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BEAR BODIES, BEAR MASCULINITY Recuperation, Resistance, or Retreat?

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Bears comprise a subculture of gay men who valorize the larger, hirsute body. This research interrogates Bear culture as a gendered strategy for repudiating effeminacy that simultaneously challenges and reproduces norms of hegemonic masculinity. In this research, the author situates his ethnographic study of a major metropolitan Bear community in its social and historical context to illuminate this paradox, with special emphasis on the embodiment of Bear masculinity and its effect on sexual practice. The author concludes that through a process of embodied agency, Bear culture yields a number of sexually innovative practices that disperse pleasure across the body and disrupt genitally centered, phallus-and-receptacle interpretations of sex. However, the subversive potential of these practices is significantly undermined by an attendant set of practices that reflect heteronormative and hegemonically masculine interpretations of sex.

Keywords: *masculinity; homosexuality; gay; embodiment; social change*

One of the most intriguing features to appear on the queer cultural landscape in the past 20 years is the Bear subculture. During that time many gay men seeking to resist the stereotypical association of homosexuality with effeminacy have found the hirsute, masculine image of the Bear enormously attractive. For a significant cohort of men who came out in the late 70s and spent their youth reveling in the freewheeling post-Stonewall sexual culture, the Bear movement's emphasis on the appeal of the husky man provides an enticing antidote to the heartbreak of a slowing metabolism. Consequently, Bear culture has flourished in this country and expanded internationally. A resource Web site for Bears (<http://www.resourcesforbears.com/CLUBS/US.html>) lists 60 active clubs in cities across the United States, 6 in Canada, 14 in Europe, 5 in Central America, and 6 in New Zealand/Australia. Bear culture has spawned a number of popular books (*The Bear Book*, *The Bear Book II*,

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Tales from the Bear Cult, Bearotica, The Bear Handbook) and magazines (*BEAR Magazine, American Bear, American Grizzly*) and dozens of Bear-related Web sites. Several dozen Bear organizations sponsor social events, runs, or camping weekends every year, with the most popular attracting as many as 800 visitors from around the world. Interestingly, although people active in a variety of queer communities are likely to know something about Bears or Bear culture, the phenomenon is not widely recognized outside of these communities.

Just what is a Bear? Responses to this question reveal a variety of answers but almost all reference the Bear body in an attempt either to describe what the typical Bear looks like or to refute the idea that Bears can be defined exclusively by their bodies. As Travis, one of my interview participants, put it, "You know, physical attributes such as stockiness, height, weight, how much facial fur you have, things along those lines. But other people see it as being 90 percent attitude, 10 percent looks." What constitutes Bear attitude? Responses I encountered ranged from "natural, down-to-earth, easy going, likes to have fun" (Larry), "closer to the heterosexual community in their tastes" (Brian), "a sense of independence" (Burt), and finally "an easiness with the body" and "the masculinity thing" (Grant). "The masculinity thing" within Bear culture is complex and inextricably tied to the workings of hegemonic masculinity outside of it. "I think some of what is really appealing to me about the Bear group is that if you saw these guys on the street, they could just as easily be rednecks as gay guys," says Franklin. This suggests that the Bear image not only is conventionally gendered but includes a specifically classed presentation of self.

Bear culture was born of resistance. According to historian and founding figure Les Wright, in the early 1980s men frequenting leather bars in San Francisco and other cities began placing a small teddy bear in their shirt or hip pocket as a way of "refuting the clone colored-hanky code," whereby gay leathermen place different colored hankies in their back pockets to signal their interest in a variety of sex practices. Not willing to be objectified and reduced to an interest in one specific sexual activity, these men sported teddy bears to emphasize their interest in "cuddling" (1997b, 21). According to Wright, this was a way of saying, "I'm a human being. I give and receive affection" (1990, 54).

Bears reject the self-conscious, exaggerated masculinity of the gay leatherman in favor of a more "authentic" masculinity. This look includes (but is not limited to) jeans, baseball caps, T-shirts, flannel shirts, and beards. To the uninitiated, Bears seem above all to be striving for "regular-guy" status. "The Bear look is all-natural, rural, even woodsy," noted Silverstein and Picano; "full beards are common, as are bushy moustaches. . . . They're just regular guys—only they're gay" (1992, 128-30). But are Bears "just regular guys"? Feminist scholars Kelly and Kane (2001, 342) saw subversive potential in this community: "Is there perhaps something radically subversive of orthodox masculinity at work here, despite all the butch trappings? Might not bears represent the sort of 'marginalized men' that Susan Bordo describes as 'bearers of the shadow of the phallus, who have been the alchemical

agents disturbing the (deceptively) stable elements' of orthodox masculinity in a newly percolating social psyche?"

With the Bears' emphasis on camaraderie instead of competition, the rejection of "body fascism" (as evidenced by the acceptance of heavier and older men), and by popularizing cuddling and "the Bear hug," one finds ample evidence that this is not the type of masculinity that predominates in other gay cultures. As Wright remarked, "Competition with other gay men for sex partners and the depersonalizing effects of a steady stream of sexually consumed bodies is balanced by the humanizing effort to . . . establish contact with the person inside of each of those bodies" (1997c, 10). But at the same time, one finds signs of a recuperative current, a rejection of the insights of feminism, even outright hostility. As Lucie-Smith noted, "There is a challenge to aggressive feminism, which not only seeks female equality, but often tries to subject men to the tastes and standards imposed by women. To be a 'Bear' is to assert a homosexual masculinism which rejects this" (1991, 8).

