rolls over, talks to the caller, and then tells me that the man on the line wanted to know if we would like to buy some porn….
An all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet runs from 9:00 to 11:00 at the Copa, the hottest spot on the north side of the Cabaña. Raffle tickets are still on sale at the club entrance. This Vegas-style Egyptian-themed club hosts drag, strip shows, and has a large dance floor. On weekends like this throughout the year, it becomes home to various special events.

Another coordinator and I get some food, sit at a table, and talk with an elderly gay man from Kansas. He belongs to the Wichita Prime Timers and sometimes goes to their holiday events; however, the gay men there act too old for his taste and he disidentifies with them. The Prime Timers, founded in Boston circa 1987 by retired professor Woody Baldwin, are organized by age in the same way that Girth & Mirth members are organized by size. Both clubs show compassion for an underdog group in gay society and both work hard to draw out folks who may live in social isolation. The man at my table, though, suggests that the Prime Timers narrowly disrupt normative understandings of what it means to be gay and getting on in years. Their brochure in the lobby talks about how older gay men prefer friendships with mature men their own age, unlike the Super Weekend, where guests of all ages and sizes can play sexually if they like, and where an earthy, crass sense of humor helps to keep them young.

Last year’s winner of the Mr. Chaser contest comes to join us for breakfast. He is a schoolteacher who lives in a French-German border town. Tan with frosty blond hair and blue eyes, he appears to be in his thirties. He is a short, barrel-chested, athletic type who goes to the pool in a snug-fitting white swimsuit. He tells me he goes to many of these events as well as Bear runs during his summer break. Last weekend, he went to Bear Camp in Ohio, where the guys roped him into a lube-wrestling match on Friday.
The other coordinator asks him if he is going to be in the Chaser half of the contest this year. Rather than run the risk of losing his title, he has decided not to enter again.

Soon-to-be former Mr. Chaser tells us some about his sexual exploits from last night. He slept with a really big guy. When he woke up this morning, the man was lying asleep on his arm. He then shows us a huge bruise on his muscular forearm. The bruise for him represents a badge of honor, a souvenir of his sexual encounter with a Chub.

Around the breakfast table on Day 2, it is possible to tell this kind of war story, but it disturbs me nonetheless, because of his “damned desire,” and too much of it. There is strong taboo against an “ideal” gay man like him, with his traditionally handsome body, with which he could attract a host of partners, pairing up with a Superchub. In this carnivalesque environment, he is able to indulge in this socially “inappropriate” choice of sex object, but he can’t let himself admit that the sex was good. So, he dwells on the bruise he suffered. This bruise not only speaks volumes about his preoccupation with Bigmen, but also seems to symbolize his fierce resistance to a thwarted sexual desire. Perhaps the truth is that he likes this kind of sex, getting smothered by a big body on top of him, and enjoys displaying the bruise as evidence of last night’s pleasure.

The Chub and Chaser Contest

Around two, I stand in line with Pocahontas for the “Texas-Sized All-You-Can-Eat Bar-B-Que” at the Copa. Pocahontas teases me and claims he told the ticket seller that he wanted to buy my waist size in tickets – equal to two of them, he says. The barbeque makes me smile, thinking about a tale the men tell of a prior year’s carnival performance called the “KC Masterpiece.” Last spring at a café klatch, K.C. was described to me as
being a “big dirty loudmouth.” At one of the banquets, K.C. got up on stage, rubbed BBQ sauce all over his stomach, danced around, and pulled his flab up over the railing. The servers and audience members at the back of the room gasped in horror – from afar, it looked as though he was doing fecal smearing. I was told that for many folks there, tongue-in-cheek, it made for an unsavory banquet. To prevent falls on stage, the contest information form now states “NOTICE: The use of any hidden props, toys or condiments will be cause for immediate disqualification from the contest.”

Organizing the Contest

Before the contest begins, the coordinators all stand in front of the stage and throw out big shirts, hats, and other donated goodies to the audience. The organizers of the show tell us not to just toss the items to our friends. I go ahead though, and throw a Girth & Mirth logo tee and ballcap to a couple whom I met over the weekend. I also try to fling a shirt to Pocahontas, but he is sitting too far away and it ends up falling short.

After the toss-outs comes the Chaser portion of the contest. The Chub bit is supposed to follow the same format and it too mocks a traditional pageant. Typically, the ratio is off: more Chubs than Chasers enter the annual show. At a meeting in June, an organizer explained it like this: “You get the small part [Chasers] out of the way like in show-business, and then the biggest contestant pool [Chubs] goes last.”

There are three parts to both the Chub and the Chaser contests: the interview, the question, and the fantasy dance show. The interview begins with a personal introduction of each contestant from his fact sheet. The organizers were thoughtful when they planned this sheet out and left off occupation because they knew some folks would be on
disability. The emcee banters with each person one by one in the lineup, embellishing their entry forms and giving the audience some juicy tidbits about them. The goal is to avoid taking the limelight off the entrants on stage.

The contest information form prompts the contestants: “Feel free to be creative and fun. That’s what this is all about.” But, as one organizer said at last month’s meeting, “Just because it’s informal doesn’t mean it has to look informal.” It is an unofficial, but organized, contest; it should move along quickly and be “drama-free.” The form asks for “Chub” or “Chaser,” name, address, age, relationship status, “top/bottom/versatile,” favorite food & drink, and how friends would describe them. The final section of the form is a help us “get-to-know you better” exercise. It instructs contestants to “Circle one word in each line below:”

1) Bedroom, Backroom, Bathhouse, Patio, Hot Tub, Kiddies’ Pool
2) Car, Convertible, Pickup Truck, Semi-Truck, SUV, Mini-van
3) Blue jeans, Chinos, Shorts, Kilts, Drag, Leather, Uniform
4) Boxers, Briefs, Boxer-briefs, Thongs, Jockstraps, Commando

Once the emcee finishes sexualizing the entrant’s word choices, which should be all in good fun, they exit stage right.

After personal introductions, the contestants return to the stage, again one at a time, and respond to a question. Most of them emerge scantily clad, while a few come out in uniform. The emcee picks various fantasy scenario questions from a ready-made list for each of them to answer. The Midwestern group wrote the questions for a general audience. They range from funny and entertaining to scandalous. For example, “What was the worst or most successful pick-up line you’ve ever heard?” As soon as each contestant answers his question, he takes a spot with the other men lining up on stage.
Following the questions, the contestants parade around together shirtless and in skimpy clothes. Most on the stage and in the audience do not take themselves too seriously, which permits fat or gay fun to spill out all over the place.

Both the Chub and the Chaser contests end with a contestant dance-off, often with pants-off, where the guys strut their stuff. The audience then votes for a winner by applause. It was explained to me as, “It appears as if there are judges, but really it’s the audience who decides the winner. With applause, the benefit is that you have an instant winner – with votes, you have to waste time tallying them.” As with the peepshow window and the raffle ticket sales, the Chub and Chaser contest is a carnival that relies on an actively engaged, lively audience. Indeed, as Bakhtin (1963) suggests, one of the characteristics of carnival is that it is “a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators” (122). The carnival fosters participatory spectacles that in the case of the contest break down the boundaries between the contestants and the audience.

*The Dance of the Chasers*

Six Chasers are in the contest this year. Contestant number one has the painted face of Quentin Crisp and walks out on stage like a beauty queen in a pair of leopard print trunks. The emcee asked him earlier, “What cartoon character would you have sex with?” and he said, “Dennis the Menace.” The audience looked puzzled, but at least he managed to give a tight-lipped smile plus shot the crowd a thumb up.

Entrant number two is the guy I bartended with. He comes out in a metallic blue wrestling singlet and boots. A few folks in the audience say he is too big to be in the
Chaser contest; later on, they talk about two older men, entrants four and five, for the same reason. Number 3, though, fits the bill, with his shaved head, goatee, and tattoos & piercings; he exudes masculinity and strolls out on stage with his hands in his pockets; his “camo” shorts sagging on his lanky frame.

The last Chaser, Devanté from the Hoosier state, lets loose over the course of the show and breaks into his erotic dance moves. He is a young and “average-looking” black guy who knows how to work the audience. He rolls up his t-shirt sleeves to show off his toned arms. The front of his shirt reads, “THE BACK VIEW IS EVEN BETTER!” and the back reads, “THE FRONT VIEW IS EVEN BETTER!” The high-cut v-shaped thong he is wearing gives him long shapely legs and exposes his round behind.

With Devanté in the lead, the six men flaunt their stuff. My fellow bartender pulls down the shoulder straps on his singlet. Devanté moves center stage and puts his leg up on the railing. At the back of the stage hangs the guy in the army print shorts, who drops them and moons the audience. Devanté strips his shirt off and all eyes are on him. I can now see that his thong has a zipper in the front with a ring pull. He begins to do pole dancing: the other people on stage laugh and smile as he humps a column. One of the big older men gets near the stage railing right beside him, turns his back to the audience, and moons them. It looks to me like Devanté and the man in the military cargo shorts are playing off of one another now: the latter moons the audience again, the former puts his shirt back on, does the splits, and runs his fingers through his hair.

As the song-and-dance winds down, the audience is howling with laughter. They clap while the emcee stands beside each contestant and calls out their names. The emcees and contest organizers determine that the audience applause-o-meter has it down
to two people: Devanté and his challenger, the one who oozed sexual prowess. They again ask for applause, to determine who the winner is, and it is Devanté, hands down. The incoming emcee presents him with a stately glass trophy that has the simple silhouette of Chub and Chaser etched on it, designed by an artist from the Midwestern group. Devanté holds up his trophy and smiles for the photographer, who likes to travel to all Chub-and-Chaser events around North America and Europe, to record them.

*The Doorknob Award*

At halftime, the audience picks out who ought to win the Doorknob Award. Formal organizations also give these out to their members who have opened up the door to let in folks from outside the group. When we were planning the show last month, one of the men got off track and said, “We wanted Janet Jackson for the halftime, but couldn’t get her to come for some tit-flashing.” All at once, he and another planner across the room lifted up their shirts and showed us their “man boobs.”

The Doorknob, in the sexual context of the Super Weekend, is a mock award. It goes to the guest who has contributed the most to helping others acculturate to the group. It humorously recognizes his undying efforts to have sex with every man there. One of the event planners described it like this: “Traditionally, it has to do with a vote based on the number of sexual partners a guest has had over the weekend or the award is won by acclamation, which becomes like a drunkard award.” This year, the emcee helps the audience narrow it down. He asks for a show of hands for how many people have had sex with at least one person since they have been there. He shouts out: “Two? Three? More than five?” and so on.
In the campy setting of the Super Weekend, the annual winner of the “Doorknob” really receives one. Sontag (1964) notes that Oscar Wilde anticipated one of the joys of camp when he said that anything, even a doorknob, if one approaches it with the right attitude, could be art. As she writes, Camp makes all objects equal: “when [Wilde] announced his intention of ‘living up’ to his blue-and-white china, or declared that a doorknob could be as admirable as a painting. When he proclaimed the importance of the necktie, the boutonniere, the chair, Wilde was anticipating the democratic esprit of Camp” (63).

This year, the Doorknob Award consists of a white wooden star trimmed in red with a crystal doorknob mounted to the center of it. It was custom-made by a retired architect from the Midwestern group. The base of the award has a plaque that reads, “2007 DOORKNOB AWARD” and a Staples’ talking “Easy Button” on it. When pressed, a male voice comes on and says, "That Was Easy!"

A big guy named Jackie wins the Doorknob Award this year and, from what I hear, he has been winning it every year. He has a puffy face, baby blue eyes, a cheerful demeanor, and has served as a long-time coordinator. His claim to fame is his sex stunts in semi-public places. I remember him telling a group of us walking by his room on Thursday when we arrived that he already had sex with 13-14 people. As we stood outside his door, he attached a suction-cup dildo onto it. Throughout the weekend, young men would enter his room, he would close the blinds, and then open them up before the next encounter. At the Welcome Party, he even pushed one man’s legs up over his head on the couch and went down on him as if giving him a blowjob. Later, I remember seeing him messing around with this person’s partner in front of the window, so that they
had to close the blinds. Now, having thoroughly earned his award, Jackie proudly holds it up for the photographer; then the coordinators come up front again to do more toss-outs. I throw a friend of Bubbelz’s a Girth & Mirth tee and hat, and head back to my seat for the Chub contest.

_Here Come the Chubs_

The Chub contestants wait in the corridor outside the club with a “fluffer” whose task it is to prepare the guys backstage and warm up the audience for them. He leads the crowd in a rousing chant and tries to get them to make some noise for the Chubs. As these entrants walk in behind him, they stomp their feet, while he claps his hands over his head and cheers, “HERE-COME-THE-CHUBS, HERE-COME-THE-CHUBS!” – synchronized to the rhythm of [clap, stomp] [clap, stomp] [clap, stomp] [clap, stomp].

Nine Chubs are in the contest this year. Contestant number one, “B.J. Boi,” or as some folks like to call him, “Cotton Candy,” looks young and acts femme. He sashays onto the stage in a skintight shirt, patterned in wide black and sheer vertical bands that show off some of the most vulnerable parts of the fat gay male form. Unlike this entrant, however, most of the contestants “loosely” construct a masculine gay image of themselves on stage. Since masculine sexual ideals are hard to live up to, their imitation of them at times becomes rather comical (see Butler 1990).

I look at all the masculine categories put forth as fodder for fat fantasy and carnivalesque parody. Number four, short and stout, in a Harley Davidson hat and a flannel work-shirt with cutoff sleeves, chooses “semi-truck” from the list and jokes about trolling for sex in truck stop bathrooms. Number five, with a shaved head and a tattoo,
reports that he served in Desert Storm and claims to have had sex with nine men in a foxhole. A bearded number six wears a Denver Broncos football jersey. The seventh contestant’s muscle tee says, “Bears = Great Head.” Contestant number eight, WOOF! WOOF! – A silver-haired Daddy Bear with rosy cheeks sporting a tie-dyed shirt – he kisses the emcee on the lips when he comes out on stage. I also notice that the most common responses to “favorite food” include those from the male-identified food group – meat, or for a laugh, Chasers.

The last contestant is a young newbie; he is Hispanic, wears cross necklaces, jean shorts, and sandals. He says he is new to the Super Weekend, but that everyone made him feel welcome and he is really enjoying himself. The emcee asks him what his favorite cartoon character is, and he answers, “Casper the Friendly Ghost, because he can sneak in and sneak out.” This contestant, feeling welcome at the Super Weekend, reminds me of the guy who sat alone reading at breakfast. A coordinator came and stood by him and dramatically waved the guy’s copy of the latest Harry Potter book, while calling out to the rest of the room how bored this guy must be to resort to this. He then asked everyone in the room to “Please make our guests feel welcome.”

Before the dance-off, the emcee jokes that for the remainder of the contest there will be no more doing the splits. “But, if any of you Chubs can do it,” he chides, “Go ahead, and we’ll get a shoehorn to pop you off the floor.” The shirtless Chubs dance to the song “Hot Boyz,” giving it all they’ve got. B.J. Boi rolls up his shirt into a crop top and does a flag dance with the black scarf draped over his shoulders. “Desert Storm” in his white jock flicks his tongue like Gene Simmons. Twirling around like a diva complete with some breast dancing action, “Denver Broncos” drops his drawers and
shakes his behind. “Casper” comes out for this round in a cowboy hat, rainbow bracelets, and leather body harness, revealing pierced nipples and tattoos on his chest. Meanwhile, “Trucker” guy coolly drops his Joe Boxers and wiggles his ample buttocks against the stage railing, to the increasing applause and cheers of the crowd. The music stops, and the emcee returns to the stage to determine the winner by the volume of the audience’s applause for each contestant. The audience goes for “Trucker,” whose “total chub” performance has won him the contest.

It is now time for the raffle drawing. Some of the prizes include the registration package for another Bigmen’s weekend coming up the next month, a Bigmen’s porn video by Juggernaut XL Productions, a CD player, toy helicopters, as well as the big cash prize. I hear B.J. Boi question the fairness of the raffle when one of the ticket sellers wins both the $890 cash prize and the CD player. Most people, however, are happy for the winner, who in fact generously treats a large group of us to “the last supper” the following night.

