

## **Organization, Specialization, and Desires in the Big Men's Movement: Preliminary Research in the Study of Subculture-Formation**

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*Histories and dynamics of the big men's movement are examined, largely through the methodology of studying the publications that have shaped and contextualized the movement. Themes and subjects addressed include the history of the big men's movement, the recontextualization of masculinity as shaped by gay men since the 1970s, relationships between the big men's movement and the bear subculture, HIV/AIDS, the role of the internet and cyberspace, social class, the counter-gauge of lesbian and feminist body politics, and models of desire structuring representations of fat men within the big men's magazine media. The essay focuses largely on political organizing and mobilization within the United States.*

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**KEY WORDS:** big men; body politics; bears; fat liberation.

### **INTRODUCTION/OCCUPYING THEMES**

In this paper, I examine histories and dimensions of the big men's movement<sup>2</sup> largely through the publications that have shaped and contextualized this nascent socio-sexual movement, and in part through further subcultural analysis. Several issues and themes direct this inquiry, organized in the following structure. First, I provide a brief snapshot of the organizing history of the big men's movement. I follow up this historical sketch with an examination of the significance of gay male reconceptualizations of masculinity and its aesthetic forms. I then turn to an exploration of the relationship between the big men's movement and the bear subculture. I am particularly interested here in teasing out overlaps between the two cultural groups regarding idealizations of shared codes of masculinity.

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<sup>2</sup>The term "big men's movement" is widely used within both the magazine media and the club circuit.

A recurrent problematic I try to work through in this paper concerns the relationship of the fetishization of large male bodies to the emergence of reworked gay male masculinities. I examine this theme in particular depth in a discussion of the big men's magazine media and the subset of the big men's community pursuing eroticized weight gain and weight gain encouragement. A following section of this paper grapples with two parallel contexts around the emergence of the big men's movement: HIV/AIDS and issues of class. To provide a comparative counter-gauge, I analyze feminist and lesbian criticisms of dominant cultural ideologies of body image and size consciousness. I also explore dynamics of desire as they are figured in the emerging big men's magazine media. I center this discussion through theorizing homosexual desires in two divergent organizational modes—*oppositonality* and *intersubjectivity*. In conclusion, I speculate about the big men's movement's potential effects upon the larger gay and bisexual male culture.

I am concerned here with the dimensions of this movement as it has achieved a widely disseminated, increasingly trans/national presence. It has proven to be beyond the scope of my research to substantively study the local networks established by individual club memberships and their newsletters. More in-depth, locally-attuned research projects will take such documents into serious account, and further problematize my reliance here on the existing big men's magazine media as the movement's primary structuring apparatus.

Within these magazines, an erotic lexicon is in place. This lexicon forms a discourse of desire unto itself. Within this discourse, desires for fat men are expressible as they are not within mainstream gay male discourses—namely, as honored and respected, in an explicitly subcultural key. The big men's magazine media is not merely a reflective surface for the celebration of fat male bodies and desires for fat male bodies. It is also a productive cultural space—productive of desires themselves. There is, in other words, a map of desiring present within this lexicon. The big men's magazine media is structured in a way that allows the desires readers bring to the media to move away from isolation and into the intelligibility of patterned formulations of desire. The big men's magazine media participates, then, in the formation of a discourse of desire and furthermore mediates this discourse in a dialectical, public, and publicizing manner. In doing so, the big men's magazine media establishes an imagined community for the big men's movement.

### HISTORY OF THE BIG MEN'S MOVEMENT

In 1976, the first Girth & Mirth Club was founded in San Francisco. Its founders were a gay male couple, Dick Bernolt and Charlie Brown ("1996 ABC Western" p. 6). In May 1976, Charlie Brown—the chaser<sup>3</sup> of the couple—placed a notice in the alternative newspaper *The Berkeley Barb* and soon received many

<sup>3</sup>The term "chaser" is short for "chubby chaser" and refers to someone who desires fat men or women. I elaborate on its meanings in my later section on desire.

responses. Girth & Mirth San Francisco was founded the following month, and similar groups formed quickly throughout the United States. In 1985, an umbrella organization, Associated Bigmen's Clubs (ABC), was founded in Seattle. By 1996, big men's clubs existed in the United States as well as several in Europe, Canada, and Australia.