Thus, in staking their claim to gay masculinity, Bears challenge hegemonic assumptions about male sexuality by introducing what feminists have identified as an "ethic of care" (Gilligan 1982) into an objectified sexual culture perceived as alienating. On the other hand, insofar as their rejection of effeminacy signals a broader devaluation of the feminine, Bear masculinity recuperates gendered hierarchies central to the logic of hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, the pastoral fantasy encoded in Bear semiotics can be linked with earlier movements aimed at revitalizing an "essential" masculinity under assault from the feminizing effects of civilization by retreating to the wilderness, if only symbolically. How then, from a feminist perspective, is one to adjudicate these simultaneously resistant and recuperative features of Bear culture? In this research, I draw on ethnographic and historical evidence as I attempt to make sense of these conflicting currents, with a special emphasis on the way that Bear masculinity is embodied and the effect this has on Bear sexual culture.

METHOD

Using a case study approach, I have designed this research in response to Stein and Plummer's (1994, 184) call for "a new paradigm for conceptualizing 'identity in culture,'" and "developing an understanding of how sexuality, along with gender, race, ethnicity, class, and generation, is articulated and experienced within a terrain of social practices."

My case study community is a Bear club in a major American city, hereinafter referred to as the Friendly Bears.¹ As Bear organizations go, the Friendly Bears are somewhat atypical in that they do not hold regular meetings, do not charge membership fees, and operate with a relatively informal administrative structure. Like other Bear clubs, the Friendly Bears have a board of directors and a slate of officers, but their work is very low profile. The vitality of the club is maintained through

monthly social events, all organized on a pay-as-you-go basis by volunteers and various fund-raising events for local charities. Most other clubs have regular meetings and membership dues, and the executive officers of those clubs tend to be much more visible. There is, however, a great deal of communication and interaction between Bear clubs. Some of this happens over the Internet, between individual members of different clubs via Bear chat rooms and message boards, but also through a series of regularly scheduled weekend events sponsored by clubs across the United States. These events, billed primarily as social opportunities, are often closely affiliated with local charities and typically draw men from a wide geographical area. In addition to the half dozen such events that may attract as many as 800 participants from all over the world, there are numerous events sponsored by clubs in midsized cities. These draw anywhere from 100 to 200 out-of-town guests. Thus, despite the peculiarities of my particular case study community, the extraordinary level of interaction between groups suggests a certain degree of national homogeneity across clubs in the United States.

My ethnographic data are drawn from approximately 300 cumulative hours of participant observation at various Friendly Bear sites during 2001 and 2002. As a graduate student and gay man in my early 40s, I had lived in "Friendlytown" for more than 10 years before beginning this research. Thus, I had already developed a number of informal relationships with Friendly Bears, greatly facilitated by my own expanding middle-aged frame and natural hirsuteness. My response to these interactions was overwhelmingly positive, following along two distinct dimensions. In the beginning, the hedonic appeal of having my aging body recast in a significantly sexier social frame, through the approving glances of the Friendly Bears, provided the overwhelming appeal. But as time went on, I found myself engaging intellectually. What does the rapid growth of Bear culture mean, and how is it that these men manage to collectively reinterpret and eroticize the very physical attributes stigmatized by the larger gay community (extra weight, body hair)?

As a result of my situation, I found that gaining access to appropriate research sites was relatively easy. In addition to attending a number of semiprivate functions, I attended two Bear summer camping trips (each with more than 100 men attending), a smaller camping trip in the fall of 2001 (approximately 30 attendees), numerous "Bear Bar Nights" (typically hosting more than 150 men), and many casual face-to-face encounters. Observation sites also included "play parties" where sex happened, but this was never the sole purpose of the gathering.² The men I studied were overwhelmingly white (approximately 96 percent), and while there were a range of social classes represented, the majority of the men I observed would be most accurately classified as middle class (see below).

I conducted in-depth interviews with a total of seven men for this research, with interviews ranging in length from two to four hours. All interview participants were white and self-identified as middle class. Interview participant selection was guided by a theoretical sampling logic. I made an effort to recruit men who presented a more or less typical Bear image in terms of body size and appearance, but I also sought out participants who decidedly did not fit this profile (i.e., smooth-

skinned, thinner men who nevertheless considered themselves members of the Bear community). I also attempted to sample a range of sexual attitudes and styles among my interview participants. At one end of this spectrum, my youngest participant spoke proudly of his sexual conservatism and devotion to monogamy. At the other end was a man of substantial experience who genially spoke of his desire to "have sex with as many men as possible." Finally, I tried to take account of participants' activity profile within the group. While I interviewed several Friendly Bears who had served as officers of the club, I also included men who were less active.

I also accessed historical materials pertaining to Bear culture, as well as contemporary commentary from various writers across the United States. These data include published accounts of Bear history, previously published interviews from key figures in the national Bear culture (particularly men who played formative roles in the late 1980s, as Bear culture was being forged in California's Bay Area), narratives chronicling the establishment of Bear clubs and organizations in other parts of the country, photographs, magazines targeted to Bears, and other related documents.

BEARS IN SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In addition to its appeal as a hedge against effeminacy and its eroticization of the heavier body, there are at least two factors contributing to the emergence of the Bear phenomenon during the 1980s. One was, unquestionably, the AIDS pandemic and the effect of AIDS-related wasting syndrome on the erotic imagination of gay men. In an era when thinness could be linked with disease and death, the fleshier body was reinterpreted as an indicator of health, vigor, strength, and virility. The second contributing factor was the Bear movement's ability to co-opt an existing subculture that had been operating on an informal basis for decades prior to the Bears' arrival on the scene. In 1976, a national network of "chubbies" (big men) and "chasers" (men who were sexually attracted to them) emerged as a new national organization called Girth and Mirth. A dozen years later, as the Bears became a recognizable subculture within the gay community, an uneasy relationship developed between the two groups. Interestingly, in many cities, Girth and Mirth chapters went into decline just as Bear organizations were cropping up (Suresha 2002). One reason for the out-migration from Girth and Mirth may be the more appealing imagery employed by the Bears. The iconic figure of the bear was enormously successful in linking the bigger body with nature, the wilderness, and more conventional notions of masculinity.