After the Contest

After the contest, I get into the pool where I see B.J. Boi sauntering around the edge. He is wearing a rainbow horizontal striped kaftan, which he bought from Basil, one of the founders of this event, who is now in his 80s. For years, Basil has been supplying these big gay men with his affordable, colorful clothing creations in extended sizes out of his makeshift store in the hotel room next to his. The pool soon fills up with energized guests coming off the contest, cocktails in hand. Having recently read Bakhtin (1963), I should have anticipated what happens next in a carnival setting – where “free and
familiar contact among people” is the norm (123) – where “taverns …bathhouses” and the like is an ideal contact zone (128). I am swarmed by three Super Chubs, Roy, Pocahontas briefly, and J.B., who “cockblocks” Roy. Roy, who is already inebriated, makes a move on me, which I redirect by giving him a friendly hug, and he settles for a peck on my cheek. I am uncomfortable being the target of these advances. I am also concerned about the waves the divers are making, since I can’t swim. Across the pool, one couple suggests I shoot off a flare to call for help.

J.B. has had gastric bypass and he no longer feels hungry, so his lover comes by to remind him to eat. He explores his prospects with me by pointing out that I don’t strike him as the “Chaser”-type. When I reply that size is not an issue for me, he is encouraged to keep trying. So I say “I have to go pee” and he playfully backs away from me. As I move toward the ladder, he offers me the key to his room, which he says is closer to the pool. I graciously decline, and head to my room to regroup. When I return to the pool I give J.B. the answer he will accept: “I have a boyfriend and we don’t ‘play.’” By this point, J.B.’s lover is back, urging him to eat, and we part on friendly terms.

Later that evening at the hotel’s piano bar, I encounter a local gay man who came in to have a vodka tonic. He asks the bartender if the Super Weekend guys come in to the bar. The bartender says, “No, not really,” to which the guy makes a snide remark, “Oh, it’s not dirty enough for them?” Even though the bartender does not acknowledge the Super Weekend guests’ sexuality, his noble explanation provides a caring challenge of the patron’s attempt to disparage them: “They’re good guys,” he says, “They enjoy
eating, but they are not big drinkers.” The local quiets down and, for now, an inflammatory tension has been minimized.

**The Last Afternoon**

Having slept in, I go for lunch at Gusher’s by myself. The name was lost on me at first. This is, indeed, doubly “gusher” territory, with all this sexual release happening near the oil fields. From where I sit, I see an African American guest in a power wheelchair, stuck in the doorway to his room, with three men trailing behind him, who maneuver his wheelchair into the room and shut the door. I also see a Chaser with bleached hair, thin, tan body, fluffing up the Bigmen around the pool, particularly “Desert Storm.” He takes a squirt gun and sprays the men. One of them in turn takes the squirt gun from him and wets down his white boxer briefs. I remember a story the men tell of a past Super Weekend when a big guy lying on the side of the pool was presumed dead because he wasn’t moving. When a Chaser walked by, the big guy’s hand slowly rose into the Chaser’s trunks as everyone cheered, “He’s alive! He’s still reaching for dick!”

After lunch, I walk to the hospitality room with three of the coordinators and friends of theirs, as well as the couple I had befriended earlier. We walk by the “twink pool” – this is “the other pool,” where men who are part of the local gay scene hang out. The joke among the Super Weekend guests is that all the big guys ought to cannonball into the pool, sending the “twinks” up into the trees. I am reminded once more that the pool is not always an equalizer; it is also the site where body shape and size are contended.

At the wrap-up meeting, among other things, we toy around with the idea that we ought to design a lifetime achievement award for Jackie, who has been winning the
Doorknob award every year. Then we consider creating more categories, since in the Chaser contest there were Chubs who entered it because they too liked chasing after other Chubs. But we can see no end to category creation: there are chubby Chubby Chasers, Chub-4-Chubs, or Tweeners whose body types don’t fit either Chub or Chaser. Finally, we remark on the Chaser emcee’s behavior throughout the contest, which, at times, was mean-spirited. We note how not only were some of his jokes not funny, but he also intentionally stole the spotlight from the contestants. This brings us to seriously discuss the responsibility of hosting an event like this with respect and compassion for the guests.
Chapter 4: Redefining Fat through Play, Camp, and Carnival

Chapter 3 described Bigmen at a Pan-Girth & Mirth event, a powwow intended to put
them at ease so they could socialize and find ways to play with redefinitions of their
sexuality through camp and carnival. In this chapter, I define carnival as a resistance
strategy against stigma; and following on Cleto (2002), I define camp as a “survivalist
strategy” (8). I also analyze the ways that the Bigmen use play to achieve being unself-
consciously at ease with each other, ranging from splashing around in a swimming pool
to fantasy and role-play, which is about sexual objectification.

The Super Weekend at the Cabaña provides rich data for studying display culture
among Girth & Mirth groups, organized around playfully sexualizing the injury that
Bigmen experience. Here, carnival performances are part of the commentary that
constitutes the groups’ culturally articulated categories that work on multiple levels.
From the perspective of symbolic interactionists, and particularly among
ethnomethodologists, people assess their own practices and behavior. For example, the
performances in the mock beauty contest take on multiple meanings. They are both a
way of social organization and social critique – and this multiplicity of social
classification, the manipulation of meaning on multiple levels, is the foundation of
embodied or symbolic interaction. In this way, the Bigmen’s performance of their fat
bodies carries sociological import.
It is difficult to produce an event such as the Super Weekend, in that it is self-generating. It is a weekend of invention, in which both the organizers and the guests are inventing the games, awards, and costumes. Once there is the idea of awards one year, the organizers are bound to invent more awards for the following. Likewise, once the guests get a taste of how parading around in a suggestive outfit is received one year, they plan their outfits more carefully the next. In carefully planning their wardrobes for the weekend, the Bigmen engaged in reinvention, constructing themselves as objects of desire and reclaiming their right to self-definition.

One of the Super Weekend organizers shared with me how hard it is to pack for the occasion. I was there as he carefully considered his slogan tees neatly stored in bins under his bed. Some slogans celebrated being big, such as “Big Daddy,” “Bigger is Better,” and “Big Dog’s Well-Hung Drywall Co.” the latter exclaiming, “We Have Big Tools!” There were also tees with funny-offensive slogans; some were suggestive, with double-entendres, like the one that said, “Let’s play army. I’ll lay down and you can blow the hell out of me,” while another tee displayed a screen-printed fire extinguisher on the front, that was holding its own nozzle as it was putting out the foam, and the slogan read, “I put out.” Yet another T-shirt had a grizzly bear on it with a slogan that read, “Come any closer and I’ll eat you up.” Playing with dress in this fashion and dressing to the excess are ways that Bigmen, motivated by their muted sexuality, redifferentiate themselves from the undifferentiated “slovenly fat slobs,” thus redefining their size as something special, something with sexual currency. With the various tee slogans and suggestive attire, these Bigmen suggest tongue-in-cheek that being big gives them bigger genitalia, rendering their sexuality bigger than life.
The Super Weekend empowers its guests by providing an environment that gives them permission to display their goods, irregardless, and perhaps precisely because, of their body shape and size. Since it is unsanctioned for fat bodies to show skin and wear seductive clothing, and since Bigmen are not allowed to flaunt their bodies, they don various outfits as their weapon for “freedom fighting” to combat desexualization and to achieve “temporary liberation.” The meaning of dress changes in this type of fat-affirming performance frame; it shows a rebellious attitude. In this manner, their adornment serves a political function. Rather than trying to camouflage their fat bodies, their clothing choices reveal their sexuality. Bigmen’s fat-revealing, sexually suggestive clothing enables them to reframe their self-image within the confines of the carnivalesque infrastructure. The carnival-like atmosphere makes possible such exhibitionism and gives guests a license to feel sexy and desirable. It must be noted, however, that this exercise of power occurs only within the confines and protection of a cohesive group of Girth & Mirthers; it does not celebrate one’s fat identity in mainstream society or in the gay community, both of which highly regulate body shape and size.

These Bigmen also have the opportunity to push the limits for another purpose: self-definition. In unapologetically engaging in “revolting” campy behavior, they thumb their nose at social morés, thus appropriating power. It is as if they are saying, “You think I am sexually repulsive? Let me show you how raunchy and disgusting I can be!” Each year, such outrageous acts enable guests to purge themselves of their injuries. And even as they push the limits, the limits seem to keep moving, because behavior that is intended to have shock value does not seem to shock most of the guests. For example, costume malfunctions are predictable; they force the onlookers to feign shock, rather than
really be shocked. When Bigmen playfully cause chasers to “lose” their trunks in the swimming pool à la Janet Jackson’s “nipple slip,” their campy self-expression is, by definition, intentionally in bad taste, even as it is supposedly an accidental incident of indecent exposure.

While the Super Weekend events appear to support pushing the limits regarding the body and sexuality, it also imposes limits when someone goes “too far.” For example, the glory hole window was shut down by the hotel for being “too suggestive”; or condiments were prohibited on stage by the organizers after the one guest smeared barbecue sauce all over his body. These restrictions actually seem to replicate the limits one finds in the larger society, but without casting the Bigmen into a marginal position among the “normals” and “ideal” gays. Rather, they are among their own – fellow big gay men. In their mission to resist stigma, Girth & Mirthers push these limits as far as they can, using carnival and camp.

These men engage in carnival acts that go well beyond all prohibitions – they would be frowned upon anywhere else if a person expressed them on their own – but they happen during the Super Weekend at the Cabaña, within the confines of this time and place. Here, group members have a good time engaging in scatological humor. They also have fun celebrating bodily expressions that center on things like food, fat, and sex. As Bakhtin says of carnival gatherings, “[T]he body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time all-people’s character” (1968:19). And despite their slum-like qualities, carnivals offer something special. As Bakhtin (1963) eloquently puts it, “Behind all the slum-naturalism…, the carnival square is glimmering” (133). The performances of outrageous and grotesque bodily expressions at the Cabaña are indeed
cosmic and ordinary. It is literally marvelous in its deviance and at the same time so very
down to earth.

The Bigmen perform their fat bodies unapologetically and their body talk
enables them to reject the socially sanctioned ideal of the thin gay man. In this context,
categories of status and privilege based on body shape and size are temporarily disrupted,
so that harassing, teasing, and heckling, which are usually imposed on Bigmen, can be,
for a change, launched at the thin guests. Here, they negotiate the frame through play and
reverse roles and enjoy the comfort of being in the majority. Furthermore, carnival offers
Chubs the possibility to reconfigure and reframe the power dynamics, where they can
make the Chasers submit sexually. The Chubs get to call the shots, rather than men with
physiques that fit the “ideal” gay male body. Such a reversal is unlikely to occur in the
wider gay community with its masculine hierarchy that is deeply rooted in body shape
and size, where slim athletic figures are generally privileged.

Within the safe confines of the Cabaña, Bigmen seek sexual objectification to
learn how to be open and accepting of one another and relate intimately to one another, as
in Goffman’s (1963) sheltering idea in his book Stigma. This is a diverse group that
allows Chubs and Chasers, in the free, familiar setting of a swimming pool, to come
together on an almost equal footing and feel “sexy.” Being in the majority for a change
makes Chubs more at ease with their bodies. One Bigman shared with me that when
“you’re at the pool and everybody is more or less of the same build, then you are more
likely to be comfortable with yourself, taking your shirt off and getting in the pool.” The
Super Weekend is about the critical role of multiple expressions of intimacy that
reawaken Bigmen’s dormant sexuality. Many Bigmen have come to deny their bodies,
and here at the communal pools, unencumbered by social morés, they get in touch with their bodies and with the healing sense of community that water, the great equalizer, can provide.

As Wann (1993) puts it, “[w]ater seeks its own level; and by a similar process of community, bodies are equal and unique in [pools]” (41). She recalls Gloria Steinem’s (1981) observation that the “impossible goal of ‘what we should look like’ has worn a groove in our brains. It will take the constant intimacy of many new images to blast us out.” At the Cabaña, the men’s bodies are “unique chapters in a shared story”; they are “together unself-consciously,” seemingly at ease with themselves. Their “diverse reality [wears] away the plastic-stereotypical-perfect image” against which they measure themselves (as cited in Wann 1993:41). For a short time, they disregard the judgments that society makes about the attractiveness of different body types – who can intermingle with whom – and engage in sensuous spectacle.

Easto and Truzzi (1973) build on Goffman’s (1961) concept of the “total institution” by applying it to carnivals. Like a total institution, a carnival is a “highly integrated social and cultural system with strong boundaries maintained between itself and the community in which it is temporarily stationed… [It] is largely self-contained, has its own distinctive culture, and maintains a separate social structure” (550). Based on this definition, the Super Weekend at the Cabaña qualifies as a “total institution” since it is in a gay enclave, in a gay hotel, with everything from restaurants and bars to gift shop and performance space all located in the same compound.

However, when the Super Weekend at the Cabaña is viewed as institutionalized tourism, we get a negative account of carnival. That is, Bigmen attend the Super
Weekend because there are no other options. Maybe it is not obligatory, but it is, nonetheless, constraining. It is a compulsory “ghetto,” as sociologists would say, that one must go to, in order to belong. But, as the Bigmen themselves say, they are glad it exists. Although it is a sideshow of the “real” gay scene, it is a necessary weekend for these men. It offers the advantages of a “total institution,” where, rather than being stripped of his individuality, a Bigman gains recognition for who he is. While this space of the Cabaña for the duration of the weekend has all the elements of a total institution, which usually gets a bad rap, this particular total institution can do something positive. The insular, artificial environment of the Cabaña provides a “realm of pure possibility” (Babcock, 1978:24), where Bigmen feel liberated at least for the duration of the weekend, seeking comfort in sheer numbers that are large enough for them to buy out a whole hotel.

In the carnivalesque atmosphere of the Cabaña, the Bigmen use campy humor to work through the stigma of being fat. Using camp, they poke fun by inverting popular cultural forms into their most bastardized rendition. They perform a “queer deconstruction of the opposition between ‘original’ and ‘copy’” (Cleto 2002:8). For example, one would think of synchronized swimming as a water dance performed by graceful, thin women in glamorous suits. The Bigmen at the Cabaña, however, mimic this dance, turning it into a spectacle as they slosh around like a merry bunch of water hippos. Their campy water sport “proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is [intentionally] ‘too much’” (Sontag 1964:59). In their use of this sophisticated humor, these Bigmen overcome their underdog status, at least
temporarily. Cleto (2002) calls this “a survivalist strategy” that works through “a reinscription of stigma” (8). In Bateson’s (1972) words, “This is play” (178).

In *Steps to and Ecology of Mind*, Bateson (1972) describes the edginess and seductive properties of play. He further describes play as being therapeutic, safely taking place within “playgrounds that are “bounded.” The Cabaña, then, provides an enormous playground where Bigmen can socialize and explore their sexuality with impunity. The weekend is all about sexuality and a license for couples to do as they please, because “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”

The understanding between couples usually is that while you are there you don’t need to get permission from your partner to play around, and you can come back and still be a couple. However, as Bateson (1972) suggests, the signals can get mixed, muddying couples’ definition of play. Some couples arrive having already agreed to have an open relationship and play with others. Nevertheless, there is the rare couple that may not have ironed out the rules for engaging in play, and therefore may not be prepared for the enticing “playful” environment that makes it next to impossible to resist the come-ons. As a newcomer to the Super Weekend, I was told the cautionary tale about how, one year at the Cabaña, a guy threw a chair through the window in a rage when he walked by and saw his boyfriend having sex with someone else, because the couple had not agreed “to play.” Play always throws things off balance, as the aggressive side of it rears its ugly head. Bateson (1972) adds that at its most complex, play can take the ritual form of hazing, which I experienced in the pool when the Bigmen heckled me about my being a fried Twinkie.
Discussion

At the Cabaña, the Bigmen escape the world that overgeneralizes all fat people as slovenly, lazy, and unhealthy; in particular, they break from the gay community that renders them asexual and undesirable. At the Cabaña for a few precious days, being “big” is not an issue; nor is being “gay.” Yet, these markers are an issue for the Bigmen who come there, because the gay community’s rejection of them fuels Bigmen’s anxieties surrounding wanting to be recognized as being “sexual,” as well. Thus, the Bigmen go to Girth & Mirth reunions to take back their power and to differentiate themselves as sexy, funny, attractive, and desirable beings. Their acts of redifferentiation make fat something else; they change the singular, negative associations about fat everyone knows, and they make being big special. In so doing, the Bigmen become unself-consciously at ease with their bodies.