The Board of Directors of San Francisco's Girth & Mirth Club wrote in 1996 that the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the big men's movement "has as much importance in the bigmen's community as do other commemorations of historic events in the gay community as a whole" (p. 6). The Board of Directors understands the movement itself in identity-based terms: "gay and bisexual bigmen, and those who prefer bigmen, have cast off the shackles of hiding and insecurity and now revel in their proudly accepted identity" (p. 6). The identity category of "bigmen" is not uncontested, as my later exploration of the relationship between the big men's movement and the bear subculture endeavors to demonstrate. This political manifestation of the big men's community co-exists with the established big men's contact/pornographic media in the sense that Girth & Mirth clubs, for the most part, have provided the backbone of the big men's movement's social networks.

Prior to 1990, the big men's movement was composed mostly of local networks. Local chapters of Girth & Mirth bound individuals together. The 1985 creation of the ABC hub permitted local clubs to include "national" information in their newsletters. The foundation of this umbrella organization facilitated nationwide events almost immediately. In 1986, the first annual gathering of the big men's movement was held in northern California, sponsored by Girth & Mirth of San Francisco. Called "Convergence," this conference continues to meet through the present. Prior to Convergence, there had been no social network outlet for the big men's movement beyond local gatherings. In 1988, the first non-newsletter magazine devoted exclusively to big men and issues of intentional weight gain, *XL*, began a publication run of a few months.<sup>4</sup> In 1990, *Big Ad* and *Bulk Male* began publishing and distributing nation-wide, followed by *Husky* and *Heavy Duty*. In April 1992, the first annual "Encouragecon" conference took place in Pennsylvania. "Encouragecon" was the first post-local convention for men in the big men's movement to meet, discuss, and facilitate erotically-charged weight gain and weight gain encouragement. I will return to the subject of gaining/encouraging later in this paper.

In the mid-1990s, two internet websites were established. Both of these websites have contributed significantly to the development of the big men's community. Chubnet, founded by a chubby gay male couple in San Jose, California, is the larger of these two sites, with many hypertext links to individual web pages and other resources. GainRWeb, set up in 1996 by a gainer/encourager couple in

<sup>4</sup>*XL* was revived years later under the title *XXXLNT*. Averill Dupois notes in *Big Ad* 47 that *XXXLNT* has been a dependable resource in the maintenance of the gaining/encouraging subculture's longevity ("Sliding Scale: Chewing" p. 14).

Columbus, Ohio, focuses exclusively on facilitating the gaining/encouraging sub-culture, through a listing of personals and both fiction and nonfiction stories. Both feature personals, stories, and hypertext links. Given cyberspace's breakneck speed, there is a high likelihood that resource-heavy websites will continue to proliferate. These internet websites coexist fruitfully with their print counterparts. A video pornography media has also taken root, with two production companies in particular—P. R. Simon and Maximum Density Productions—creating videos and advertising these videos in the big men's magazine media.

The big men's movement illustrates a particular development in contemporary culture, which Henning Bech (1996) has named tele-urban (p. 90), and which Michael Warner (1993) has identified, with a different emphasis, as translocal (p. xii; p. xxx n15).<sup>5</sup> Within the big men's movement, the formation of collective sexual identities is dependent not solely upon local sites of social interaction but also upon voicemail telephone-based contact services, the internet-relay channel network (or "IRC," in existence since 1989), internet websites and internet homepages. Though internet domains are unrestrictedly open to those with computers, access to computers themselves is dependent upon capital possession.<sup>6</sup>

There is, thus, a privatization of the means of identity and community formation within the big men's movement. Social interaction fostered within these translocal/tele-urban channels is atomized. Individuals are linked to other individuals outside of the actual, bodily, and collective presence of like-minded people. At the same time that this collective identity/desire is decollectivized by the atomization of social interaction implicit within both electronic- and print-media, the tele-urban nature of such minority community formation enables individuals to locate extremely specific kinds of information and stimulus. Tele-urban communication and interaction make the achievement of such specificity possible. As minority community formation shifts from physical to post-topical sites, an interesting comparison can be made between the *collectivist* imperative organizing most social movements and the inclination toward *specialization*, which certainly fuels the big men's movement.