Indeed, to fully appreciate the Bear phenomenon, one must acknowledge its place in the broader spectrum of back-to-nature masculinity movements dating back at least two centuries. American history reveals richly sedimented associations between the wilderness and escape from the perceived feminizing forces of civilization. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, popular biographies of pioneers and backwoodsmen offered accessible literary escapes. By the 1840s and

1850s, Kit Carson, Daniel Boone, and Davy Crockett “all became mythic heroes . . . when their biographies were rewritten as primitivist narratives of innate, instinctual manhood” (Kimmel 1996, 63). Of course, for those men not satisfied with mere fantasies of escape, there was the vast American frontier. Immediately after the closing of the frontier in the latter half of the nineteenth century, an enthusiastic nostalgia developed that seemed to serve the same purpose. Rodeos, Wild West shows, cowboy lore, and wilderness adventure novels were all extremely popular during this time. Like the image of the bear, “A cowboy on a bronco symbolizes the rugged individuality of the Western man and beast . . . a true taste of the wild and woolly” (Bond 1909, cited in Kimmel 1996, 176). More recently, the mythopoetic men’s movement has stressed the importance of rediscovering various masculine archetypes, a process that is apparently greatly facilitated by drumming rituals in remote forested areas.

But the Bear phenomenon is remarkable in that despite its reprisal of the time-honored masculine call of the wild and its lush backwoods imagery, it has been nurtured and sustained almost exclusively in urban settings. For example, several of the sources I consulted mentioned the 1950s gladiator movies of actor Steve Reeves as a formative cultural influence on Bear culture (Suresha 2002, 81; Wright 1997b, 24). One source even specified that it was the films in which Reeves appeared bearded that really provided the impetus for the eroticization of the hairy male body (Lucie-Smith 1991, 6). Another example is the oft-noted predilection of Bears for computer technology and Internet communication. Bronski (cited in Suresha 2002, 40, 41) linked this to the inauthenticity of the “natural” that informs Bear imaginings: “Bear culture is paradoxical. Anyone really brought up in the wild knows that it is not half as romantic as Bear images try to make it. It is an urban fantasy about what a world in the wild would look like . . . the artificiality of the so-called natural. I think that is why so many Bears are in love with cyberspace. The Bear idyll has always taken place in a cyberspace, which is nostalgia for something that never was.” With respect to social class, Wright observed that “Bears’ ‘naturalness’ registers in the key of ‘blue collar’ ” (1997c, 11). Bears present an image of working-class masculinity, yet many, if not most, are middle class, as Brian observes in this anecdote:

I will never forget going to a—in fact I was a judge at—International Bear Rendezvous in San Francisco in—when was that?—’97. And uhm, you’d see these guys, and they were all dressed like, you know, in the Bear drag, bubba drag, you know the, uh, flannel shirt and the ripped jeans, ripped flannel shirts, working boots, and all this sort of stuff, and they were all like—systems analysts at Sun Microsystems [laughs loudly]! I mean, they were all like these, they were all like computer geeks. Not one of them was—you know, like I was saying—a bricklayer, a plumber, a fireman, a policeman.

Because of their purported impatience with abstractions and their daily trials with the harsh realities of material life, working-class men have often been understood as more authentically masculine than their middle-class counterparts. As

Connell observed, “Hard labor in factories and mines literally uses up the workers’ bodies; and that destruction, a proof of the toughness of the work and the worker, can be a method of demonstrating masculinity” (1995, 36). Furthermore, working-class bodies have long held an erotic fascination for the middle class, as Wray suggested: “Any cursory reading of popular representations of lower-class whites suggests that the middle classes seem obsessed with what lower-class whites do or threaten to do with their sexual bodies” (1994, 1). For all these reasons, it is perhaps not surprising that middle-class Bears, in their revision of gay masculinity, would find working-class images appealing. What is surprising is the silence surrounding these issues, not only the unexamined, underproblematized acceptance of the equation of masculinity with working-class men but also the lack of reflection as to what it means when middle-class men do working-class drag. In this context, Brian’s commentary is the exception that proves the rule.

Bear culture advertises itself as racially inclusive but remains overwhelmingly white. For example, my field notes indicate that on a typical Friendly Bear bar night, with more than 100 men attending, I saw 2 African American and 2 Asian American men. Similarly, at Bear Camp 2001, with an enrollment of nearly 120, 1 African American man and 1 Latino man attended. Fall Bear Camp attracted 54 white Bears and 1 African American Bear. My sense is that this is not simply a local problem. According to most of the printed discourse, the Bear body has nothing to do with white skin. To their credit, most Bear organizations actively seek to diversify their ranks, and racially inclusive language can be found on many Bear Web sites. Yet several writers mention the conspicuous absence of Bears of color in their communities. In two separate content analyses of Bear erotic magazines, both Locke (1997) and McCann (2001) commented on the predominance of white bodies. Kelly and Kane (2001, 344) asked why Bears “feel the need to adopt a rhetoric of racial inclusivity when the iconography of the texts before us is so overwhelmingly white.”

The whiteness of Bear culture is probably due at least in part to the foundational image of the community (the bear itself) and how this image is perceived across racial lines. For most white men who join the Bear community, the appeal of the bear image is based on its association with masculinity and strength while at the same time signaling a capacity for tenderness and conviviality. But when, in the early 80s, the forerunners of the Bear movement sought to humanize the impersonality of the leather community by wearing teddy bears in their pockets, they were unwittingly drawing on a raced cultural history of white American masculinity. As Bederman (1995, 44) demonstrated, the inspiration for the teddy bear, Teddy Roosevelt, possessed a “talent for embodying two contradictory models of manhood simultaneously—civilized manliness and primitive masculinity.” Civilized “manliness,” she explained, was a character model that “comprised all the worthy, moral attributes which the Victorian middle class admired in a man” (p. 18). As such, manliness was intimately linked with whiteness. By contrast, “masculinity” was understood in essentialist terms, referring to “any characteristics, good or bad, that all men had” (p. 18). But here again, this primal masculinity was understood to be

threatened by the feminizing effects of civilization. On Rotundo's (1993, 228) reading, white masculinist anxieties were further fueled by fears of domination by the more "authentic" masculinity of the tribesmen of "Darkest Africa," the "savage" Indian. Such descriptions of the recuperative back-to-nature narratives of the period reveal their racialized character.