The Girth & Mirth reunion brings together Bigmen alienated in a world that renders them invisible because of their size, much like ageism that renders older people invisible. Ironically, the same world that renders Bigmen invisible based on their size also makes their size rather visible. For example, a fat man may present the symptoms of a cold and be given a lecture about losing weight because in the doctor’s eyes his being fat overrides all of his other characteristics and symptoms. At the Super Weekend, the Bigmen affirm the overriding characteristic of being fat by calling attention to characteristics other than fat that equally define them. The Super Weekend carries the burden of creating hypervisibility. It provides an outlet where Bigmen can show off the body excess. During that weekend, Bigmen engage in a variety of campy-queer behaviors, being funny and mirthful and having fun at their own expense. This enables
them to carve a place for themselves at least in the margins of gay community as fat and happy, though living up to a stereotype.

Bigmen process shame in a number of ways, including internalizing it. At the Cabaña, interestingly, the shamers are not there, but in a very real sense, they are too—and this gets played out in the Bigmen’s performances. And it appears that a major response to shame is “play.” Play disputes, refutes, and rearranges meaning. Rather than using politics or lobbying, the Bigmen use the expressive culture of adult play at the Cabaña to transvaluate their stigma.

As a frame for the Super Weekend, play helps Bigmen renegotiate their value. For example, in the aquatic sports parody and the make-out session between the Chasers, they turn the criterion of the “ideal” body in determining dominance in the gay hierarchy on its head, as they place Chasers beneath the Chubs and under their command. Babcock (1978) refers to this as “symbolic inversion,” which contradicts and abrogates, creating the possibility of a “reversible world” (14). She also calls it “institutionalized clowning,” which enables the performers to let off steam (22). Thus, play troubles commonly held social codes, in this case, the codes of the gay hierarchy. As Bateson (1972) suggests, play communicates on different levels, conveying different messages; and one could imagine that some of the implicit messages of play, like the inverted gay hierarchy, would rub off.

As Babcock (1978) advocates, “We seem to need ‘a margin of mess,’ a category of ‘inverted beings’ both to define and to question the orders by which we live” (28). Play throws things off balance, casting “the clean with the filthy, the rational with the animalistic, the ceremonial with the carnivalesque in order to maintain cultural vitality”
(32). By adding the taboo counterparts to accepted codes, values, and norms, Bigmen at the Cabaña set out to play with who they are, creating disorder as they perform their fat bodies shamelessly. These defiant acts of theirs are both shameful and liberatory; in a way, they are shameful but liberatory.
Chapter 5: Big Gay Men Seeking Status Differentiation

Chapter 4 identified one of the general functions of festival as ritual inversion. Carnival, from this perspective, is viewed as affording the possibility for the mixing of classes and the forgetting of sexual mores (Babcock 1978; Bakhtin 1968; Turner 1974). In this chapter, I continue the discussion of how display or carnival becomes a means for owning one’s stigma and therefore reconfiguring it. Here I take up the questions of status differentiation evident in the comparison of two different events: the Super Weekend and Convergence.

After I had attended the Super Weekend at the Cabaña, I went to Convergence, another Chub-and-Chaser reunion, at the recommendation of a few members of the Girth & Mirth board. The former took place in July, the latter over Labor Day weekend. Despite their striking parallels, these two events provided for big gay tourism differently, which renders a comparative analysis of these two events worthwhile. The same people sometimes attend both, but the events have a very different flavor. In this chapter, I further investigate what festival does for a stigmatized group, what differences there are between the ways that fat stigma is handled at the two events, and to what extent the festival setting minimizes woundedness.

Both weekends take place in a city and involve group activities, but unlike the joint effort to coordinate the Super Weekend, the group hosting the Labor Day weekend changes every year, as does its location. The latter is also a much larger event, with more
than 350 attendees in the year I attended, which is at least twice the size of the Super Weekend. Over Labor Day weekend, one brave club agrees to take charge of the event and have it on its home turf. It has backing from the umbrella organization, “Affiliated Bigmen’s Clubs” (called “ABC” for short), formed to help advance awareness of big men's convergences within the gay community.

The hotel for Convergence is upscale and though gay-friendly, usually mainstream, in a Marriott this time, whereas the motel for the Super Weekend is inexpensive and gay-exclusive, surrounded by a gay village. Cross-cultural encounters take place between gay and straight guests at the hotel for Convergence. In fact, as I was taking the elevator up to my room Saturday before dinner, there was an old WWII veteran and his wife, talking with other veterans in their military garb. They were all attending a conference going on at the hotel the same weekend. Unaware of my affiliation with the Girth & Mirthers, he said to his wife and friends, “I’m dying to see what’s on deck for those people who are all about 300 lbs.” This highlighted for me that Convergence was being held in the midst of other mainstream events that were sharing some of the same spaces as these men.

This stands in stark contrast to the Cabaña Inn – a closeted space, with safe and familiar surroundings that provide an escape from heteronormative society. Even if Convergence could be counterhegemonic, it is foremost a group vacation and continues to rely on the presence of a gay social scene in large and diverse host cities to provide the itinerary for its excursions. There is a fee for these outings, some include sightseeing more characteristic of mainstream tourism, and indeed, supplemental to the more hotel-bound activities like those offered in Oklahoma (e.g., cocktail receptions, pool parties,
buffet meals, Chub & Chaser contests). In addition, Convergence offers educational seminars and a themed dance.

This chapter differentiates the two events in terms of the economy of sex on display, focusing especially on the ways in which big gay men seek class validation and respectability during the Labor Day weekend convergence. It handles bodily display differently than the Super Weekend. The more that sex is not explicitly articulated, but rather indirectly referenced, the closer it is to "art" and "performance" rather than just "sale." Furthermore, if gay folks tend to be hyper-status conscious, then it becomes all the more apparent when they come together in a collective moment of gay affiliation. In addition, and as hinted at in the last chapter’s analysis of the Super Weekend at the Cabaña, the individuals performing are not even specifically selling themselves, but rather are participating in a communal economy of symbolic exchange. A carryover from the heterosexual world, greater status is accorded to men who have more partners, particularly those who approach the “ideal” body type. Powerful politicians, for instance, often promote their promiscuity, thus relating it at some level to their status as well as to masculinity. In this way, sexuality, gender, and class coincide. Big gay men would like to have the same sexual currency and the corresponding status that it appears to bring.

At Convergence, the Bigmen’s ways of performing class create an extra obligation on the event, that is, to perform class is value-added – not just recompense – Convergence offers more than a weekend to make up for what is missing in their lives. Here, the men engage in status-affirming activities. To do this, they have to silence discourses of shame that undermine their class-based efforts to distinguish themselves through “Culture at Convergence” (fittingly the title of a meeting packet insert during the
Labor Day Weekend that I attended). Yet, unlike those who attend the Super Weekend, Labor Day Weekenders still perform some of the markers of mainstream middle-class society. In so doing, the Bigmen experience themselves as being less on the fringes of society.

By attending the Labor Day Weekend, when the guests go on city tours, outings to the mall, to the state fair, to gay bars, the sculpture garden, and the art center together, they engage in some of the legitimate activities that they feel they missed out on in their lives, such as their high school prom or Spring Break. The Labor Day Weekend offers a variety of rather elaborate packages that also list the à la carte prices, such as $30 for attending the Renaissance Festival or $20 to go to the Casino. These expenditures are above and beyond the cost of the hotel and registration for the event. This definitely makes it a more pricey weekend than the Super Weekend at the Cabaña, and one that is more aligned with the city’s already existing mainstream tourism, thus making the guests purveyors of culture. Many of the guests also tack onto their packages a Convergence t-shirt, which, not surprisingly, begins at size LG and goes up to 6XL, immediately excluding all of the Chasers in this inverse world.

When I first began to consider attending Convergence, my travel-companion-to-be said offered some comparisons of the weekend at Convergence to that at the Cabaña. His impression of the Super Weekend at the Cabaña was that it is “more ‘play’-oriented, whereas Convergence runs the gamut with fashion shows, big fashion designers creating leatherwear made to order for all shapes and sizes, body image workshops, formal dinners, and by far ‘nicer’ accommodations.” Space is also reserved in the hotel for the gay vendor market and movie showings. On our drive to the event, my travel companion,
who had attended several Convergences, reminisced that one year, the headliner was a
disabled comedian; then they had a masquerade where the guests were given fancy
feather masques to wear; another year, there was a French jazz singer; and another time,
the entertainment was drag. These status displays and performances also render social
status a significant code at Convergence other than that of carnival and class suffering.

At the Cabaña, differentiating oneself through fashion meant wearing playwear
like leather chaps and body harnesses. At Convergence, the Bigmen preferred to
differentiate themselves by wearing sharp and classy attire. For instance, as my travel
companion also recalled, at a past Convergence, Casual Male, a mainstream clothing
chain, sponsored a fashion show and outfitted pairs of Chubs and Chasers, who walked
down the runway together. The guests could then buy these outfits at 50 percent off.
Like the other events that follow, the fashion show, too, reinforces the class ethos at
Convergence.

First-Timers’ Orientation

The way that first-timers got introduced to the two settings was quite different. Whereas
at the Cabaña it appeared that hazing was the way to learn the sexual codes of the
weekend, at Convergence there was an actual “1st Timers’ Orientation.” This was held,
as most orientations are, at 8:00 o’clock in the morning of the second day, when folks had
had a taste of Convergence culture. The new president of ABC facilitated the orientation.
I had attended the Super Weekend as one of the organizers; at the Labor Day Weekend, I
was simply one of the new guests. Eight of us newcomers attended the orientation and
sat in a small talking circle in one of the hotel’s meeting rooms. The following is an excerpt from my fieldnotes of that morning.

While we were waiting to begin, the facilitator mentioned that he hoped one guy in particular would show up. He said the guy felt a bit overwhelmed at his first night of Convergence because he comes from small town and wasn’t used to an all-gay environment where guys were kissing, holding hands, and hugging. He added that this is why the orientation was on the second day after guys had some experience with the event and were looking for a debriefing. He also told us that he wasn’t a trained counseling psychologist, and to feel free to use nonclinical sexual language and refer frankly to genitalia.

The facilitator’s pseudo-professional lingo reminded me again of the mainstream traits of Convergence, which were so unlike those at the Cabaña. The timing of the orientation session, which was following one night of exposure to the sexual undercurrent at Convergence, also pointed to the tendency toward a formal organization, where one is first exposed, and later debriefed on what one just experienced.

The Convergence orientation was reminiscent of a sex-ed class, where the participants were to talk openly with the trusted facilitator about sex. People had some questions, some of which were off topic. The facilitator gave advice about sexual expectations and on how to deal with sexual advances. In my fieldnotes, I grappled with this advice. The sexual scene that Convergence promised was in sharp contrast with what my compatriots had told me to expect at the Cabaña.

The Convergence facilitator said, “If you come to Convergence just for sex, you may leave disappointed. If you come to meet a lot of good people and make new friends and if the sex happens, that’s a bonus.” The advice I had heard from my informants at the Cabaña about the Super Weekend was different: “If you come to the Super Weekend looking for a long-term relationship to blossom from casual sexual encounters, you will be sorely disappointed.”
The Convergence facilitator also gave a tip for how to reject people and reminded folks to retain their personal values. If you’re not interested in someone, gently tell them “You’re not my type” and if they get nasty, they were probably not the kind of person you would want to be with anyway. At the Super Weekend, it seemed that this advice wouldn’t fly — why else would one be there? In fact, the answer that worked at the Cabaña, which I had to learn by trial and error, was “I don’t play.”

The type of advice given at Convergence was packaged in a formal presentation. Furthermore, the recommendation that was given for how to deal with unwanted attention was quite unusually mainstream. Participants were advised to assert an individual standard for why they may not want to respond to someone’s advances. In contrast, at the Cabaña, I had to learn the appropriate code of play.

The Convergence facilitator contrasted the Labor Day Weekend with Bear runs where people are more overtly sexual and rowdy in public spaces, whereas at Convergence folks may be a bit more reserved. As he said, “Here guests meet at the pool and take it back to their room, though occasionally you will see things in the wee hours of morning in the hospitality room.” Then he opened the floor for any questions or concerns folks may have, asking whether any of the guys felt uncomfortable. One guy chimed in saying, “I just went to Fire Island, and this was nothing in comparison.” There was definitely less sex on display at Convergence, than at the Super Weekend. Sex took place behind closed doors — again hearkening to middleclass mainstream etiquette and rules regarding having sex in public — not that this event too did not include plenty of fondling in the pool.
My Researcher/Participant Status

My researcher status turned into one of full participant during the Chub-Chaser Contest at Convergence. While I was still enjoying the privileges of being a disengaged researcher, I mentally noted some differences between the Convergence contest and the one at the Cabaña. The Convergence show was simpler than that at the Cabaña, where the contestants competed in and mocked all of the traditional beauty contest categories, which included the question-and-answer section, individual talent performances, and the group dance, among others. While it consisted of just the individual dance routines to a song, these were more carefully thought out and less off the cuff. Also, the Convergence contest was judged as in a traditional pageant, with a panel of three judges, whereas at the Cabaña, the whole audience was the judge, giving power to the people, so to speak.

Being more overtly a researcher at Convergence put me in a different position than at the Cabaña. Given his training in Social Work, my travel companion advised me that I should talk about my researcher role as if I was a member of Girth & Mirth, writing about how Bigmen work out self-esteem issues. He felt that this way, more people would talk to me. Taking his advice, when appropriate I introduced myself and my study. Still, being open about my researcher status did not keep me from being called on to participate fully. The line between the performers and the spectators at Convergence was easy to cross: the audience and the stage were only distinguishable by who was standing on the parquet floor and who was sitting at tables on the carpeted end of the same ballroom. Therefore, before I knew it, I was literally pulled onto the stage by a contestant as one of his two Chaser sidekicks. The following excerpt is from my fieldnotes reconstructed after the Chub Contest:
A Chub from the UK came out in a light button-up shirt and black pants. I learned later he worked in liberal politics and his boyfriend was from Sweden. He came out cracking his leather belt. Wrapping it around me, this guy pulled me from my table to the stage – like at a comedy club or drag show, when you’re sitting up front, and it’s inevitable that you’re going to be pulled into the routine. While we were on stage and the music was playing, he quickly whispered gentle instructions to me. I obliged with my best improv, for which my dinner companions later complimented me. I had to get on my knees and undo his shirt, then take off mine. He pulled out baby oil, and we oiled each other up. Then he spanked me with the belt on my behind. He also pulled in one of the Asian Chasers and like at a carwash, we both oiled his chest on either side. When I returned to my seat, my dinner companions threw me their napkins so I could wipe myself off. My travel companion then wiped my back and showed me the photographs he took.

As I discovered through this unexpected turn of events, even though I was out as a researcher, there was no way that I was going to be able to sit back and simply watch the show. This full-blown participation had been required of me at the Cabaña, too, but there, it was to be expected, since I had not spoken openly about my research.

Noyes (2003) has remarked on the problem of an onlooker at a festival setting, who gets swept up into the crowd. Indeed, during my time at various Girth & Mirth events, I have experienced a kind of recruitment taking place, as people assumed that I must be a Chaser – why else could I be interested in the lives of Chubs? I did not, in so many words, try to contradict the assumptions that were projected onto me. Rather, I accepted the roles in which they placed me.

**Chaser Cachet**

Most important to the focus of this chapter, there was more Chaser action at Convergence, where, through the lens of status, Bigmen appeared to value anyone who would give them greater validation. Altogether, there were fewer contestants at
Convergence, where the Chasers took their performance rather seriously. The contestants made their appearance on stage in the reverse order from what they did at the Cabaña, where Chubs are the valued commodity or affirmed group and are therefore saved for last. So at Convergence, five Chubs went first, followed by six Chasers, unlike at the Cabaña where there were six Chasers followed by nine Chubs.

As soon as the Chubs finished, the Bigmen in the audience rushed the stage getting in position to take photographs of the Chasers who took mainstage, something that did not happen during the Chub portion of the contest. They wanted to record these hypervisual sex objects, each with his own beguiling persona, each employing a stereotype of the prototypical male.

Among the Chasers, there was a brawny, tanned guy all oiled up, wearing only a loincloth and on his head a crown of ivy. Another Chaser, an African American, came out in football garb, dancing to the lyrics, “don’tcha wish your girlfriend was hot like me.” A third, who I learned was a Disciplinary Principle at a Chicago Catholic School, bounced onto the stage with a drill and his underwear for a toolbelt, dancing to “Macho Man.” Yet another Chaser was a German man, wearing a leather harness and thong, cracking cat o’ nine tails. Then there was Devanté, an African American, who danced to the lyrics, “loosen up my buttons” in his white bikini briefs. I recognized him from the Cabaña, where he had stolen the contest earlier this summer. Finally, there was the “twink,” with a retro-eighties look. He wore a leather thong and sensually moved to a dance remake of McKenzie’s “San Francisco.”