In other words, these tele-urban channels have de-centered traditional urban grids from the centrality of their position within modern social and sexual systems of traffic and exchange.<sup>7</sup> Micro-electronics have enabled a post-topical creation

<sup>5</sup>By "tele-urban," Bech (1996) suggests "a telemediated social world of strangers, as we know it from the spaces constituted around television and video screens" (p. 90). Warner's (1993) investment in the "translocal" appears to be offered in part as a variation on the idea of the "international," though with attention placed on the notion that specific locales share particular characteristics or problems across inter- and intra-national borders.

<sup>6</sup>Such capital possession might be economic, though it also might be cultural—the institutional enclave of many universities, for example, provides students, staff, and faculty with internet access whether or not economic resources would otherwise accord them such privileges. Even given this point, university enrollment in the United States is too often predicated on baseline economic resources. It is important to note that the economic resources required for the creation of a homepage are far less formidable than those required for the creation of a newsletter or magazine. Electronic publishing is less expensive than print publishing, though access to the internet continues to be class-determined in a way that access to pornography, even of a subcultural variety, may not be.

of subcultural space—space without the material attachments of place. The telephone has been re-activated through voicemail to engender community formation. Scanners allow facsimiles of photographs to be sent onto computer screens and websites. Video systems allow people to have sex with each other's moving images. These technologies permit the development of a considerable degree of subcultural specificity, which the urban grids composed of streets, parks, bars, bathrooms, and other sexual zones cannot provide in quite the same way or with the same intensity and speed. Decollectivization represents the decline of a certain structuring of homosexuality in modernity, while it heralds the birth of other structurings of homosexuality.

### MASCULINITY-AS-IDIOM: GAY MALE RECONTEXTUALIZATIONS OF MASCULINITY

“Masculinity” can be interpreted as the aggregation of masculine norms and idioms into gender performance, as exhibited either by men or women. I understand “masculinism” as a system of behaviors, affects, and institutions that aggressively advances the domination of men as a class over subjects deemed other than—thus *less than*—male: women, transgendered people, and assorted sexually dissident men. Stanley Aronowitz (1995) writes of masculinism's naturalizing function: “Its main feature is to merge putative biological difference with territorial privilege” (p. 314). Later in the same essay he writes: “... masculinism may be defined in relation to the essentialist ideology of biological determination. It imputes male superiority on the basis of physical strength and/or gender differentiation with respect to sexual reproduction, and posits gender-determined mental propensities” (pp. 316–17). One language of masculinism is certainly masculinity, though many performances of masculinity are not directed toward upholding codes and imperatives of masculinism. Gay leathermen and various other gay male subcultures valorize the hyper-masculine, but the argument that such valorization somehow facilitates the functioning of masculinism as a “politics of domination” is highly questionable.<sup>8</sup>

In short, masculinity is not masculinism. For many people invested in the study of gender, this maxim is accepted plainly. Nonetheless, it benefits from repetition. The functioning of what Judith Butler (1990) has termed the “heterosexual matrix” (p. 151 n6) locks men into the gender performance of masculinity, organized in complementary yet hierarchically-advantaged relation to women

<sup>7</sup> Ashworth et al.'s (1988) “The Red-Light District in the West European City” illustrates similar points regarding prostitution. Of particular note are Ashworth et al.'s description of differences between urban “red-light” districts (where sex workers are visible) and telephone-accessible networks of sex workers (who do not participate in street traffic, and who are consequently not publicly visible). (p. 206)

<sup>8</sup> The term “politics of domination” is bell hooks's (1989). hooks fleshes this concept out in *Talking Back*, pp. 175–76.

performing femininity. Butler's matrix stresses that these linkages of "sex" and "gender" are routed into two asymmetrically positioned, compound binaries. In turn, they achieve intelligibility only through *heterosexual* terms of expression and reference. Butler's "heterosexual matrix" elucidates the foundations of hegemonic constructions of sex and gender as well as their mechanics of subject-intelligibility and subject-recognition.

To valence any "one" of these terms in a direction counter to the heterosexual matrix's processional functionality is to assault the descriptive force of the matrix, and to render the term in question less than comprehensible. The queer masculinities of gay men, for example, often signify an hypermasculine excess that extends the imaginary isomorphism of "men" and "masculinity," yet fails to deliver the goods into the heterosexual economy. The presence of homosexual desire within masculine men throttles and disturbs social relations as conceived within the terms of the heterosexual matrix. I am not interested here in scrutinizing the idealization of masculinity in post-World War II gay male social and sexual cultures as much as I am invested in acknowledging a dislink from the heterosexual matrix on the part of masculine gay men.