Consequently, as the heirs of a raced cultural dynamic that equates the return to nature with whiteness, Bears may be unintentionally reproducing the raced appeal of the bear image. Exacerbating these effects is the racialized history of identification with animals. While many gay white men revel in their identification with the bear (this extends to purchasing Bear T-shirts, caps, vanity license plates, and other items of "Bearphernalia"), men of color may be much less eager to do so, in light of historically racist comparisons between animals and people of color (Becker 1973; Plous and Williams 1995). But the unintended racialized effects of Bear iconography are complicated by the deliberate appeal to men of color in this primarily white community's rhetoric. Here it seems that Bears are at least trying to challenge the hierarchical ranking of raced masculinities that is a prominent feature of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995, 80), but they do so from within a symbolic cosmology heavily structured by race. In the final analysis, this remains a heartfelt and conciliatory gesture extended to men of color to participate in what is still fundamentally a white fantasy. Can efforts to diversify the Bear community succeed under these conditions? Perhaps, but this will entail further consideration of Almaguer's observation that men of color "do not negotiate the acceptance of gay identity in exactly the same way white American men do" (1991, 86). Such a success will also mark an interesting cultural reversal, insofar as men of color will be adopting the symbol of the bear and ascribing to it a new set of resistant and racially inclusive meanings.

Finally, in addition to class, race, and the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity working from outside of gay cultures, Bear culture is shaped by competing masculinities within gay cultures. The regular-guy masculinity of the typical Bear is a response to the hypermasculine clone phenomenon of the 1970s. The clone look emphasized a muscled, toned body and a presentation of self that was heavily influenced by certain iconic figures of masculinity (The Village People, a popular band during this time, delighted gay audiences by taking this impulse to the extreme). The Bear look was a reaction not against the clone's masculinity per se but rather against his hypermasculinity and the particular way that the clone displayed the body to signal that masculinity—hard, lean, muscled, toned, and smooth. If this is true, it seems to indicate that Bears are interested not so much in revising conventional masculinity but in resignifying it. Wright conceded as much when he acknowledged that "Bears are fully engaged with hegemonic masculinity, seeking an alternative answer, both accepting some of the trappings while rejecting others" (1997c, 6).

Given the context established in this section, what possibilities does Bear culture open up and close off in terms of gender resistance? How are the particular

inflections of Bear masculinity manifest in the community's sexual culture? I turn now to an exploration of these questions.

EMBODIED BEAR MASCULINITY

Bourdieu (1977, 45) proposed habitus, the deeply interiorized and embodied set of mental and physical dispositions that guide social action, as relatively durable but not impervious to change. He allowed that individual experience, or on a societal level, "times of crisis, in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted," may indeed affect the habitus in profound ways. I want to argue that men who come to understand themselves as Bears experience just such a time of crisis. However, I first want to examine several of Bourdieu's more specific concepts as they relate to the embodiment of Bear masculinity. In *Masculine Domination* (2001), he used his Kabyle fieldwork to abstract the processes governing the embodiment of gender and specifically the way these processes come to be understood as natural, thereby obscuring their arbitrary nature and the gender politics they reflect.

Bourdieu called the first principle that serves to naturalize embodied masculinity "necessitation through systematicity" (1997, 194). Here he acknowledges the influence of structuralism on his work and the primacy of gender as a "master binary": "The limit *par excellence*, that between the sexes, will not brook transgression" (Bourdieu 1990, 211); "[the] binary opposition between male and female appears founded in the nature of things because it is echoed virtually everywhere" (Bourdieu 1997, 194). Thus, the arbitrary "nature" of gender is obscured by virtue of its richly homologous relationship with other already gendered binaries: Hot (masculine)/cold (feminine), hard (masculine)/soft (feminine), outside (masculine)/inside (feminine) (Bourdieu 2001, 13-18). By this method, the "arbitrary of the social *nomos*" is transmuted into "a necessity of nature" (Bourdieu 2001, 13). The critical point here is that masculinity is defined relationally, against the feminine. In Bear culture, this pattern is reproduced when Bears define their masculinity not only against the feminine but more specifically against the feminized, hairless, and gym-toned body of the dominant ideal of gay masculinity—"the twink," as he is dismissively known in Bear culture. Wright suggested, "When a Bear makes such a counter-statement, that he is not a 'woman,' not a 'twink,' not a 'heterosexual,' he is using his body to participate in changing social practice and challenging hegemonic power" (1997c, 9). I would argue that with respect to embodied masculinity, this statement obscures the fact that Bear masculinity simultaneously challenges and reproduces hegemonic masculinity.

Bourdieu's concept of "hexis" is instructive here. Closely related to habitus, but more specifically focused on deportment (i.e., ways of presenting and moving the body in social situations) as the physical instantiation of objective political and social relationships, hexis represents an embodied "political mythology" (1977, 93). Thus, the embodied hexis of Kabyle women includes a somewhat stooped