These Chasers at Convergence were all clearly 100 percent Chaser material, unlike the Chasers at the Habana many of whom were in fact big guys who liked chasing big guys. Devanté won the Chaser contest at Convergence as he had done at the Cabaña – perhaps working his way up to becoming the doll of the Chub-Chaser circuit, a niche status.

As Bigmen who are increasingly relegated to a low status group have a chance to flirt and romantically associate with Chasers at these events, their status gets elevated.
While Chubs are more desirable and therefore have more status at the Cabaña, Chasers appear to have more status at Convergence. This may be because the ethos at the Cabaña is more Bigmen-for-Bigmen, whereas Convergence is more truly a “traditional” Chub-Chaser event.

Given my research goal to give voice to Bigmen, I spoke to more Bigmen at Convergence, and did not make a concerted effort to speak to too many Chasers there. This misstep is reflected in the fact that the information I have on Chasers is second-hand. At a future date, I can foresee intentionally participating in Chaser culture and interviewing Chasers to learn more about them. Doing so in turn would have enabled me to appreciate Chasers’ subject position, which Bigmen consider to be a difficult status to maintain within most gay circles.

The Superchub, who was gracious enough to share his transportation and lodging with me, served as my gatekeeper at Convergence. He introduced me to several key figures, most of whom were Bigmen. It was him who first made me aware of the difficult position in which Chasers find themselves. As he said, “Chasers feel stigma because they pursue gay ‘misfits’.” I take this to mean “courtesy stigma” in the way that Goffman (1963) coined the term: Goffman observes that people who associate with a stigmatized group are guilty by association, so to speak, as they are conferred a “courtesy stigma.” In her discussion of fat admirers, Millman (1980) also hints at the same phenomenon. This came up in a conversation I had with a Girth & Mirth member who was working as a vendor at Convergence, selling CDs of his stand-up comedy and other dance CDs. As he told me,
Chasers usually experience a stigma by association and this is the one time a year they can come and be comfortable expressing their desires. There is this Chaser who settled down with a conventionally handsome guy because he is so closeted about his sexual preferences. And he wanted to be “normal” – like homosexual guys who marry women … But he has to sneak off to Convergence once a year to get his groove on.

It is noteworthy that Chasers, too, worry about their status: their reputation can be tarnished if they are seen going out with men of larger stature. Chasers who associate with fat people may be marginally accepted within the “deviant” group as honorary members. However, if they come out as “Chasers” among gay “normals,” they are tainted for holding an unorthodox ideal of what constitutes an “appropriate” mate.

Chub-Chaser Dynamics

At both the Cabaña and Convergence, the Chub-Chaser dynamic brings the class question to the fore: how is size tied to male desirability? In both heterosexual and gay society, there are Chubby-Chaser subcultures. In the heterosexual main, though, men of a larger stature are still desirable to some women, without their bulky bodies relegating them to the fringes. In the gay main, however, it would be rare for a Bigman to be desirable to other gay men, his bulk forcing him to seek sexual validation on the fringes. Girth & Mirth offers events such as those at the Cabaña and Convergence in response to this need.

It is ironic that Chasers should be called “Chasers” at all, since they are not exactly playing the part of a chaser. A couple different Chubs at Convergence lamented about Chasers’ being intentionally ambiguous. One of the Bigmen mentioned over dinner: “I would prefer if a Chaser just said ‘yes’ or ‘no’; instead, they remain politely disinterested, but they are not direct.” Perhaps, Madonna says it best in her song, “Justify my Love”: “Poor is the man whose pleasures depend on the permission of another.”
Given the small ratio of Chasers to Chubs, the Chubs are “a dime a dozen,” and relegated to generic status. Chasers, in contrast, have rare status; they are aware that they are in high demand. Therefore, they can be noncommittal, stringing along several Bigmen even over one short weekend. Within Convergence culture, Chasers have more power that comes with their status, such that they can afford to be a tease. The principle of least interest appears to be in operation here.

Admittedly, within the Chub-Chaser dynamic, there is potential to expand the “acceptable” range of body types that any gay man may choose as sex partners. However, not all of the Chasers’ sexual pursuit of Bigmen should be lauded as being counter-hegemonic. As the Bigman who gave me a ride to Convergence told me, as a Superchub who loves to meet up with Chasers, “There are some Chasers at Convergence who get into packs and plan their conquests – they are the bed-notchers. They huddle together deciding on the biggest guy and who can use him in bed. Then they score their conquests. Not all Chasers do this, but some do.”

In his chapter on teams, Goffman (1959) refers to this as “dramaturgical cooperation” (83). That is, these Chasers act as co-conspirators who cooperate to stage a performance of sexual conquest. While this may not constitute “hogging” that heterosexual men do to fat women, as discussed in Gailey and Prohaska (2006), it makes sex a sport. For instance, Gardner (1995) talks of public harassment that men in teams dole out to women and “score” women as though it were all “fun and games.” This negative judgment of sexual conquest was not the case at the Cabaña, where a Chub won the Doorknob Award for having had the greatest number of “sexual scores” during the Super Weekend.
This is not to say that Chubs and Chasers never commit to each other in a long-term relationship. However, there seems to be a built-in instability. In one case at Convergence, a middle-aged Chub told me that he has been in a relationship with a younger Chaser for the last four years. In fact, they were at Convergence celebrating their anniversary, only having recently moved to the host city. The Chub was the director of a human service agency, where he hired his lover as a secretary. As he told me,

The current problem is that my intellectual needs are going unmet. I feel like I’m being forced into a fathering role. Then again, my partner’s sexual needs are not being met completely, either: he wants to play. One time, I was intimidated that he played with a guy I thought was better looking than me. Then this other time, he got mad at me because I was talking to a guy for several hours. He sobbed later in the evening about it.

We all witnessed that the Chub, who had refrained from alcohol for a year, went on a drinking binge during this particular weekend at Convergence. We also saw his Chaser partner behaving like a “bad boy” in the pool on the second night there, pleasuring other men under water, while his chubby boyfriend looked out over the pool from his bedroom window. This may have been a display of what Millman (1980) refers to as the fat “mother” and the thin, admiring “provocative child” (191) – in this case a Chub “daddy” and his dependent Chaser “son.”

Replacement Culture

The replacement culture at Convergence meets many Bigmen’s want of romantic tradition, while the Cabaña provides an alternative culture and many sexual opportunities for Bigmen. At Convergence, the Chub/Chaser Contest was followed by the “Fall Harvest Dance Party,” which was a Bigmen’s version of the Homecoming Dance; in contrast, at the Cabaña, coming out of the Contest, the men moved on to sexualizing in
the pool. To Bigmen at Convergence, being able to take part in replacement activities means doing what all other people – gay or heterosexual – get to do. This is unlike at the Cabaña, where Bigmen go mostly to be like other gay men – sexually desirable.

The Fall Harvest Dance was not a mockery of anything; nor was it a gay circuit party. It had the flavor of a traditional dance, one that looked familiar to me from mainstream high school culture. Then again, one may encounter a wholly nontraditional song, as was the case a different year at Convergence, when Bigmen got down on the dancefloor, singing and boogieing to K.D. Lang’s “Big-Boned Gal.”

Unlike at the Cabaña, where men danced with their shirts off, mocking anything mainstream and formal, at Convergence, the dance had many recognizable mainstream features like a traditional slow dance or a cash bar. Something familiar like this offered legitimacy to the Bigmen who might have missed out on prom night or the Homecoming Dance, and compensated for some of the stigma. It signaled toward mainstream replacement culture and offered a postponed occasion where Bigmen who might have been unable to go to a prom because they did not meet mainstream standards for weight, could attend this dance instead, even if years later.

For the most part, the Fall Harvest Dance at Convergence was like a high school prom. Bigmen danced to great popular top 40 music under dim lighting in a big ballroom, while others sat at candle-lit tables with white linen tablecloths, talking quietly. Some walked up to the DJ requesting a favorite song. The dance offered another occasion that afforded a mixing of classes, Chubs dancing with Chasers.

Here, being able to participate in this replacement culture is to some extent about class. Bigmen want to be “doing” the markers of middle class society, but they were not
given those opportunities because of their size, and not necessarily because they were gay. Other fringe groups also have replacement traditions to make up for events where they cannot fit in. Some examples include immigrant dances that blur the line between American traditions and their own traditions. For instance, American Muslims have the girls-only Muslim proms. At the coming-of-age Latina prom (Quinceañera) too, we see how American culture markers get co-opted. In these subcultures, as in the case of Girth & Mirthers at Convergence, there is a paradox. They seem to be saying, “We are not mainstream, but we’re going to do it our way.” Then again, there actually are gay proms or there are big fat queer proms for women.

**The Question of Class at Convergence**

Convergence indeed is “classier” all the way around, and has more money circulating. Bigmen who opt out of Convergence in favor of Cabaña regard it as a high-class event. For instance, I was forewarned by one couple that on the first night of Convergence people dress up, maybe even wear a suit and tie. As I later found out, folks do look nice for dinner, but it’s certainly not a black-tie event. I also learned that Convergence exceeds many folks’ budget. As one Girth & Mirther told me, “The Super Weekend makes for an affordable run; Bear Camp is an affordable run, but Convergence is out of a lot of people’s budgets. They stay at high-class hotels. How can I put it? I would expect at Convergence you would see the queeny side of everybody (laughs).” In saying this, the speaker also was equating money with rich old queens – that is, as an outsider to Convergence culture, he seemed to be drawing a parallel between money and masculinity: according to him, the higher one’s class, the less masculine one is.
The gay community in general makes larger references to status relative to size, which lead to class divides. Big, hirsute Bears, for instance, configure into questions of class as they aspire to represent “real” men like a lumberjack, by performing the working-class drag. In terms of masculinity and class, Bears do “masculine” things – for example, they go camping. This separates them from skinny gay twinks or fat drag queens.

Bigmen who attend Convergence also make an overall effort at being part of “mainstream” society unlike those who attend the Cabaña, who intentionally form a subculture. The social environment at Convergence therefore affords the possibility for networking and pursuing shared interests beyond sexualizing. For instance, at the Convergence that I attended, there was a seminar on fat fetishism. In the seminar, we all became students together who were all critical consumers of the information we were receiving. There, I met an older Bigman who was a Professor of Psychology and a member of the NAFFA, with an interest in critical fat studies. Coincidentally, his young lover, with whom he was writing an academic paper on Chub/Chaser culture, was a graduate student studying with one of my past professors. When the Professor challenged the speaker on the topic of “gaining and encouraging,” I was able to also assert my academic identity, which allowed us to recognize one another’s fellow academics. In essence, Convergence provided organized activities in which guests could perform their occupational/educational status/identity.

Similar occasions at Convergence afforded the possibility for the guests to perform their identities very differently than what guests were able to do at the Cabaña. However, my ability to engage in an academic exchange with this man is perhaps more a
function of my having overtly shared my researcher status. This is made possible by the social class of the clientele at Convergence who can accept, and even be flattered by a researcher’s validation. At the Cabaña, in contrast, my travel companions thought that my researcher status had to be kept under wraps in order not to feed into people’s paranoia about researchers. Perhaps rightly so, since gay people have been pathologized by academic fields such as psychology. Having said this, it is still true that this other dimension of networking was more possible at Convergence.

In contrast, the Cabaña’s carnivalesque culture offered a creative outlet for “the everyman” to thumb his nose at the sizist elite. The way the raffle tickets were sold at the Cabaña is a perfect illustration of this. For example, tickets were wrapped around the buyer’s waist, his girth determining the number of tickets he would get for the set price; the greater his girth, the more he is worth. How is that for creative activism? At Convergence, tickets were sold, not performed like at the Cabaña; the tickets also brought in a bigger kitty ($1,200 to $1,300 was given to the winner at Convergence versus $890 to the winner at the Cabaña). That is, the signs of wealth were given greater significance than the creative selling technique. For example, no one wanted to claim the free night stay at the low-end Motel 6 that was given out as another raffle prize at Convergence. The Cabaña, on the other hand, is a gay Motel 6, itself.

Another class marker of the US Convergence is its international representation, giving it world-class status. For example, at the convergence I attended, there were guests from Sweden, Germany, the U.K., and many from Asian countries. In fact, there is also a European Bigmen’s Convergence, the counterpart to the US Convergence. In the case of the Asian Chasers, it appeared that they were drawn into the scene by the
greater ratio of Bigmen in the US. Then there was even a contest to see who had traveled the farthest distance to Convergence. The year I attended, a guy from Japan won.

Finally, the two locations, the Cabaña and Convergence, are indicators of how Bigmen “do” their culture, rather than why they do it. Whereas Cabaña is a total institution, or a world set apart, Convergence maintains a mainstream profile. At Convergence, one can invoke class to move beyond the walls of the gay world.

Stereotypes, like that of the prototypical black man in football garb in the Chaser contest, get deployed here exactly for their replacement value – that is, it is not about exoticizing racism, but affirming the Bigman’s sexual desirability to what many would consider “the ideal man.” Class at Convergence provides big gay men a resource to take part in the markers of middle-class society, such as proms and fashions shows. It is a formal venue for middle-class Bigmen to have an opportunity to sexualize. This class distinction between the two settings fundamentally changes how Bigmen perform their identities – in one, through play and social slumming, in the other, through status differentiation and culture.
Chapter 6: Girth & Mirth – Shame Reconfigured

Shame’s mercurial nature leaves people unsatisfied, which can actually be productive. In circumstances that throw everyday ethics into question, those shamed may make a “commitment to more generous identities, responsibilities and connections” ( Connolly 1999, as quoted in Probyn 2004:346). That is to say, some abject people are able to own and reconfigure the stigma of being fat. As Sedgwick (2003) puts it, “at least for certain (“queer”) people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that… has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities” (64-65). Members of Girth & Mirth reconfigure their shame of being fat by performing their fat bodies as objects of desire. Yet becoming objects of desire and feeling sexy does not necessarily have to culminate in sex. Bigmen simply engage in defiant, in-your-face behavior in an attempt to construct rich and meaningful lives and carve out a place for themselves within the gay community. At times, they also attempt to effect real structural change by challenging gay body politics and the imposition of labels.

This chapter examines the ways in which members of Girth & Mirth manage and reposition the shame of being fat. Girth & Mirthers use a transvaluative strategy for reconfiguring shame, transforming felt abjectness into something desirable. This chapter is also cognizant of other isms – whether members of Girth & Mirth make transvaluations of sizism at the expense of consumerism, reverse sizism, sexism, or racism.
Because Girth & Mirth represents big gay men, the “coming out” metaphor becomes readily available to them. To varying degrees and often at separate times, most of these men have come out as both gay and fat. As one Bigman shared, “I had a second ‘coming out’ later in life, after my marriage ended. . . . I think you come out twice. Once to realize you’re gay, and then once to accept yourself as who you are and if that’s big, if that’s being a big person, then so be it.” In the following story, another member told me about his big gay debut, a photospread of his ample body in the nude for a gay magazine to help him break out of his body shyness:

I gave a unique coming-out present to myself. Back in ’96, I had lost, probably 70-80 pounds. I probably weighed like 240. So to me, I was actually in really good shape. But I still had the issue that I was shy about my body. A friend of mine in San Francisco had a Bigmen’s magazine, so they asked my roommate and me to do a photospread. We had pictures taken and sent them in, and they said they were good, but could we do some more. As a joke, we put in a couple of pictures with watersports in them. Well, they published them! It was like a good coming out present to myself. You didn’t see a whole lot of men my size in a magazine. . . .

As Moon and Sedgewick (1993) suggest, coming out and living openly as a fat and gay person involves taking a risk and publicly announcing what folks already know – that one has a fat body. That is, coming out as fat and gay involves owning one’s size. It lays claim to “a renegotiation of the representational contract between one’s body and one’s world” (230). The past president of the local Girth & Mirth clearly articulates this size-positive group’s campy-queer subtext:

We all love to see each other and spend quality time eating, laughing, being out, loud, proud, politically incorrect, big, and maybe (just maybe) a few blocks up “Wrong Street.” OK, maybe a few miles up “Wrong Street” and down a few alleys!
Like with other forms of everyday shame, gay men experience fat revolution together in monumental ways, converting their shame to pride publicly, and usually through mundane aspects of everyday life like having dinner out or grabbing a cup of coffee together. As Britt and Heise (2000) so aptly put it, while “shame may lead to hiding . . . pride may lead to expansive behaviors in public space” (254). In a sense, Bigmen’s growing sense of pride figuratively parallels their large body size, as reflected in language, when one might say, “He swelled with pride” (254). When one is proud, one indeed feels bigger, taller, and stronger.