The idealization of masculinity is not totalizing within the big men's magazine media and community, but it is a primary means of organizing desire for big men. I will later attempt to explain how this masculinization establishes and organizes itself. The pressures attendant upon such a masculinization are many. To begin with, the immediate cultural associations with fat men are often associations of effeminacy. Michael Moon (in Sedgwick & Moon, 1994b) describes the confusing reception facing fat men in United States popular culture of the 1950s with some questions:

'Why was John Wayne's big flabby butt taken as yet another sign of his virility while my aging male piano teacher's very similarly shaped posterior was read as that of a "fat-assed pansy"...? What was the difference between a hermaphrodite—a figure still represented in freak shows at the local country fair in my childhood—and a male movie star like Victor Mature who was considered hypermasculine ...?' (p. 216).

Clearly, fat men have an uneven purchase on "masculinity" within American culture. Scholars of male homosexuality would not be glib to assume that, in a masculinity-driven gay male cultural context, this uneven purchase would eventually precipitate a concerted effort to *masculinize* fat men. Indeed, as much of the following commentary and criticism will show, it is precisely this kind of effort that has been made.

## BEARS AND BIG MEN

The idealization of masculine idioms within gay male leather cultures in the post-World War II era is historically extensive and deep. Leather and s/m

subcultures have provided noteworthy examples of such masculinizations. As an emergent sub-set of the leather subculture—among other subcultures—the bear movement achieved a disseminated presence around 1987, with the original publication of *Bear* magazine. Though a closed definition of “bears” does not exist, the term can be said generally to refer to gay or bisexual men with a good deal of body hair. While physique is not specified within the movement, the bear aesthetic tends toward a bulky, thick, and not necessarily gym-toned muscularity and, importantly, includes many big men deemed fat and denigrated by the mainstream of gay male social and community networks.<sup>9</sup> Though the big men's movement organizations' history dates back to 1976, the arrival of *Bear* magazine in 1987 contributed importantly to the emerging big men's media. The big men's movement draws extensively on the erotic codes constituting the bear subculture, itself an offshoot of gay men's leather and s/m cultures. All the major big men's magazines (*American Bear*, *Big Ad*, *Bulk Male*, *Heavy Duty*, and *Husky*) were founded in or after 1990. These magazines draw upon overlapping codes of masculinity.

In the January/February 1994 issue of *Bulk Male*, Jay Hollin and Van Lynn Floyd debate the identification of “bears” as a typology of gay men. While Hollin protests the division of “big” men from “bears” in club networks, he also insists that “bearness” is ontological, and not a “state of mind” (p. 11). Hollin writes: “These skinny men running around calling themselves bears are full of it,” (p. 11) further understanding “bear” as a classification referring to men outside of the gay male aesthetic mainstream. Hollin does not want to have to separate big men from bears, although he clearly rejects understanding smaller men as bears. Floyd's analysis is a little more universalizing. He insists only upon a common denominator of hairiness (p. 11). Otherwise, Floyd situates his definition of bearness in the “rebellion against the emphasis on physical perfection, which pervades that gay community” (p. 11)—a rebellion that aligns bears with big men and their chasers as one deviant coupling and older men and their younger admirers as another.

Another conversation adds to the cultural and the taxonomic considerations between the categories “big men” and “bears.” In the September/October 1994 issue of *Bulk Male*, an exchange between John Peebles and Truck Mitchell dramatizes the differences between the bear network and the big men's network. Peebles argues that the “hybrid” and “domesticated” bear movement has invaded big men's club territory, drawing upon a much publicized event-scheduling disagreement between the Girth and Mirth Club of the Delaware Valley (Pennsylvania) and a

<sup>9</sup>In his essay “Bear Roots,” Ron Suresha (1997) examines the development of the bear subculture in San Francisco. He notes that in San Francisco, the circa 1990 participation of “Girth-n-Mirthers” in the Bear Hug group sex parties held at the Lone Star Saloon altered conceptions of bears from inside and outside the bear community. Following 1990, bears began to be seen and self-conceptualized more commonly as *big men* (p. 48). See also Les Wright's (1997a) “A Concise History of Self-Identifying Bears” for a broad-based cultural history of the development of the bear subculture.