posture, with the gaze directed downward. A Kabyle man, on the other hand, gazes directly at others, and his dominance is “asserted in movements upwards, outwards, toward other men” (p. 94). Likewise, when Bears refuse to “do submission” or “do effeminacy” with their bodies, they in fact exercise a kind of embodied agency, insofar as the Bear body is perceived by heterosexual men as both “not heterosexual” and “not effeminate.” Moreover, this is an agentic deployment of the Bear body that may act to radically destabilize the reified hegemonic narrative linking femininity with male homosexuality. However, this possibility is significantly complicated by the way that Bear masculinity operates *within* gay culture and how this is deployed against other homosexual men. I strongly suspect that of the three defining functions of the masculinized Bear body (not woman, not heterosexual, not twink), it is the twink that provides the real oppositional anchor for most Bears. In their virulent rejection of the effeminate stereotype and female drag, Bears certainly wish to convey that they are “not women,” but in practice, this is accomplished indirectly, through an attack on the feminized, narcissistic body of the twink. Furthermore, while Bears may proudly acknowledge that they are “not heterosexual,” this should not be read as a rejection of heterosexual masculinity. On the contrary, it seems that the vast preponderance of Bear discourse seeks to minimize the difference between Bear and heterosexual masculinity. On this reading, the Bears’ challenge to hegemonic power is negligible, and the power relations reflected in the embodied hexis of Bear masculinity reproduce the hierarchical assumptions of hegemonic masculinity. Both assign lower status to bodies perceived as feminized.

Furthermore, despite their use of the twink as oppositional anchor, the “natural confirmation” (Bourdieu 1997, 194) that is the desired consequence of this “systematicity” remains problematic within Bear culture. This is because, in contrast with heterosexual masculinities, there exists no “rich homology” of binaries to obscure the arbitrary features of gay masculinities. Thus, Bear masculinity must be developed and sustained intersubjectively, within the community itself, an interactive process that is greatly facilitated by the symbol of the bear. The bear operates to link this new form of gay masculinity to the natural; it provides an opportunity for rich elaboration (through the designation of various types of Bear men as sexually submissive “cubs,” sexually dominant “grizzlies,” gray or white-haired “polar bears,” etc.); and most important, through the nostalgic wilderness imagery it evokes, it links Bear masculinity with heteronormative masculinity.

But this construction remains unstable, its arbitrary nature easily revealed, as in this scathing assessment by Harris:

Its hirsute ideal of rugged masculinity is ultimately as contrived as the aesthetic designer queen. While Bears pretend to oppose the ‘unnatural’ look of urban gay men, nothing could be more unnatural, urban, and middle class than the pastoral fantasy of the smelly mountaineer in long johns, a costume drama that many homosexuals are now acting out as self-consciously as Marie Antoinette and her entourage dressed up as shepherds and shepherdesses. (1997, 106)

My time in the field leads me to speculate that this fragility probably works to increase (rather than undermine) group solidarity among Bears.

Bourdieu identifies the other critical process that naturalizes embodied masculinity as “gendered socialization and the somatization of domination” (1997, 195). This describes the various practices that inculcate a gendered habitus during childhood, and Bourdieu further divides the process into four subcomponents.³ Here I want to apply these processes to the revision of a gendered habitus in adult gay men and apply his ideas to the reconstruction of masculinity in Bear culture. The first practice is identified as “rites of institutions.” These rites, such as ritual circumcision in many cultures, serve to underscore the difference between those who participate—men—and those who do not—women (p. 195). Participation, of course, keys directly off of the body. Local Bear organizations such as the Friendly Bears serve the same institutional purpose, and the Bear body becomes the point of reference for those who participate in Bear clubs, organizational planning, and activities. It is worth noting here that membership in these clubs is not strictly limited to men who self-identify as Bears. Most clubs welcome “Bears and their admirers,” a phrase familiar to anyone active in this community. The inclusive description serves at least two purposes. First of all, it expands the possible membership beyond those who exhibit the typical Bear physical traits. But even as it does this, it underscores the centrality of the Bear body and its existence as an object of desire. Slim men, hairless men, younger men—all are welcome *provided they identify as Bear admirers*. I observed one such admirer at numerous Friendly Bear events. He was a relatively young, tautly muscled, smooth-skinned ex-gymnast. While he fit the physical description of a twink, his enthusiastic sexual interest in older “Daddy Bear” types meant that he greatly reinforced, rather than undermined, the intersubjectively sustained erotic of Bear sexual culture. As such, he was warmly welcomed in the club, and his interest in larger men was enlisted as supporting evidence of the “natural” appeal of Bears. Thus, the inclusive membership policy contributes significantly to a key agentic function of the Bear clubs—the embodied reassignment of the fleshier, hairier frame from stigmatized to desired object.

The next important process is the “symbolic remaking of anatomical differences.” Here Bourdieu (1997, 195) explained that “the socially constructed body serves as an ideological foundation for the arbitrary opposition through which it was itself constructed.” Bourdieu used the example of the interpretation of “swelling” and all its various analogies as based on a taken for granted association with the male erection and phallic swelling (2001, 13). In the case of the Bears, the association can (again) not be taken for granted; it must be actively constructed in community and applied to the swelling of the Bear’s phallic body. On this reading, the Bear’s generous frame, contrasted with the more compact frame of the twink, becomes a kind of homage to phallic power and masculinity.

Bourdieu identifies the third and final process I want to apply as “differential usages of the body and rites effecting the virilization of boys and the feminization of girls” (1997, 198). Here he cites numerous practices among the Kabyle to virilize boys, among them the cutting of the boy’s hair and the father’s assistance in

dressing him for his first trip to the exclusively masculine world of the public market. Analogous practices for Bears are instructed not by a single patriarch but by the normative structure of the entire group. The self-conscious attempt to dress and groom oneself like a “real” man approaches but never quite registers consciously as drag in the typical Bear consciousness. Nevertheless, this is an ongoing project among Bears, one requiring active construction and constant vigilance. This is perhaps best indicated by those attempts that are perceived as falling short of the prescribed mark. Fritscher (2002) complained, “There’s nothing worse than seeing a big brute doing all this standing and posing at a Bear convention or in a Bear bar, only to then watch him pirouette out the door.” Two of my Friendly Bear participants made similar observations:

[Gil is a] very handsome man with a very nice beard. . . . You walk up to Gil and you think, “Boy, this is a guy who just fits the image,” and then he’ll open up his mouth, and flowers come out! [That] kind of subtracts a little Bearishness somewhere along the line. (Burt)

I think honestly that you need to, you know, your mannerisms, how you talk has to fit how you look. And that’s kind of a problem sometimes. You know, I know guys who can be, who look extremely butch, you know, lumberjack types who open their mouth and the chiffon flies out [laughs]! (Travis)

Returning to the concept of *hexis*, it would seem that these discordant displays of improperly masculinized “corporeal dispositions” are upsetting precisely because they reveal the constructed nature of what Bourdieu referred to as “the doxic experience of masculine domination as inscribed in the nature of things, invisible, unquestioned” (1997, 195).