Weathering the Shame

Some Bigmen whom I interviewed felt strongly that it is important to call into question the verbal abuse meted out by those who seemingly enjoy humiliating them about their pronounced size in public. He believes in having it out with the shamer by acknowledging the insult and coming back with a zinger. As he said,

I throw it right back at ‘em just to embarrass them back. I am all about public humiliation and embarrassment. If someone upsets me, if they say something against me in public, even if it’s innuendos to suggest certain things, I will embarrass them. I strongly believe, call it on the carpet.

He believes that doing this brings out the shamer’s immature behavior and that calling the shamer on the carpet exposes him. He operates on the premise that if the shamer “can’t handle that, then everyone needs to know his maturity level and see the type of person he is and see what he would be like behind the scenes.” However, this is not to say that this Bigman’s modus operandi is exactly a way to transform shame: it only deflects it, and reduces one to the level of the perpetrator. Thus, challenging routine harassment as a
strategy of action, albeit moderately, partly meets the theoretical criteria for constructive uses of shame.

Other Bigmen have said that they deflect the shame they experience in public places, such as in medical settings, by calling out the prejudicial treatment of inattentive medical professionals who cannot see beyond their size. Even doctors themselves fess up to their sizism: “When a big, middle-aged guy walks into the emergency room, that’s going to be the first thing on every health professional’s mind: this is a heart attack. That’s just how it’s going to be.” At Girth & Mirth, members help one another recognize and respond to this kind of profiling and renegotiate everyday feelings of being out of place. The club provides its members a basic “relevance structure,” with room for interest in advocacy and activism (Martin 2000:132). Here, “interest” refers to concern about ethical dilemmas that crop up during one’s everyday experiences of shame (Probyn 2004). The nursing and right-to-die literature calls this “situated ethics,” a mode of interest that emphasizes the ethical relationships between bodies. Club members also provide doctor referrals for one another.

As the following patient shared, when he was dissatisfied with previous doctors who routinely profiled him, he sought out a gay physician who was a Bigman himself. As he told me, “I found a fat doctor (chuckles). He’s also gay (chuckles again).” His new doctor complimented him on his good health and exercise habits, presenting the possibility that health can be relative at any size. As he said,

What they don’t know is that somebody like you, and somebody else as big as you walking down the street, you are infinitely healthier than that person is. Because, you watch your blood sugar, you take your blood pressure medicine, and you do everything that you’re supposed to do to be
as healthy as you possibly can be. Yes, you’re a big guy, but you are extremely healthy for a big guy.

This doctor at least acknowledges that a Bigman can be “healthy” despite his size.

However, his remarks suggest the notion that there are “good” and “bad” fat patients. It sets up another shame dichotomy of healthy fat and unhealthy fat people.

Bigmen also manage the shame of being fat by attending occasions where they can take comfort in numbers. For instance, Girth & Mirthers attend Gay Day at a Midwestern Amusement Park with other nearby Bigmen’s clubs. This affords them the luxury of knowing that they are not the only big gay guys in the amusement park. One Girth & Mirth member recalled the last time he attended Gay Day:

At least we’re able to go to a place like that, be open with each other, walk around holding hands, and still be able to ride some of the rides and have the pizza and the cotton candy and enjoy everything there is about an amusement park as a gay couple. My partner and I have gone to it in years past, and we meet up with friends there from all over town and Ohio and Indiana, and West Virginia, and Kentucky that are larger guys and it’s fun.

This speaker also remarked to me that regionally, and luckily, there are a lot of big gay men where he is from, who organize large groups of them to attend Gay Days so that they are not in the minority. As he told me, “Maybe it’s a Midwestern thing, I don’t know. I know that the Gentle Giants, another group in Central Ohio, are going to that. And I know that our group tries to have some type of loosely organized thing to go to it, as well, so there’s lots of us there.” This speaker also remarked how if they have to forego a ride because of their waist or weight, they are able to use humor in the safety of one another’s company to cope with the discomfort. The bigger point, however, is that they are happier to be dealing with the issue of accessibility to rides that all fat people face, rather
than not being able to enjoy a “Gay Day.” At some amusement parks, Gay Days are less within Bigmen’s reach, since they are outnumbered by far by the prevailing gay image norm.

**Improving Body Comfort**

Girth & Mirth offers members a valuable network and reaches out to other big gay men outside the club. At its activities, it tries to rouse friend- and visitor levels of self-confidence and body comfort. One member complimented Girth & Mirth for its role in making members feel included and attractive, thus aiding them to reconfigure their sexual injury. At the same time, the club provides a friendly, social environment where there is no pressure.

A key strength of G&M is that they can make others feel comfortable. Actually, sometimes I feel really sexy with them, because they tease me all the time about being a top: “but you’re a top, dammit!” And some of them think I’m good looking. That’s nice too, when they say that you’re good looking, it’s not that they want to get into your pants; they’re drawing you out. At gay pride, too, there’s this couple from G&M that takes their shirt off and they’re not ashamed, and they try to make me feel comfortable doing the same.

At Girth & Mirth’s charity bar night which is held at the Bear bar, Bigmen are able to behave freely in ways that they most likely could not at gay circuit parties—where the majority of “ideal” men would be confident enough to dance around shirtless. Girth & Mirth’s supportive network allows big gay men to revel in the same pleasures that other body-types of gay men get to experience. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes at bar night illustrates the comfort of being in a fat-affirming context.

G&M members sit up at the entrance between the main bar and the D.J. booth, watching videos, taking the $2 cover, ogling guests, and talking over the hissing smoke machine. Tonight, the club is hopping. Back by the lounge bar, three big men coax one another to dance. It’s still early in
the night, so the floor is otherwise empty. The biggest (and by appearance youngest) of the three begins stripping off layers of clothes. One by one, he pulls off a leather vest, shirt, and then undershirt. One of the other men follows suit and lifts up his t-shirt. Before long, they are both moving their bellies sensually together under a red and amber strobe—bumpin’ n’ grindin’ bare bellies on the dance floor, smiling and having fun….

In this fat-affirming context of the Girth & Mirth bar night, the men make their fat bellies boldly visible, rather than shamefully drawing attention away from them. This is reminiscent of the “fat handshake” I witnessed at a pop culture conference, where fat activist Marilyn Wann concluded a meeting by asking those present to face one another and to bump their stomachs together before leaving. At another Girth & Mirth charity bar night, I witnessed the same leave-taking behavior between a club member and the new bar manager, a big person himself. The two men had not seen each other since high school and spent most of the night catching up. They said farewell to each other that night by moving in close and cheerfully rubbing their bellies together.

Members also develop further strategies to increase others’ body comfort level and sexual assertiveness. For instance, while volunteering at a Big Men’s weekend event, a club member announced each visitor coming into the hospitality room by rolling out the red carpet for each man as if he was an esteemed guest no matter what his body-type. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes refers to attempts by Girth & Mirth members to get big – and usually younger – men to loosen up. Oftentimes, this involves encouraging them to shed protective layers of clothing:

A young man in his early twenties, short and chubby, well-dressed-and-groomed, with glasses enters the bar. He’s wearing an awful lot of layers for coming out to a club. He hovers around those of us working the door. He holds his body stiffly. Some of the men “take him under their wing,” talk him up, and complement his features. He soon gets tongue-tied, his face flushes, and he tugs at his collar, saying, “It’s hot in here.” He tells
us that he went shopping today and spent $400 on new clothes. The guys urge him to take off his zip-up sweater, which he does. Now, he fusses for a long time with his new *J Crew* button-up shirt. He nervously pulls and fidgets with the bottom of it, fluffing the clinging shirt out away from his stomach and his sides, and then smoothing it out again. Later, group members persuade him to unbutton his collar. He has yet another t-shirt on underneath. The main doorkeeper lifts Kerry’s t-shirt up a bit and rubs his fat stomach. Kerry continues to hang out with us the rest of the night.

**Gaining Visibility at Pride**

On some fundamental level, celebrating the fat body can be good for one’s health and the first step is to enjoy and value oneself as a fat person. As club members have said, “Girth and Mirth is about being big and loving it.” They stress the need not to internalize the outside criticism of being big, but to be out, loud, fat and proud.

At a Girth & Mirth pride-planning meeting, members came to the club’s defense in response to a chatroom attack, which called them an “embarrassment to the gay community” and even suggested that they “disband,” arguing, “we shouldn’t encourage large people.” As one feisty member retorted with affected speech, and in black vernacular, “We’re robust! Some people missin’ some social skills to mingle with people!” He then continued his rant saying,

Bears are “normal” and Girth & Mirth, we’re not? Chubs have let themselves go? We go out there and have the courage to be who we are. Some people clap, some laugh at us, and some laugh with us. The point is that we’re being noticed by riding in the parade. We are positive role models with a message that “you can be big and still find people who will like you for it.” You know, Bears are also looked at with revulsion: “Get a razor, would it kill you to shave your back?” People say we don’t look normal. They titter at you. Some people take it in and internalize it, but you can’t do that. Don’t apologize for being who you are. Speak out! We’re out there doing our thing and we’re happy with ourselves.
Another member chimed in with “I concur; that’s healthy,” while the feisty orator finished by saying, “Snorting cocaine and taking an hour and a half to get ready, is not being who you are. It’s not like any of us are born with glitter on our face!”

In this fat rant, the speaker offers an alternative kind of shame, what Halberstam (2005) optimistically refers to as a “total disregard for shame and its tortuous pathways” (233). His speech resignifies what it means to be gay and healthy, as he equates “health” with being “big ’n happy” rather than being “coked out.” He also redefines what it means to be “who you are,” when he upholds being “ursine” over “vain.” However, as he does this, he shifts the shame to another group, negatively evaluating what he sees as the hard-partying lives of those caught up in the gay circuit – amid drugs, covered in glitter – and criticizes their body worship and obsession with physical appearance. Criticism aside, he offers other options to gay men, having to do with feeling good about their bodies and sexual orientation.

At one of the pride parades that I attended as a participant observer, I walked in front of the Girth & Mirth procession, holding one end of the club’s banner. Also at the front was someone carrying the American flag, while others walked waving their Bear flags. Puzzled lookers-on read the banner out loud and said, “Girth and Mirth?” Then they either would exclaim, “What’s that?” or would laugh. A guy holding a sign in support of normalizing gay marriage yelled at the group asking who was I to represent the group, “He’s anorexic!” One of the flag bearers saved me and came back with, “He’s the “mirth!” With this flippant remark, he nipped in the bud the negative body talk. And despite all the snickering, there were a lot of people who did cheer for the group. A lady in the sidelines clapped and yelled, “Big daddies!” Girth & Mirth’s presence in the gay
pride parade was “disruptive,” so to speak, not that it caused any trouble, but that it gave
the audience license to do body talk, particularly about body size, which is a completely
different issue than sexuality. For some Girth & Mirthers, therefore, their presence in the
parade amounted to coming out two times: as gay and fat or as gay and a fat-admirer.

A Chub I interviewed volunteered a story about a pride parade he attended in
which he and a Chaser were hamming it up as they walked, while his chubby partner
played along. When the onlookers dramatically covered their mouths and exclaimed in
feigned horror, “Oh my God!” they retorted in self-defense, “It’s all about the belly!” He
continued to elaborate that although their display was deliberately provocative, it put a
face to Girth & Mirth, as being a fun-loving bunch.

. . . that’s when we were walking without our shirts on, and literally just in
rainbow towels for the 5-mile parade route and our Chaser would rub our
bellies and say, “It’s all about the belly, baby” and it was sweaty and hot
and he would be out there kissing on our bellies and everything, and
people would just laugh, but he got off on it and it was fun and it
represented to the public what we are and what we’re about.

Similarly, in a cheeky San Francisco Bay Times article on the sanitization of pride, the
author quips, “The Girth & Mirth Club will be asked to either not be fat or at least not
show a sense of humor about their stout state. After all, we wouldn’t want the public to
think that a bunch of happy, chubby gays represented our community, now would we?!”
(Van Iquity 2006).

As Probyn (2004) argues, shame erupts when the shamed are in close proximity to
their perpetrators. For Girth & Mirthers, shame gets magnified especially when the
perpetrators are other gays. Bigmen, who often feel shamed by other gay men for falling
short of the ideal “chiseled” gay image, participate in the Pride parade to bring visibility

to themselves and in doing so, they provide an image alternative. As the following Bigman told me, “I think we as a group at Pride have tried to show that we’re not just all the pretty-perfect, chiseled guys. We are who we are. We accept who we are. We know we’re not society’s ideal of physical perfection. We’re big guys, we have fun, and we’re okay with it.” In their effort to gain visibility, the men of Girth & Mirth march in pride celebrations and wreak havoc on the monolithic notion of who constitutes the “gay community.”

Consumer Inclusion within the Gay Community

Members of Girth & Mirth normalize their desires rather than accept being excluded. In one attempt to normalize, a member took on The Human Rights Commission (HRC), complaining about the Commission’s sizist clothing options. At a spring potluck, he told a group of us that he had written a short letter of concern to HRC. He forwarded the following letter to me:

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN
OFFICE OF CUSTOMER CARE
NEW CASTLE, DE 19720

26 May 2007

This is not a concern about an order that has been placed, but about an order that cannot be placed.

HRC is a great organization, but by offering t-shirts that only go up to a size 2X, it is excluding a large, (no pun intended), section of the community. It would be nice if HRC would offer t-shirts in larger sizes for those of us that do not fit the perfect-body stereotype.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
This letter calls attention to a fundamental flaw in the system, which, to my knowledge, has yet to be resolved. Wearing t-shirts with an organizational logo represents a form of solidarity, but this fat-affirming group cannot fit into the shirts, and is therefore excluded from the gay community. In the opinion of the letter writer above, the “Human Rights” commission, which prides itself in working toward equal rights for LGBT folks, has overlooked a considerable number of people.

Pointing out groups excluded from the shame-to-pride conversion process, because of their body shape and size, closely resembles Halberstam’s (2005) model of “feminist gay shame,” which challenges social injustice. It opens up the possibility for overlapping agendas with other underrepresented groups like female fat activists. The letter is in fact consistent with strategies used by the National Organization to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), in contesting shame (Martin 2000).

Consumer complaint and the strategy of shaming the rejecter are not without problem. The above letter about the t-shirt reminds us to ask what niche fat people fill as consumers. How does niche recognition factor into their production of culture and ritual? If all complaints were consumer-oriented, then a fat person’s identity produced by stigma would presumably fade once manufacturers and corporations “fixed” all of the conditions and problems. It then becomes important to consider what anchors fat identity and desire. In this way, the t-shirt letter would be considered not a radical critique of HRC, which creates apparel that perpetuates the conspicuous consumption of gay identity and its conformity, but rather a negative transvaluation of the norms and physicality
associated with the ideal gay male body. Making the oppositional anchor those gay men who pursue the “perfect-body” prevents organizational and community rejection from becoming one’s own self-rejection. As Britt and Heise (2000) state, “social movements [provide] justification for making an attribution about the system rather than the self … not only because the system is unjust but because [people] have been made to feel ashamed” (256-257). There is disadvantage to the strategy of shaming another, however: it potentially undermines the stigma but keeps in place the rejection of another body type.

Finding clothes that fit one’s larger body, which is already difficult in mainstream society, becomes even more of a challenge when one wants to shop at a trendy gay boutique, since it is rare for stores to carry t-shirts in 2-3-4X sizes. Consequently, Bigmen have remarked that they like supporting vendors that carry gay apparel in extended sizes whenever they can. One member described how he intentionally patronizes them.

This past year at Pride, it was funny. I got several t-shirts. I got the Stonewall Pride t-shirt, only because it came in my size. And if a gay organization offers t-shirts for fundraising or whatever, and has something in my size, I’m gonna buy it. Because if they had the forethought to include a person of size, male or female, I’m gonna buy it. For the True Colors tour, the t-shirts only went up to 2XL. And they were small 2XLs. I was upset. But this year at Pride, there were a couple of times to buy t-shirts, and I bought them because they were available. And people in the club were going, “Why? What’s going on?” And I said, “It’s my size, it’s a gay organization, I’m gonna buy it.” If they’re gonna think enough that there might be somebody big here, I’m gonna buy the shirt.

Given the fashion-consciousness in gay society, denying Bigmen the latest trends in clothes takes away one more opportunity for them to be like other gay men. Big gay men therefore like supporting businesses that cater to their needs because they appreciate having more options when it comes to finding clothes that fit them. Rather than
condemning the gay cult of fashion, they buy into the system by making an appeal for stylish Bigmen’s fashions. Thus, modes of resistance in commercialized contexts create strange bedfellows; they incorporate outcasts from fashion back into a questionable system.

**Differentiating Fat**

Bigmen have consistently bewailed the problem of the lack of differentiation imposed on all people of size. They resist the imposition of being labeled first and foremost as a “fat ass” or “fat slob,” and reclaim the right to define their size. They therefore make an effort to differentiate themselves through complimentary portrayals of their bodies, or redirect the attention from their fatness by normalizing it, so that other attributes can come to the forefront. One Girth & Mirther discussed his art that he uses to differentiate himself as a *talented* Bigman. As he said, being an artist defines him:

> It is one of the things that I like to do, and people say I do it well. It’s a way for me to be different and on the vain side; it offers an excuse for me to be a little bit weird. I can always say, well I’m an artist, I can wear these clothes, I can do this, and I can say these off-the-wall things and behave a little bit, you know, kicky and weird. It gives me another opportunity to be known for that: “oh we have an artist in our group.” I use that as a tool to support the club, which I’ve done now with the newsletter and helping design the Pride parade float – I’ve been enlisted to come up with some graphics for that.

This speaker also spoke about using club members as models for a series of five paintings he called “Gods and Magic,” which “uphold the larger male form as being something to be admired as opposed to something to be ridiculed.” He believed that doing so would enable him and the models to remedy the weak media imagery of Bigmen by producing realistic images of them: “It won’t be the thin muscular bodies; they’ll be club guys, big guys, with all the hanging fat if it’s there. It’s the body type I want in these pictures.”
went on to say that, three people from Girth & Mirth have already sat for him to do his sketches. His artistic depictions of Bigmen’s bodies casts him alongside artists throughout history like photographer Leonard Nimoy, whose *Full Body Project* depicts big women in black and white, to Rubenesque art, to the primitive *Venus of Willendorf* statues. He is in fact further differentiated from these artists, in that his art will bring the invisible “fat man” to the fore.

Bigmen differentiate themselves by different kinds of body excesses, either by fat-revealing and provocative dress or by acknowledging their body size through artistic renditions. Traditionally, masculinity also affords options for dealing with body excess; it differentiates size by genitals or, more commonly, through muscles and bodybuilding. While the artist I discuss above renders fat hyper-visible in his paintings, some Bigmen who go to Bigmen’s bars differentiate themselves by bringing other attributes to the fore, like a larger-than-life personality, sexual prowess, or excess. Thus, fat is not the overriding identity marker as in the works of art. Being able to let their bellies hang out among other men of common exception doing the same affords Bigmen to normalize their size, since everyone there is Big, and focus on and accentuate other aspects of themselves. One Bigman put it this way: “a lot of men go in there who let their bellies hang out. It’s not uncommon to see guys without their shirts on who have a big paunch. It’s just nice to be around, to be in a place where you’re not going to be judged on your size, but on your personality, or your dick, or your sexual interests, not just your belly.”
Performing Shame and Celebrating Otherness

Big gay men respond to everyday shame through outrageous and performative acts, as well. Going beyond daily survival and demanding a “livable life” (Butler 2004), they revel in their body size and celebrate their “otherness” as they engage in campy queer performance. As Sedgwick (2003) writes: “shame/performativity may get us a lot further with the cluster of phenomena generally called “camp” (64). Bigmen engage in campy, self-critical acts in an effort to reframe an identity produced by the stigma surrounding their size. Using drag as her example, Halberstam calls this “tak[ing] pride in [your] shame”– “a place where shame can be transformed into something that is not pride but not simply damage either” (2005:229).

The excerpt below, from my fieldnotes written after working with the Girth & Mirth fellows at a Halloween Bar Night, provides an illustration of how one member took pride in shame.

I am wearing an official Boy Scout hat and shirt: a self-presentation strategy that became awkward after a former Boy Scout criticized my costume concept. A big, monumental fat couple is also in costume tonight. I sit at the entrance with these men welcoming guests and collecting cover charges most of the evening. The main doorman works the register and calls his costume idea, “Catch of the Day.” He is shirtless. He wears an old pair of yellow rubber fisherman's overalls with one strap dangling; the other, a marvelous sash made of fishing net and finished with fancy fake fish and assorted seafood. Wispy white hairs billow out of his low-back overalls. His baldhead bears no fisherman’s cap. His costume design reveals his fat chest and midriff rather than conceal it.

Aside from my costume, no one on that Halloween bar night was taking anything literally. These men live far from any fishing communities such as the former Provincetown, now gay Mecca. It would be a mistake to interpret Catch of the Day’s costume concept as some broader critique of the ideal body. The fisherman in overalls
was meant to be about a big and middle-aged man being “a good catch” – indeed his boyfriend had already caught him and intended to keep him. Despite its strong connection to an image of a masculine identity construction, this outfit is not meant to be taken seriously to suggest a truly rugged, adventurous, weathered, and scruffy fisherman. This parody is campy, artificial, and shows the constructed nature of the fisherman’s role. It differs from gay Bears whose masculine, working-class or lumberjack drag is a turn-on. Bersani’s (1987) passing remark seems relevant here: “Parody is an erotic turn-off and all gay men know this. … [A]nd while that may be fun at a dinner party, if you’re out to make someone [really horny], you turn off the camp” (208).

Catch of the Day explained the reasons why he felt it necessary to be outrageous in his choice of costume. He said he felt that in order to gain visibility as a big gay man and to put a face to Girth & Mirth, he had to go to the extreme in presenting a fun, “larger than life” persona.

I have days when I don’t care what people think and I’m gonna do what I want. If somebody doesn’t like it, they can kiss my ass. And then there’s days where I’m like, okay, we’re going out in public, and we have to be publically acceptable. The more we as a community push the envelope, even when we’re in our own spaces, if we’re out in public and we’re doing things, the more accepting people will be and say, “oh, those people look like they’re having a good time.” And to show that, you have to be a little more extreme. You have to be larger than life, or you’re just not gonna be noticed, ‘cause there’s so many people who are larger than life, you know? In the gay community, that’s part of how we’re getting more accepted in society as a whole is to be, sometimes you have to be, a little extreme.

In going over the top, the Catch of the Day certainly made a splash. Sedgwick (1995) proposes going further than Goffman (1963) in his book, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. As she suggests, it would be good to expand Goffman’s subtitle to include more than just identity management, since, in any queer politics, one
also approaches one’s spoiled identity in ways that are “experimental, creative, [and] performative” (210-11). In this fashion, the Catch of the Day’s in-your-face largeness is a defiant act in the face of other gay men whose acceptance-tolerance-rejection matters the most.

Those with a body out of bounds can also use laughter to disrupt shame. According to Scheff (1994), this is healthier than unacknowledged shame. One member of Girth & Mirth, who had a fat drag queen for a roommate, tells a story about how she busted out laughing, literally from her corset, after he compared her preparation for her show to a scene from *Gone with the Wind*.

My old roommate, a fat drag queen, ordered a fishbone corset. One night before her show, she summoned me, her equally large friend, to help coax her body into an hourglass figure. I wrestled her into the tight-laced corset. While I was yanking her in, it reminded me of that scene between Scarlett O’Hara and her mammy from *Gone with the Wind*. I said, “I guess you’re resigned to havin’ a 20-inch waist instead of 18 inches like it was before the baby, oh, fiddle dee dee!” We both broke out laughing so hard, her brand new corset split!

By letting loose the restrictions around her waistline, she is filled with generous, good-natured humor. Scheff (1994) makes a distinction between shying away from shame and light-heartedly dispelling it. He writes, “One method which almost always dispels shame is laughter, good-humored or affectionate laughter. This idea is very much in accord with the popular belief that laughter relieves embarrassment” (172), thereby disrupting shame. We must also remember that the above speaker’s campy remark does not claim to be “PC”; it is *intentionally* in poor taste. Clearly, his purely playful comment about his roommate’s ample body getting squeezed into a corset is both a parody of the scene from *Gone with the Wind* and crass humor, which does not censor the film’s racist undertones.
Girth & Mirth’s penultimate example, Bearilyn’s Birthday Wish, uses camp to celebrate a Bigman’s birthday. It illustrates the playful disregard of fat shame, where the performer aestheticizes it through a parody of Marilyn Monroe’s “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” song. The Girth & Mirth member performing in the passage below combines the birthday song with the lap dance for the unlucky birthday boy of the night, be it at Spaghetti Factory or the coffeehouse. Bearilyn, as the group affectionately calls him, has made it his mission to recognize people’s birthdays in this manner.

Bearilyn does the Marilyn Monroe moves and copies Marilyn’s playful hip wiggle that made her a star. Voluptuous like Marilyn, he exudes a healthy sexuality with his full figure. In an interview, one of his friends described him as “not one of the most masculine guys, but he’s a guy, I mean, but when he lets his hair down, he does this thing for birthdays, I mean, oh my God, it brings the house down wherever we are. He’s a big guy and he uses what he has to be Marilyn Monroe, rubbing somebody’s head and putting it between his boobs and it’s just, you have to, if it was videoed, you would die.” Asking the lucky recipient to sit on a chair with plenty of space around it, he lap dances as he sings in breathy, low-pitched vocals:

♫ HAPPY - BIRTH-DAY  ♫
(Sensually caresses recipient’s head, neck, and chest)
♫ TO YOU,
(Unbuttons recipient’s collar and undoes his own to show some cleavage)
♫ HAPPY – BIRTH-DAY  ♫
(Grabs recipient by the neck)
♫ TO YOU
(Pushes recipient’s face into his ample chest; breast-shaking action ensues)
♫ HAPPY - BIRTH-DAY  ♫
(Sits on recipient’s lap facing away; leans head back on recipient’s shoulder)
MR. PRES-I-DENT
(Sits upright and wiggles his derriere on recipient’s lap)
HAPPY - BIRTH-DAY ·
(Stands up and pulls open recipient’s collar)
TO
(Pulls recipient’s head tightly against his chest)
YOU
(Guides recipient’s mouth onto his nipple)

As his song ends, Bearilyn bends over and whispers to the recipient, “Thank you ever so.” In many ways, this one-man show is comparable to the political actions that some women’s groups take, since it challenges stereotypes of what is “sexy” and “beautiful.” For example, there is the California-based Big Burlesque (now the Fat Bottom Revue) and PHAT Fly Girls. Then, there is the radical cheerleading group F.A.T.A.S.S. pdx (Fat Action Troupe Allstar Spirit Squad). These women’s groups refer to what they do as “creative activism.” Their goal is to empower the audience because they can see and appreciate size diversity – maybe someone who actually looks like them. When Bearilyn performs the “birthday wish,” he too empowers his audience of big men by being sexy and suggestive, lewd and bawdy.

The boldness and confidence that Bearilyn’s performance symbolizes is summed up best in the words of the late Heather MacAllister (a.k.a. Reva Lucian): “Any time there is a fat person onstage as anything besides the butt of a joke, it’s political. Add physical movement, then dance, then sexuality, and you have a revolutionary act” (Ben-Itzak 2007). Indeed, Bearilyn’s performance is not demure; it does not represent a recoiling from shame or trying to blend into body-perfect gay society; on the contrary, it
flaunts the limits and resists “normal” representations of fatness through the comic mayhem of neo-burlesque.

As the performer himself remarked, the Birthday Wish is about making the person feel recognized on his special day. He credits the origin of this performance to his husband’s mom:

> When I was at his mother’s house in Florida she said, “Oh, you have another birthday coming up pretty soon.” I made the mistake of saying “Birthdays are just another day, they’re no big deal.” She replied, “NO IT’S NOT! Your birthday is your day. You have to share all the holidays, but your birthday is your day. It’s important.” So ever since then, I try to make his birthday important, and I try to make my birthday important, and I try to make everybody else’s important, too.

Bearilyn’s performance epitomizes the campy-queer respite that the club offers. Humor, in the campy-queen sense, is a weapon for freedom fighting, as well. Bigmen who find themselves down on their luck can count on members like Bearilyn to come along and lift their spirits.

> One member who is into S&M equated this humor to tickle torture: “Hopefully you’re not ticklish because humor – the capping, the puns – to me are about as equivalent as me tying you down and tickle torturing you for the next hour. There’s a lot of fun with it.” He described his own emulation of Bearilyn’s lap dance:

> The night of the G&M potluck at my house, next door was my neighbor’s birthday and after she blew out the candles, they dropped the cake. When I found out, I brought them a big chunk of our chocolate death by brownie. I asked her sit in a chair, straddled her, and did the “Happy Birthday” Marilyn Monroe style. And then I pulled the bowl of cake around in front of me and everybody thought I was gonna smash it in her face, but I took it and fed it to her and sang “Happy Birthday,” and then I ran my finger down her neck and toward her breasts. I didn’t grope her, you know, she’s a woman, I don’t want that, but a part of Bearilyn rubbed off on me. And that is a lot of what G&M will do.
As group members remark, Bearilyn serves as a mascot for Girth & Mirth, and his playful spirit rubs off. Much of what Girth & Mirthers do for one another, as they told me is, “when a person finds himself in a bad situation, or they just had a streak of bad luck, we’ll step up to the plate and do or say something to lift them up a little.” This sentiment was echoed in another interview with a Girth & Mirther, who remarked that at the club, they could let their hair down. As he put it, the club is “a place where, if you have to butch it up at work and you have to butch it up for the neighbors and you have to butch it up to go to the grocery, God dammit, there’s got to be a place where you can go where you don’t have to butch it up and if you want to queen out or get campy or whatever, Mary, you can just do it.”

Indeed, members regard Girth & Mirth as their home away from home, a place where they can go and simply nurture joy. The club also helps members to own and name the stigma of being fat and celebrate their otherness. Some members come to use a transvalutative strategy to reconfigure their shame and transform the abjectness they feel into something desirable. This is not to say that Bigmen necessarily set out to reconfigure their shame, nor to challenge injustice. At most, they simply manage within the status quo, normalize their “deviant identity,” and come to accept and be at ease with their size. Many go to the club to weather, rather than transform, the stigma surrounding being a Bigman in the gay community. There are some, however, who campaign for consumer inclusion, achieve group recognition through the Pride Parade; or set themselves apart by redefining what it means to be big and gay. It is no small feat that, with their in-your-face largeness and over-the-top behavior, Girth & Mirthers are able to
live up to the club’s name by redefining their sullied identity as something that is positive, desirable, and joyful.

Strange Bedfellows

One of the questions I investigate in this work is whether a Bigman owns up to his fat stigma as a means of reconfiguring it. An outsider’s assignment of shame, which most people do, can be a form of reconfiguring fat, as well. Furthermore, Bigmen have different motives and strategies for reconfiguring the shame of fat stigma. There are instances of Bigmen who reconfigure shame not necessarily in order to be accepted, but to avoid being in the spotlight. One kind of reconfiguring shame makes individuals into objects of desire. My investigation into Girth & Mirters also showed that reconfiguring is not always reduced to sexual behavior; it can also be done through one’s level of “outness,” so to speak, through status symbols, through clothing, or by taking shelter among one’s fellow Bigmen at the coffeehouse, the club potluck, or a retreat.

For big gay men, coming out as a form of reconfiguring the shame of fat stigma involves different types of disclosures – coming out as fat is very different than coming out as gay. A fat person does not exactly “come out” of the closet. Then again, there are choices one makes in performing one’s fat identity: should one pose nude in a magazine, flab and all, making fat pride about ownership? Should one perform fat burlesque in a mainstream coffeehouse? Or march with fellow Girth & Mirters in the Pride Parade? Issues of courage are also interesting; walking down the street with a group of other Bigmen in a Pride Parade is not just about owning one’s stigma; it takes guts.
How does one go about accepting one’s shame? Reconfiguring requires acts of humility, as well. To gain visibility, Bigmen willingly carry the torch of public humility, as they do when they walk in the Pride Parade and suffer the humiliation of not only the usual remarks from religious protestors, but also sizist remarks from heterosexual homophobes and worse, snickering from gays. It is the latter, the within group injury, that hurts the most. Even when some of the shame is reconfigured, the sting remains because it is such as slap in the face, coming from one’s own identity group.