Don’s case is particularly interesting with respect to the social construction of the Bear body. Don grew up on a farm and attended high school in a small town, which I quickly surmised was a painful experience for him. He told me, “I came out to myself back when I was 9, 10—I knew I liked what I liked.” In high school, Don weighed more than 350 pounds and was ridiculed for being heavy. During his senior year, things got uglier when he was outed by his classmates in a particularly public way. “They were chasing me down the hall with a video camera because they were putting together, like, this news footage and . . . they just outed me, and the next thing you know, I was the gay guy in school.”

After graduation, Don wasted little time, waiting only three weeks before moving to the nearest big city. He also managed to drop a considerable amount of weight, and while he was still big, for the first time in his life, he began to feel good about his body: “I had a 45-year-old woman stop me on [Metro] Mall when I was about 20, and [she] said that if she were 20 years younger she’d make me her husband. I was just having my lunch—a chicken salad sandwich—and she came up storming, and, and she wasn’t nuts. I mean she was a business-professional-type woman, and it was like she just said that I was an attractive young man. And I went, ‘Well thank you,’ and then it dawned on me that—well fine—I must be attractive.”

But even as this encounter bolstered Don's self-confidence, it also highlighted his same-sex interests. As revealing as this encounter was for Don, it was not something he could pursue. His sexual self-confidence did not really blossom until he found the Friendly Bears, at which time he felt like he had "found family." "I mean, I'm big and hairy, it's obvious. . . . I found my niche, where I was welcome to be who I was and don't have to hide anything."

But Don makes it clear that finding the Friendly Bears was not just about finding interested sex partners. "I never really had a hard time finding sex," he tells me. "When I found the Bears, I found a lot more of what I liked in a man, within that culture. I sort of like knocked out the nellyisms. . . . I knocked out the, you know, the flaming drag queens." On discovering the club, Don was able to quickly parlay his good looks, stocky build, and tall stature into Bear social capital. He is currently very active in the group, both socially and sexually, and often makes a gregarious show of his affection for the community. At the campfire, according to my Bear Camp field notes, "[Don] seems to be running the show, making various bad jokes and, interestingly, using a variety of voices that incorporate growls and grunts into his speech. He is, I realize, talking like a bear. (10/12/01)"⁴ His association with the Friendly Bears has allowed him to come to terms with his traumatic high school experiences, albeit in a way that is obviously informed by hegemonic masculinity: "I still, I see five or six classmates that I went to high school with down at the bar now. So it's sort of like . . . I was sorta like, 'Uh, what was this—I'm the gay one and you're not? On your knees!' [laughter]."

Don's complex and contradictory journey is perhaps best summarized by again returning to Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *hexis*. Don's acceptance within the Bear community is reflected in a new understanding of his body and the way it can be deployed in social and sexual situations. Prior to finding his way into the Bear community, he wrestled with feelings of shame and inadequacy. From the Bears, he has learned to adjust his gait, posture, and gaze in a way that now signals strength, dominance, and virility. These traits are in turn read by other members of the community as evidence not only of a positive attitude toward his newly discovered Bear self but of an unselfconscious, natural disposition. Perhaps this is why, despite the obvious prominence of a specific body type among Bears, many members (e.g., Larry, quoted earlier) continue to insist that what distinguishes a Bear is "90 percent attitude." This emphasis on attitude may serve to underscore the importance of some of the explicit applications I have made in this section, as well as the utility of Bourdieu's work. As Bourdieu (2001) himself reminded us, it is the presentation of the gendered self as "natural" that obscures its constructed nature in the first place.

SEXUAL CULTURE

Given its paradoxical relationship to hegemonic masculinity, how distinctive is Bear sexual culture? What distinguishes the erotic imagination of Bears from that of other gay men? Kelly and Kane looked at Bear erotic fiction and noted the

refreshing emphasis on support, nurturance, and playfulness included in the descriptions of sex that they analyzed, albeit with some caution: "I'm wondering whether this discourse of nurturance has to be presented through a discourse of sex in order to make it OK for men to participate? Or is it a way of reclaiming the whole body for eroticism and thereby dephallicizing the cock? And besides the nurturance, what about the playfulness? I think that really mitigates my discomfort with the wild man myth's seeming to reproduce old time sexism" (2001, 341). The concept of "dephallicizing the cock" is not a new one and speaks to the process Bourdieu referred to as the "symbolic coding of the sexual act" (1997, 197). Among gay intellectuals, perhaps the best known proponent of a symbolic "re-coding" of sex between men is Hocquenghem ([1972] 1996), who called gay men to a "revolution of desire." Drawing on his critiques of Freud, Deleuze, and Guattari, Hocquenghem advocated moving beyond what one commentator referred to as the "phallus-and-receptacle" paradigm (Moon [1972] 1996, 20). In his preface to Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire* ([1972] 1996), Weeks explained, "Practicing homosexuals are those who have failed their sublimation, who therefore can and must conceive their relationships in different ways. So when homosexuals as a group publicly reject their labels, they are in fact rejecting Oedipus, rejecting the artificial entrapment of desire, rejecting sexuality focused on the Phallus" ([1972] 1996, 39). Thus, Hocquenghem held that "homosexuality expresses an aspect of desire which is fundamentally polymorphous and undefined" ([1972] 1996, 35) and that gay men should reject the Oedipal entrapment and its privileging of the phallus, with its attendant emphasis on penetrative intercourse. He called on gay men to collectively transform themselves into "desiring machines" and disperse sexual pleasures across the body.