There also is the question of whom the Bigmen choose to be the recipient of their public displays. It appears that at the Pride Parade, Bigmen shake up the gay scene, whereas at the Cabaña’s carnivalesque events, the Bigmen are thumbing their noses at themselves, not at others in the gay community. This work also points out differences between Bigmen making “real” structural changes in the external world and mostly the temporary, symbolic performances and status differentiation in which they engage.

Another form of public display is striking right back at the shamers. In some of the narratives about being humiliated, Girth & Mirthers reconfigure the shame by calling things on the carpet. However, this strategy is simply a reversal of roles.

In reaction to being treated as a single undifferentiated mass, Bigmen engage in performances of reconfiguring the shame of their fat stigma by differentiating their different kinds of fat “selves.” One such differentiation of fat is to declare that “Fat is Beautiful.” Oddly, however, this strategy, too, makes Bigmen objects of desire. When the artist decided to make the paintings of Bigmen, for instance, he was doing it out of admiration for their form. Yet another way that Bigmen try to differentiate fat is to masculinize it and make an authenticity claim as to who is the “real” gay man: The fat,
hairy guy with a healthy appetite? Or the anorexic, drugged-out circuit gay? Bigmen would like nothing better than to lay claim to being championed as the *real* gay men.

Many contradictions do not get resolved in this work. For instance, the normative world that gay Chubs must endure is in complete opposition with the world in which Chasers have more latitude. It is also true that some Chubs want to be desired by Chasers who have disdain for them, which falls right in line with the paradox of love: people desire the person who plays hard to get, or worse, batters them. Similarly, Chubs would like to be a part of the gay fashion scene, the very same scene that excludes them. Consumer inclusion is among Girth & Mirthers’ efforts to reconfigure. For example, pointing out that Bigmen have been left out of fashion consumerism means they are buying into the system that overlooked them. On the flip side, to be fair, all activist groups unwittingly exclude some group(s) and they have to stand corrected, as was the case in the HRC example.

Thus, the concept of awkward bedfellows is important here. While these contradictions do not get resolved, they seem to co-exist without much ado, irregardless of whether it makes much sense. In this study, too, I have tried to be careful to celebrate the tensions, rather than taking on the task of resolving them. Instead, I am interested in identifying the tensions among the actors herein, or between their motives and strategies.

This ethnography of Girth & Mirth culture provides a smorgasbord of strategies for dealing with fat stigma. Other than internalizing fat shame and allowing it to run their lives, Bigmen continue to find productive outlets, such as sexual objectification, status differentiation, and celebrating otherness, among others. Of these, one of my own personal favorites is campy-queer performances that utterly disregard shame, playfully
acknowledging one’s size in relation to one’s sexuality. What a burden it is to be
stigmatized; and what an admirable feat it is to perform one’s way out of the isolation of
stigma. Undoubtedly, the road to acceptance appears to be paved with something more
than simply managing stigma; it requires an unforgettable performance. . . .
Chapter 7: Reflections on a Movement for Inclusion

The problem I set up in this work was what it must be like to be big and gay. I tried to unpack the everyday shame that Bigmen experience and to explore why it is so compelling that people so dispossessed long to be middle-class, or long to become sex objects. But when they get what they desire, is the woundedness they suffer really fixed? Typically, we divide groups into political resistance or “other”; but are these categories sufficient to characterize Girth & Mirth, which appears to be a group that is not political, but appears political to outsiders, yet its members just want to get together for a chili cook-off? In this chapter, I analyze the political potential found in the group’s positive and fun-loving approach to size and sexuality, drawing distinctions between the club as a normalcy group and its unmaking of normative groups.

As I come to the end of my study and reflect on what I have learned from the members of Girth & Mirth, I return to the final interview question that I asked the participants in my research: “In wrapping up, is there anything you expected me to ask that I didn’t ask, or something you were wanting to share but I didn’t ask about?” In response, a couple I interviewed both asked me in return what I myself had to add at this point. As one of them put it, “As a newcomer and as a person who is doing this survey, what are your observations and how has this research changed your thoughts or image of bigger people?” And his partner added, “That’s exactly the question I was going to ask
you earlier, and then I realized that if you were a researcher halfway worth your weight in gold, you wouldn’t answer that question until we got done.”

Social movement literature has been pointing toward bringing emotions back into the study of movements for inclusion. Girth & Mirth represents politics at a personal level. Events organized by the club give members an opportunity to interact intimately with one another within the comfort zone that their shared culture affords them. This access to intimacy thus becomes a political act. As the feminists put it well in the seventies, the personal is indeed political.

This work attempted to answer the following questions: What kind of social organizing group is Girth & Mirth after all? How do marginalized groups seeking inclusion organize themselves? What is unique about a doubly stigmatized group? What is it about Girth & Mirth that disavows politics, despite having a political undercurrent? What role does location play in community formation? For instance, for the local chapter of Girth & Mirth that I studied, a sex club would be off-putting, while extra-locally, there is plenty of sex to be had. Furthermore, the Cabaña in Oklahoma City is a repetition of a safe space each year – oddly enough, in an inhospitable region of the U.S. for gays. But at the same time, the Cabaña offers a shelter from an increasingly sterile gay scene, even when its location in Oklahoma may not exactly provide the best shelter from homophobia. In reflecting on these questions, I stretch Goffman’s (1963) concept of stigma by adding to it LeBesco’s (2004) study on “revolting bodies.” I then use their perspectives to help me analyze what it must be like to be big and gay.
Social Club? Sex Club? Dining Club?

In reflecting on the data, an interesting distinction emerged for me regarding the type of club that Girth & Mirth is and is not, depending on the location: locally, and first and foremost, it is a social club; and extra-locally, it is also a sexual club. But when it comes down to it, it is simply a friendship circle intended to draw big gay men out of social isolation. As one member admitted, he simply goes “to make friends and to hang out with them from time to time instead of being at home all the time.” Locally, what the club is has to do with the role of the ordinary – ordinary couples attending ordinary events like a potluck with friends. What is accomplished there is that people can be friendly and can receive friendship in a normal way, without preachy weight-loss sermons. Another Girth & Mirther had this to say about the club,

It gives people the opportunity to socialize in a way that they don’t have to worry about being chastised or looked down upon because of their size. So there’s that format, it’s set up so that people are expected to be nonjudgmental – they can relate to people that are the same, or appreciate people the way they are. Men of size are generally the most ostracized groups of people that are out there, so we provide an environment where we don’t allow that to happen, so it’s in its own way more friendly and non-judgmental than we see with a lot of other gay groups.

In response to the needs of most of its members, Girth & Mirth prefers to position itself as a social club, a family. Its role is no different from what any family member would do to help a relative. Members feel comfortable attending these local events. As one Girth & Mirther said,

One of the things that I pride myself in with this club is that it’s not about sex. It’s about camaraderie. It’s actually about a friendship. It’s not about who can screw who first. It’s more about people getting together enjoying each other’s company, talking about their week, enjoying each other’s lives, and the bad things, and so, I was impressed that it wasn’t about having sex. It was about actually being a group of people that like
to get together and actually do things together. And if somebody is having a hard time or going through trouble, the group definitely provides support. The way that they have reached out to folks who’ve been going through a rough patch I think is just wonderful.

This is not to say that Girth & Mirthers don’t also grapple with the choices offered to them that may be beyond their comfort level, like the sexualizing that takes place extra-locally at Convergence or the Super Weekend. One member had this to say on the subject of Bigmen’s weekend “runs”:

Outside of our monthly schedule, the bar nights and stuff like that – I don’t go on the runs. I tried to get myself to go, but I always come up with the same answer. Oftentimes I get the impression that these runs are more sexually driven. And I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with that, but it never really excited me a whole lot. I don’t want to watch people have sex, it’s none of my business, you know? So, I was thinking coming into this club, oh boy, these guys are going to be hitting on me, they’re going to be taking off their clothes, and it’s not like that, at all. But it’s entirely possible that next year I will go on a run.

Another member compared Girth & Mirth to the Centurions, a leather/Levi club, which, according to him, “is wilder.” “But,” he said, “that was at a time when I myself was a little bit wilder.” Then he added surreptitiously, “After we turn the tape recorder off, I can tell you a story.” The same man also compared Girth & Mirth to the catholic gay men’s support group that he joined in Texas:

It was almost as if folks were sitting around in a circle apologizing to each other for being gay. Which is quite frankly what the Catholic Church does to you, and that was sort of the space I was in at the time. It was all about reconciling your sexuality with your spirituality. But there were certainly a lot of people who weren’t terribly far along with doing that.

As it became clear from the interviews and observations, Girth & Mirth is not really a sex club, nor is it a religious support group – it is about fraternity. In a sense, it is simply a dining club, where members like to get together to eat. As my travel companion said of
Convergence, “you can go there, be yourself, pick up talking with people like it was ol’ times, and eat in front of people without worrying what someone will think – it’s a comfortable environment.” One member compared Girth & Mirth to The Denton Dining Queens for gay faculty at the University of North Texas where they had monthly potlucks. Like the Denton Dining Queens, he said Girth & Mirthers are not necessarily about apologizing for your size; they also do not put one on the spot sexually. As he put it, “No sex, no agendas, just getting together and having wonderful dinners. So that I think was the closest out of all to Girth & Mirth.”

Indeed, food does play a significant role in Girth & Mirth’s community formation. In my analysis of big gay men, food seems to matter quite a lot. There are intimacies of food in Girth & Mirth. For instance, I centered my introduction on a café klatch, a space that offers a kind of intimacy where Bigmen come to socialize around coffee and dessert. On the surface, it does not appear to be political for big gay men to be gathering around a meal; however, food intimacy is a political act for Bigmen, one that can mute or magnify their shame. Then again, the person who is too political gets thrown out because members would rather simply discuss where to meet for dinner – that’s all … This was the case with a Bigman who had to be quelled, as he was too interested in politics. When he became a board member of the local chapter, he tried to use the group as his platform for his views on radical democracy, mistaking Girth & Mirthers for the Rad Fatties.

Food can nurture a sense of the familiar, as with “comfort food.” The Bearilyn song is a food-informed event, as when a Girth & Mirther shared a chunk of chocolate cake with his next-door neighbor in Marilyn-esque fashion. In this manner, the chocolate cake provided a link between club members and the local community. Food integrates
people into the community rather than isolating them, serving as a unifying principle in celebrations, gay or otherwise. It thus helps to mute the shame of fat stigma. The Pride Parade also provides an avenue for connecting with the larger society. However, to the extent that it causes a ruckus, it magnifies Bigmen’s shame. Then there is the K.C. barbeque sauce masterpiece at the Super Weekend, which is about magnifying, rather than muting, one’s shame surrounding food and fat, carried out semi-privately.

**Are Girth & Mirthers’ Wounds Unique?**

In this study, I analyzed within-group hierarchies that surround the shame of fat stigma and how members of Girth & Mirth reposition it. I explored how big gay men experience size as a marginalizing status and how they seek dignity and respect in spite of their marginal position. Gay men, as a subaltern group, have their own hierarchy, and this work sought to answer a larger question about whether the social consequences of failure to be height-weight proportionate should be so high in the gay community. As looks are the organizing feature of the gay world, big gay men become doubly marginalized – i.e., both for their sexual orientation and for their size. Thus, they constitute a subaltern within the subaltern.

They are not unique in this regard, however; we see it in other movements, as well: all marginalized groups construct themselves in this way. African Americans make distinctions based on skin color and lightness: Collins (1990) discusses the lights and the brights in the African American community, documenting division and preference within race groups. Feminists historically divided along class lines, as well – white middle-class women vs. women of color. Likewise, in disability discussions, people with severe
cognitive disabilities get lower priority than those with physical ones. These are hierarchies in relation to the dominant group and the within-group dynamics point to larger sociological issues. Another study could look at all the ways that different multiply marginalized groups redress their stigma, how these repairs are the same or different across groups, and which strategies are most successful.

How does sizism compare to other ‘isms? The Fat Studies listserv to which I belong heatedly debates on a regular basis whether sizism is comparable to racism. Again, this is subject for another study – but what we can say here is that shamers perceive “obesity” to be different because being fat is argued to be within one’s control, in turn making it a moral issue. Students in my classes, for example, have difficulty looking beyond assigning individual blame to fat folks; they can sometimes see the social causes of “obesity,” but much less the idea that everyone – from the couch potatoes to the genetically predispositioned fatty – deserves respect (see LeBesco 2004).

What do we learn from sizism as type of ism? It is interesting to consider what we learn from the comparison of racism to sizism about social movements. Both have in common visual characteristics not of one’s choosing; however, though fatness may not necessarily be chosen, one is expected to do something about it. Is the political act of being black and sitting at a lunch counter the same as being fat and sitting at a lunch counter? A sit-in to get inclusion of one’s size differs when there are no exclusionary signs except for at amusement parks concerning safety, which do not overtly stand for discrimination. Trying to change a form of discrimination that is invisible – that people are not even aware of – may be different. Many people grow up in contexts of mixed
size, for example immigrant enclaves in the U.S., not in contexts of size-related segregation.

Interestingly, many other movements have included the body – queer, civil rights, feminism, to name a few. Unlike these movements, sizism has a different history. In terms of being a multiply marginalized group, however, big gay men continue to live in the shadow of the gay community. Suffice it to say here that multiple marginalizations are not unprecedented.

**How Effective are the Reconfigurations?**

Girth & Mirthers, as an out-group within an out-group, are aware of each other’s horror stories, but they do not primarily sit around and exchange war stories; rather, they reconfigure their wounds either by creating themselves into sex objects, or by seeking class prestige, or by playfully disregarding their shame. The question, however, is whether such repairs truly get to the heart of the matter. For example, to seek fat acceptance, big gay men do socially unacceptable things at the Cabaña, though their reconfiguration is only a short-lived, pseudo-sexual healing. Furthermore, even though Chasers at the Cabaña were sometimes put in a one-down position, this does not really redress any inequalities beyond the walls of the total institution; at least, however, it does not reproduce existing inequalities.

At the middle-class convergence, reconfiguration of the shame falls short, since the sexual agenda is hidden beneath an agenda of seeking status differentiation. To get middle-class prestige, Girth & Mirthers learn how to pretend they are not having sex. For example at Convergence, they engage in middle-class replacement activities, like an
innocent dance, though this in itself can be problematic, as it may open up old wounds rather than heal them. Also, while there is no honeymooner’s orientation for straight people, the big gay men at Convergence are offered a first-timers’ orientation for sex-ed, as if they didn’t know anything about the rules of sexual engagement. This charade of an orientation for newcomers to Convergence contradicts the whole point of hotels being set up for spontaneous romantic getaways. However, it is unfortunately the price some Bigmen are asked to pay to join the ranks of the American middle class.

As LeBesco (2004) has said so aptly, any strategy to redress the shame of fat stigma that claims Bigmen’s innocence is politically futile (LeBesco 2004). She is arguing against separating people who could do something about their condition from those who are the “innocent” (e.g. those with a genetic predisposition to weigh problems). She even disputes the idea that our focus should be on the conditions that produce or deny opportunities to lose weight (i.e. she does not make a separate case for ample size because of poverty). Innocence creates another stigma and it does nothing to disrupt sizism. While hiding fat gay sex under a blanket of prestige will not change anything politically, one can see why this strategy might be attractive, since our culture supports these kinds of apologetic moves.

The question that remains, however, is, “What counts as political?” In disrupting the signifiers – the Bigmen’s play just might be considered a political act. Maybe Convergence does not do as good of job disrupting the signifiers. Would such an argument accord more power to the carnival event than to Convergence? After all, Convergence achieves a kind of normalcy that may have more resonance in the ordinary lives of Bigmen than a once a year carnival. As I write the last words of this study, over
700 Bigmen are attending the most recent Convergence held in Vegas over Labor Day weekend. If numbers are useful measure, then clearly it offers something significant. Convergence may be more comfortable, but then again, the Cabaña, in all of its uncomfortable forms of shapeshifting, could lead to a paradigm shift.

Though some of the normal pedestrian occasions such as food rituals/commensality (i.e., going out to eat) seem apolitical on the surface, it may be that in their desire to be “normal” and to do ordinary things, Bigmen do manage to repair their freakish identity. However, even as they go out to eat as a “herd,” they may attract attention, thereby standing apart from the larger society. Conversely, having a potluck among one’s fellow sufferers may signal withdrawal. Thus, it is important to consider the public/private dimensions of such engagements and withdrawals from society.