To what extent does Bear masculinity enable this recoding of the sexual act? In the previous section, I introduced the idea that Bears exhibit agency insofar as the embodiment of Bear masculinity simultaneously resists and complies with hegemonic masculinity. In this section, I discuss the implications of this paradox for Bear sexual culture, as I present evidence that Bear masculinity both challenges and reproduces an emphasis on genital sexuality.

"Sexuality among Bears is sensuality first," Burt tells me. I have seen enough in the field to appreciate what he is talking about. There is a great deal of emphasis on physical touch, both affectionate and sexual, between Bears. On this reading, institutionalized practices such as the Bear hug provide strong evidence of sexual innovation among Bears. My field notes from Bear Camp include an especially vivid example of this. I observed a spontaneous group Bear hug in the middle of the mess hall, wherein six men alternately engaged in kissing, fondling, and massaging each other. After several minutes, another man joined the group:

I am surprised to hear him introducing himself to one of the other men kissing him, rubbing his body and "nuzzling" his beard. I can't help but notice how "bear like" the men's movements are, especially the rubbing and "nuzzling" of the face. This goes on for some time. Throughout the "hugging" people come in and out of the mess hall and

take very little notice of the activity. The “hug” group is momentarily interrupted as new arrivals come in wondering if they can still get some supper. The guy in orange doesn’t miss a beat, he takes them back into the kitchen, the younger guy who had been giving him a backrub stands back from the group looking a bit bereft, but then he starts working on another guy and is drawn into a “group hug” with the remaining four. (7/5/01)

What impressed me here was the absence of any sharp division between the sexual/sensual activity and the practical activity in this scene. This strikes me as a way of claiming space, of sexualizing and sensualizing the everyday—an almost territorial ritual that seems to say, “This is Bear space now.” This kind of sexualizing of space, for a variety of reasons, is not possible for these men in the outside world. I am also struck by the fact that other than a brief episode of genital fondling that I saw initially, this activity did not seem to be very genitally centered. All members of the group seemed to know the Bear hug “script,” as evidenced by the easy accommodation of the newcomer and the casual introductions during the hug. There is also quite clearly something going on here beyond instrumental sexual “scoring.” Franklin told me that this kind of contact has a very special meaning for him: “There was one bar night where about eight guys were all just kind of glumped together . . . like a litter of puppies—some feeling each other up, some hugging, just feeling good to be alive that way.”

Burt observes that the emphasis on sensuality helps to foster a more responsible attitude toward safer sex practices. As a long-time member of the community, he has observed this among HIV-positive Bears. “I mean, think of all the varieties of sexual practices that we have to draw on. And we can enter in the ‘not so safe’ with a few men, but we don’t have to. I mean, we can still pleasure total strangers if we want to without ever getting into the unsafe category or even close to it.” This is significant because it demonstrates that at least for some Bears, fostering a sexual culture that decenters penetrative intercourse is a conscious and deliberate choice.

Burt clearly articulates this in his critique of what he calls “dick-oriented” sex. “You will find that the language amongst a lot of straight men that indicates subservience surrounds a quick sexual encounter. To fuck you is really meant to say, ‘I’m gonna get my rocks off you and leave,’ or ‘She’s a whore.’” When I ask Burt whether Bears would be more or less likely than other gay men to emphasize the importance of fucking in their sex lives, his initial response is equivocal. Eventually he settles the matter by telling me, “Only in the Bear group will you get the, the idea that there are other parts of the body that really bring the intense pleasure. And you can do it in many different ways.” He smiles warmly and concludes, “I think we’re damn good at sex, to be perfectly honest.”⁵

Beyond this, however, my time in the field yielded little that distinguished Bear sexual culture from others’ in terms of specific sex practices. When I ask Larry about this, he relates the question directly to the Bear body. “I’d say there’s some things I only do with a guy who’s hairy . . . like nuzzling chest hair—I can do that for a long time—I love it.” Given the obvious emphasis on sensuality and increased

attention to touch among Bears, I was surprised when several of my participants explicitly rejected the idea of distinctive sexual practices:

Sex is sex—one form, shape, or another. (Don)

I think in some respects, when it comes down to it, the sex is sex. . . . When it comes down to the basic sexual practices, it's all the same. (Travis)

Men are men. (Grant)

Clearly, not all Bears understand their sexual activity in Burt's more expansive terms. At a Bear play party, I witnessed a scene suggesting that some Bears understand sex in fairly narrow terms, centered on penetrative intercourse. My field notes describe "a brief but enthusiastic fuck session" involving a Bear visiting from out of state. Afterward, the visitor proudly proclaims to the small group of men watching the scene, "*That's the way we do it in Texas!*" After a brief pause, I hear another onlooker wryly reply, "*That's the way we do it in [this state] too.*"

When I ask Brian how he regards intercourse, he smiles and admits, "I mean, honestly . . . everything else is an appetizer [laughs], you know?" On the other hand, Larry seems to concur with Burt, while once again directly referencing the Bear body. "I just base it on more the enthusiasm, the enjoyment of the touching, the feeling, the nipple play, the kissing." Don tells me that intercourse itself is not important to him, but because of his large frame and aggressive personality, and because it is important for other men, he finds that he is often asked to play the top (insertive partner). He responds to these requests with a curious mixture of care and machismo: "If they want it, they'll get it. They'll get it good." Finally, Travis responds to my question about the importance of intercourse in a way that equates it with "real" sex, a definition shared by all "real" men. "You know, guys are guys. They're gonna have sex, you know, whether you're, whether you're in the Bear community or if you're in the gay community in general." Thus, it seems that while Bear culture does yield a number of sexually innovative practices that disperse pleasure across the body and disrupt genitally centered, phallus-and-receptacle interpretations of sex, these innovations coexist with (rather than displace) an attendant set of practices that sustain the phallic emphasis on insertive intercourse.

It seems clear that Bear sexual culture has been heavily influenced by hegemonic masculinity and, to a lesser extent, heteronormativity. But there is also ample evidence of resistance and sexual innovation within this subculture. Institutionalized practices such as the Bear hug, the nuzzling of "fur," and the easygoing sensuality of these men do indeed signal a partial reclamation of the body for eros, along with a corresponding and equally partial decentering of phallic sex. But it is not quite as Hocquenghem ([1972] 1996) would have it; there is no out-and-out rejection of the phallus, nor has this community entirely transcended the phallus-and-receptacle view of sex. Moreover, these men surely do not understand themselves as the undisciplined "desiring machines" of Hocquenghem's imagining. On the other hand, they have clearly come to understand their sexual relationships in novel

and evolving ways. Perhaps the most accurate way to conclude my observations with respect to Bear sexual culture would be to say that the practices that disperse pleasure across the body coexist with, rather than displace, the phallic emphasis on insertive intercourse.

CONCLUSION

Do Bears make gender trouble (Butler 1990)? What does it mean when Silverstein and Picano observe of Bears, “They’re just regular guys—only they’re gay” (1992, 128)? Clearly, there is a move toward normalization here, as well as an identification with heterosexual men, a move that may ironically turn out to be profoundly disruptive of hegemonic masculinity. When Franklin remarks, “Some of what is really appealing to me about the Bear group is that if you saw these guys on the street, they could just as easily be rednecks as gay guys,” he speaks for many men who identify as Bears. Herein lies the possibility of subversion, as Bears have been largely successful in divorcing effeminacy from same-sex desire and creating a culture that looks like a bunch of “regular guys.” The subversive implications, however, have everything to do with reorganizing sexuality and very little to do with challenging gendered assumptions. Most of these men would like nothing more than to have their masculinity accepted as normative, something that is largely accomplished within the group but remains problematic outside of it.

How is it that Bears come to understand their particular brand of masculinity as natural? It seems clear that this is accomplished quite deliberately, through the appropriation of back-to-nature masculinity narratives that are sustained intersubjectively, as group members reinforce these meanings and associations through their day-to-day interactions. Thus, Bear culture seems currently disposed toward renaturalizing rather than denaturalizing gender relations. It seems far more likely, then, that increasing acceptance of Bear masculinity will encourage greater investment in a heteronormative sexual culture, less experimentation with new pleasures, less dispersal of pleasure across the body, and a renewed appreciation for insertive intercourse as “doing what comes naturally.” In this case, the perceived naturalness of the Bear body may be extended to naturalized understandings of sex practices that are increasingly compliant with norms of hegemonic masculinity.

As Connell reminded us, “The choice of a man as a sexual object is not just the choice of a-body-with-a-penis, it is the choice of embodied-masculinity. The cultural meanings of masculinity are, generally, part of the package. Most gays are in this sense ‘very straight’ ” (1995, 156). I can certainly see this logic operating among Bears. Unlike many of their queer cousins who identify as sex radicals and activists, few Bears assume an aggressive political profile. While queer activists make a claim to radical difference and demand broader public acceptance, Bears make a claim to radical similarity; a similarity to both heterosexual men and conventional masculinity. For Bears to pursue this claim politically entails undermining its “natural,” self-evident character. Thus, Bears seem trapped in political

acquiescence and vulnerable to the recuperative currents discussed above. Still, there is some degree of agency exercised by Bears. Perhaps what we are seeing is only a temporary retreat from the political arena—a period of political hibernation, if you will. Everyone knows that in the wild, bears emerge from hibernation with a ferocious hunger. Perhaps one day, the Bears featured here will demonstrate the same ferocious hunger for change in the gender politics governing resistant masculinities.

NOTES

1. The name I have given my case study community is a pseudonym, as are the names of all of the individual members of the Friendly Bears mentioned in this article. Sources or commentary not specifically attributed to a member of the Friendly Bears should be understood as applying to or coming from the broader national community of Bears or writers commenting on the same.

2. Again, my prior association with the Friendly Bears made the observation of sexual activity relatively unproblematic. I was an occasional participant in these parties before I began my research, so formal observation entailed simply introducing a higher degree of methodological rigor to a familiar activity. As was the case at other (nonsexual) observation sites, I recorded extensive field notes as soon after leaving the site as possible. The sexual nature of observations made confidentiality an especially important issue, but I saw little reason for additional concern. As a sex-positive community, “play parties” like the ones observed in this study have been a central component of Bear culture since its inception (Wright 1997a), and many Bears are quite frank about participating in them. However, I found a range of attitudes about this type of activity among the Friendly Bears. Two of my interview participants characterized themselves as “vanilla” (conservative) in their sexual tastes. In addition, in his study of Bear erotica, McCann (2001) characterized Bear culture as sexually conservative. The conservative characterization did not go unchallenged, however. One of my participants (Travis) described Bear culture as “almost no holds barred.” Another (Franklin) confessed his bewilderment at the popularity of open (nonmonogamous) relationships among Bears.

3. I deal with only three of these in this section: “Rites of institutions,” the “symbolic remaking of anatomical differences,” and “the rites affecting the masculinization of boys and feminization of girls.” The significance of a fourth subprocess, the “symbolic coding of the sexual act” is elaborated in the next section on Bear sexual culture.

4. During my time in the field, I also observed more than one man who quite literally growled during sexual activity, something I have not observed outside of the Bear community.

5. Burt’s status among the Friendly Bears is significant here, given his resistant sexual philosophy. In addition to being a long-time member, Burt served for several years as an officer of the club. The overwhelming impression I received from my time in the field is that he is an admired, highly respected, and beloved member of this community.

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