**My Contribution to Stigma Theory**

As I mentioned earlier in this study, Goffman (1963) discusses how stigmatized individuals manage their spoiled identity in mixed contact with the “normals.” The social deviants in his book weather their shame – they manage it, cover it, conceal it, pass with it, and take shelter from it, often resigning themselves to half-worlds (in some cases, not unlike Girth & Mirthers). The group alignments Goffman discusses are about lining up with fellow sufferers or about re-educating “the normals.” By “social deviants,” Goffman (1963) refers to people outside of society’s norm – homosexuals, gypsies, carnies, prostitutes, or cultists, who are outside the system. These are the people who flaunt and refuse to accept their place in society. In doing so, they receive differential treatment than those of the middle-class ideal.
By “stigmatized,” Goffman (1963) refers to perspectives, not persons. According to Goffman, the “normal” and the “deviant” play both roles at different times – that is, they are both part of one another. Goffman’s stigma theory was helpful in my research of Bigmen. However, as I considered and analyzed my data, and started to pull in theories of carnival, camp, and play from Bakhtin, Bateson, and others, I saw where Goffman’s *Stigma* (1963) needed to be revisited and updated.

Given the dramaturgical perspective we find in his early body of work, Goffman certainly was interested in the performative actor in relation to stigma. As he wrote in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), we are all acting out the dramas of our lives. Therefore, I suspect that Goffman would have been equally interested in one using playful subjectivity as an avenue to address stigma. For instance, he does mention minstrels. However, the minstrels act out their shame in front of normals, whereas my subjects who attended the Super Weekend performed in front of their fellow “deviants.” Furthermore, the Bigmen’s acting out is camp, not a minstrel performance. While minstrel impersonations tend to be performed by ingratiating mendicants, campy behavior lodges privileged humor as a survivalist strategy. Goffman (1963) also discusses the “gentlemen deviants” of the 1950s who fell short of the American ideal and used role inversion to mend their sullied reputation (110-11). In my study, too, I found that my subjects performed role inversion, though they did it through play and campy-queer performances.

It is also interesting that Goffman (1963) wrote about the town clown, the fat fraternity boy, or the village idiot – that is, individuals who live within close-knit communities as public characters. He also discussed how fellow sufferers had the option
to form groups. However, he never wrote about a subaltern within the subaltern – i.e., he did not unpack the layeredness or nestedness of outgroups. In my study, I show that stigma could in fact be more deeply layered and could span across multiple dimensions.

Goffman was writing his book on stigma in the early 1960s when various social movements were gaining momentum. At that time, it would have been difficult to anticipate that resistance groups would be so successful. Granted, Goffman could not have realized when he was writing his book that minorities would choose to remain outside the mainstream and preserve their culture, rather than assimilate. He could not have foreseen that gays would one day be able to shout out, “We’re here, we’re queer! Get used to it!” Then playing off of that, fat activists’ mantra became “We’re here, we’re spheres! Get used to it!” (LeBesco 2004:95). As these quotes illustrate, one can harness power from remaining outside the norm. However, Goffman would not have known that, in today’s context, wanting no be normal would be such a radical wish.

**My Contribution to Fat Studies**

Fat Studies scholars hold in high regard LeBesco’s (2004) book, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*. This is justifiably so. While Goffman laid out a global foundation for stigma theory, LeBesco specifically focused on the politics of fat oppression. Her work elaborating stigma, normalcy, and politics has helped me understand Girth & Mirthers better: the layeredness of the stigma that they experience, their club as a normalcy group, and how we can see the political underpinnings in a group that is cast as social.
LeBesco (2004) hints that gay men do not find much refuge from sizism in queer circles. Likewise, in my work, I argue that the gay community is not going to accept and assimilate its Big brethren with open arms. The problem is not that L+G+B+T+Q is exhausted; it is not a matter of not accommodating any more categories. Rather, it is a resistance to size. As others and I have said, this is about corporeal deviance. Feminism hasn’t been so great toward its fat constituents, either. Therefore, the question of whether a subaltern within a subaltern get protection from aligning with other disadvantaged groups is a mute question. No other group is going to assimilate Bigmen into its fold, save NAAFA, though this is not a gay association.

It is quite fascinating that the Bigmen minimize disability even though they have great awareness of it because some of their members no longer work and are on disability. The question is why they would relinquish the possibility of having a disability. Ordinarily, a disability might grant a form of face-saving to a Bigman – however, the issue of embarrassment is huge. According to LeBesco (2004), NAAFA has experienced within-group conflict regarding whether fat is normal or whether it is a disability. The downside of adopting the latter is that disability equals corporeal deviance; thus, a “double whammy”: a fat stigma and a disability stigma. In my study, it makes sense that the Bigmen do not bring up disability much; and when they do, they try to silence or minimize that discourse. For example, at the Super Weekend Chub-Chaser contest, the organizers purposefully omitted the “Occupation” line from the entry form because they knew that some people who come to the weekend are on disability, and they did not want to embarrass their guests. At the same time that these same Bigmen were making a point of not stepping lightly around size and sexuality they were tiptoeing
around disability – understandably, since adding physical disability on top of being fat and gay would be triply stigmatizing. Importantly, they seem to be less interested in normalizing their body than in expanding what qualifies as sexuality. In a different context, seeking sexual activity when one is fat and gay gets easily labeled as sexual deviance, again triply stigmatizing the Bigman.

LeBesco’s (2004) work also helped me explain Girth & Mirthers’ ambiguous relationship to the norm. Sociology privileges the social deviant’s desire to be bodily normal as the crux of his identity. However, my research showed that most Bigmen were not necessarily looking to normalize their bodies, but were more interested in expanding and playing with what qualifies as sexuality. Fat people’s sexuality remains tenuous – that is, as I discussed in the chapter on woundedness, Bigmen fall outside normal parameters for ideal sex objects in various ways, namely as asexual or as sexually degradable beings (Millman 1980). Therefore, Bigmen having sex at all qualifies as transgressive to outsiders.

LeBesco (2004) also talks about how the slogan, “big is beautiful,” is misleading; big is not necessarily beautiful in all instances, but it still is normal, and deserves unexceptional treatment. Therefore, the artist in my study who wants to make fat bodies admirable and godlike in his paintings might do better to paint them as ordinary mortals. At the same time, this Bigman succeeds in differentiating himself as an artist, which in itself is a mark of making progress toward a self-concept that is multidimensional and less limiting. His claiming the identity of artist defies what shamers do when they reduce Bigmen solely to their size.
The idea of the “peaceful consumer revolution” is introduced by LeBesco (2004:72), who saw it as a move toward assimilation. In my study, Girth & Mirthers who support organizations that make clothing inclusive of all sizes and oppose those who do not is “peaceful consumer revolution.” For instance, the HRC letter-writing example was a peaceful attempt to bring a gay organization in line with Bigmen’s clothing needs. Or the Casual Male fashion show at Convergence is a compromised victory, since it buys into the system. Still, it is no small feat. In fact, it is arguably even more revolutionary when fat people alter clothes by stores that accommodate plus sizes, thus defying the tasteful intent of the design (LeBesco 2004). For example, taking big swim trunks and cutting out the mesh to make oneself more accessible for fondling in the pool at the Cabaña was not the intent of the makers of those stylish shorts.

In terms of the political potential of Girth & Mirth, LeBesco’s (2004) framing device for the politics of size is one of compromised victories and pleasures. In a similar vein, readers of my work have remarked that they are saddened by the various ways in which the Bigmen reconfigure the shame of the stigma of being fat, because they perceive these repairs as fleeting – they are sad fixes, temporary and only symbolic. The Bigman still has to leave the weekend retreats and return home to the homophobia of mainstream society and the fatphobia of gay society.

As LeBesco (2004) points out, there are strands of fat scholarship that are so hell bent on showing fat in a positive light, that they are willing to overlook the story of woundedness. When this is done, however, “fat positive” scholars have a difficult time accounting for those fat people who succumb to fad diets or bariatric surgery and see them as traitors. They do not want to acknowledge the overriding pull of the “fat
negative” – that it is depressing to be marginalized for one’s size. I myself fell into this trap, not wanting to write about woundedness, especially since the moniker Girth & Mirth stands for being fat and happy. It is essential, however to understand Bigmen’s social injuries and why they have to work so hard to reconfigure themselves and why they still would fall short of fat positive standards.

**Political Struggle or Play?**

Keeping in mind, that most conceptually, my work is in dialogue with Goffman's stigma and visibility and Bakhtin's carnival and hierarchy, I am arguing from these perspectives that Girth & Mirth is political – but not in the way that the political is typically conceived. The feminist credo of "the personal is political" is aptly reflected in Bigmen’s organizing – similar to a new social movement. The edges of self-mockery… the ostracizing of a more overtly political member… the local groups’ choice not to affiliate with the national Bigmen’s association and to affiliate more extensively with the Super Weekend, rather than Convergence’s higher status and more mainstreamed group… all of these are reflections of the individual, local chapter, and organizational domains of the personal as political. Thus, Girth & Mirth exemplifies a personal political, beyond the historical frame of social movements.

As a friendship circle intended to draw big gay men out of social isolation, Girth & Mirth *is* political. Whether Bigmen are involved, or not – gay sex *is* political. I am here again reminded of Goffman's "sheltering" discussion in *Stigma* (52-53). As Goffman suggested, "whether we interact with strangers or intimates, we will find that the finger tips of society have reached bluntly into the contact, even here putting us in our
place" (53). Thus, at the Cabaña, the shamers are not there, but in a very real sense, they are there too – and the response of intimate friendship is political. My data makes for a new appreciation of how the "strategies of action" of organizational intimacies is exemplified in big gay men's sheltering (Swidler 2001).

My interviews and observations indicated that the Girth & Mirthers appeared to “steer clear of politics and religion.” However, one Bigman commented that one could consider their work to keep the club going as political. Another said, “I think some of the folks in the group are politically aware in a very positive way. One of the subtexts that I see in the group is a kind of interest in advancing the cause of the gay community. For example, the time when several of us marched around the state house.” It is ironic that the one area in which these Bigmen claim to be political is in advancing the cause of the gay community, the very same community that rejects them. Similarly, the charity work they do for the youth organization is also perhaps doing work for a group of people who would most likely not sign onto their cause.

Though Girth & Mirth board members recognize that being a non-profit organization comes with an organizational structure, a governing body, and a club mission, they are less likely to see that the club’s being not-for-profit implies that friendship comes in all shapes and sizes, and cannot be bought. In terms of whether the club is built on a politic, one Bigman said, “I don’t think that politics is anywhere near a driving force behind the club. . . As far as politics goes, it is not an avoided topic. But it’s something that doesn’t dominate our club in terms of any of our club rules or philosophies or anything behind the club.” It is interesting that this Bigman says this,
when in reality they espouse a politic of inclusivity. The terms used to describe fat gay men also involve “a political spin.”

Online, “chub” is acceptable (e.g., Chubnet). The chub/chaser stereotype is a big, older guy and little younger guy. The classic scenario is the older big fat man and the chaser is skinny and young. Terminology is like gay, faggot (and among African-Americans “niggah”) – just like the black community, we can call each other those terms, but woe to those not in the community that call us that. . . We call ourselves Chub, Big, Husky, Large, Fat, . . . Guys in the group may use the first three or fat, big. . . How people describe things when they play online or strike up a conversation online seems relevant. You’re not going to get any response if you say you’re “fat.” Husky or chubby is ok. If you say “big” then people ask “how big” and the conversation degenerates from there.

This is not the first study to point out that Chubs are political even though they disavow politics. Monaghan (2005) notes that a sexual focus often predominates in the Bigmen’s movement, and asserts that some of these groups provide a politics of pleasure and intimacy, helping people to engage with one another rather than remain isolated. Girth & Mirth’s inclusiveness of a range of body sizes is, in and of itself, a political act. It is also political to put size at the forefront of a shared identity and to make it sexually valuable. However, it is threatened by the rejection within a subaltern of a subaltern. For example, Superchubs are thrice rejected. LeBesco (2004) points out how fat and gay share a politics of outing, where fat is put in a metaphorical closet and where one has to atone for one’s size in order to come out. To complete the metaphor, what is painted on the closet door is shame.

Monaghan (2005), when talking about big handsome men advocates thinking about it as identity politics. Coming out as both fat and gay is an act of courage. It also involves adopting a well-adjusted line. According to Goffman (1963), if an individual stigmatized for his size and sexuality wants public approval, he needs to adopt “the right
Only then will he have “come to terms with himself and be a whole man . . . an adult with dignity and respect” (Goffman 1963:103). This was illustrated well in the second Pride Parade that I attended, where the Bigmen unexpectedly won best float for their float with the theme “Rub-a-dub-dub, three men in a tub.” The float consisted of a larger-than-life bathtub with shower curtains blowing in the breeze, overflowing with Bigmen from the club who were all blowing bubbles. This was an instance of their having successfully adopted the acceptable party line.

It makes sense that Girth & Mirthers were successful in a festival occasion where they could play with the multiple meanings of signifiers. Rub-a-dub-dub worked, given its multiple signifiers: the neutrality of a child’s rhyme, the allusion to three men in any tub meaning gay, the fun of being in a tub and rub-a-dub-dubbing. This shower act in fact had been tested by Bear groups in other Pride Parades and had proven successful. In the case of either group, this performance is not just desperately wanting normal; it is about insisting on playing with signifiers to refuse any single over-simplified rejection of fat. This is in line with LeBesco’s (2004) call for a fat politics that engages constant playfulness, and that playful subjectivity and performativity should be the mission of fat politics.

There certainly also are instances of Girth & Mirthers adopting the potentially “wrong” line. For example, when they approach someone in the gay community whom they perceive to be a perfect candidate for their tribe, their assumption may come across as offensive. Their outreach is rebuffed because reconfiguring can also be self-denial of one’s size. Someone who wants to diet would not want to join a group like Girth &
Mirth because crossing the line and joining up would make them fat and happy instead of regarding their “obesity” as a problem or worse, a disease.

In the eyes of the public, fat people receive a low approval rating. They somehow fail to adopt “the right line” and therefore cannot be full citizens who deserve dignity and respect. Therefore, as LeBesco (2004) has observed, stigmatization is used to distinguish citizens from non-citizens. By general consensus, obesity is deemed an epidemic, which fat people are thought to have brought on themselves; what is worse, they are regarded as contagious and immoral.

The Bigmen I studied complicate this portrayal; some buy into the “biggest loser” mania; but on the whole, their efforts are not toward achieving “acceptable” bodies. Mostly, they want to have a sense of normalcy and citizenship, rather than buying into body modification packages that include plastic and bariatric surgery, liposuction, etc. Out of hundreds of Bigmen that I met both locally and extra-locally, I encountered only four Bigmen who opted for bariatric surgery; and I can recall only one memorable case that stands out, of a Bigman locally who tried various fad diets and exercise regimens and felt repeatedly defeated by his multiple attempts. Still, most Girth & Mirthers are not about legitimating obesity; rather, they are engaging in a dialogue about ways in which body fascism warrants a reconfiguring, even if not so liberatory. Theirs is not a fat revolution, but a reaction to oppression.

As Le Besco (2004) has said, if fat people have been the norm in other times and places, then fat people seeking inclusion of course would not be about body projects that more closely approach the norm; rather, their efforts are intended toward reclaiming the body’s “citizenship” (63). For example, fat gay men simply want to be able to sit in
comfortable chairs in which they fit without having to think about it. Locally, Girth & Mirthers are interested in recovering their failed citizenship by taking part in the pedestrian events of daily life, such as a prosaic potluck or movie night. The club creates a comfortable space where they can give and receive friendship. Members who go to Convergence or the Super Weekend are a subset of the regular Girth & Mirthers. Extralocally, most of the Bigmen who go to Convergence desperately desire the normal. They are interested in buying a class presentation that has to do with how middle-class people do sex or fashion. By attending Convergence, they are buying a set of activities and thus earning cultural capital, so to speak.

What happens when a community’s response to stigma is play? In their desire for citizenship, Girth & Mirthers are engaging the shame of fat stigma by playfully disregarding it. Yet it takes courage to disregard stigma, and the group members use campy humor to cope with fat oppression and stigma. This group gives us an opportunity to look beyond what we traditionally tend to think of as political action groups. This study of Girth & Mirth revealed how cultures get constructed to provide a space for stigmatized citizens to just live their lives.
References