Philadelphia bear organization (1994, p. 10).<sup>10</sup> Peebles questions the term “bear” on grounds of appearance, insisting that “real” bears are big and hairy. Though the metaphysics of authenticity fueling Peebles’s tirade is discouraging, he does return his critique to body politics:

Somehow, naming yourself a “bear” has come to mean that you don’t have to face the fact [that] you’re fat. It mitigates the stigma of being overweight and therefore obscures being “out” as a gay CHUBBY or, for those of you who don’t like that term, FAT gay man. Coming to terms with your fatness, and knowing that it can be an attractive attribute, is what G&M is all about, the basis on which we were founded, and what we’ve been working for all these years (1994, p. 11).

Peebles continues, noting the intense commercialization of the bear subculture within the larger gay community as well as the adoption of bear terminology and imagery within the big men’s movement. Peebles writes of “the recent formula: bears equal masculine equals sexy” (p. 12). This equation, as I have been stressing, provides the central—though not the exclusive—idiom behind the construction of big men within the big men’s magazine media. The common denominator of rugged, hairy, bulky masculinity, idiomized into effect by decades of gay male recontextualizations of masculinity, is distilled in the case of the “bear,” while in the case of big men, it derives much of its sexual force *in proximity* to the “bear.” (I hope that this summary does not suggest a one-way street of influence. In fact, a strong case can be made for the existence of a more dialectical relation between the two groups. See Suresha’s (1997) historical account [summarized in footnote 9], which makes the important point that what has been understood as “bear” in San Francisco, at the very least, is itself influenced by the participation of big men in bear social spaces.)

A response to Peebles’s article was written by Truck Mitchell (1994). Mitchell acknowledges the conflicts between the bear and big men’s movements as legitimate, arguing that bears and big men alike are on the receiving end of discrimination within the gay male community and dominant culture. Mitchell’s appeal is couched against identity and toward affinity, though he does not acknowledge the important criticisms that Peebles makes regarding the fixture of masculinity within the social mobilization of big men as erotic. Mitchell’s big tent, in fact, rests on the very lever of masculinity, of an affinity-based goodwill put into effect by “big, masculine, intimidating men ... standing tall and saying to the world ‘you bet I’m gay ...

<sup>10</sup>The debate over the scheduling mishap continued into letters to the editor of *Bulk Male* 5.1. Eric Jennings, (1995) the President of the Great Lakes Bears, and Ron Smith, (1995) the President of the Delaware Valley Bears, both find fault with John Peebles’s “unsubstantiated gossip” (Smith) and offer attempts to clarify their version of the schisms at hand. Jennings focuses on a collective bear/big men’s Chicago fund-raiser event that split apart; Smith on the accumulation of two years of non-communication between a bear group and a Girth and Mirth chapter. What emerges is the juxtaposition of several contested accounts, difficult to pull apart and make intelligible. What also emerges is the fact that there are important and enduring functions of social organization for big men, which do not accrue in quite such a vital way for men self-identified as “bears” and vice-versa. While these two appellations share much ground—and often overlap—they differ in terms of the histories that their participants bring to their social networks.



You got a problem with that?" (1994, p. 13). Homophobia here is countered by a reliance on a normative (if excessive) masculinity. Mitchell bypasses Peebles's important criticism of the equivalence of the bear subculture and masculine idioms, in turn relying upon this very equivalence as a source of collective pride and social realist defense against homophobia.

David May's short February 1997 article, "The International Bear Rendezvous '97," crafts a social history of the bear movement. May reiterates many of the points Mitchell stresses in his 1994 response to John Peebles—of bear semiotics and sexuality as an exhibition of "both ... queerness and ... manhood" (1997, p. 22). May understands the arrival of the bear phenomenon as "an oasis of manhood on an otherwise sterile and sexless landscape" (p. 23); a celebration of men "once again looking like men" who can be "admired, wanted and loved *as men*" (p. 23; italics mine). May inscribes bear sexuality as "primal," as "archetypal," and as "animal," in each instance opposing it to the denaturalizing effects of mainstream gay male culture on gay men. May quotes Jason Macario of the Bears of San Francisco, who hypothesizes that many bears did not come out as gay until the bear movement emerged. These were "... men who didn't identify with the gay stereotypes or with what they saw in the media, and went off to get married instead of being queer. Now they find that they can identify with Bears and their masculine attitude and still be queer" (p. 24). Truck Mitchell writes in a separate 1995 essay for *Bulk Male* an interpretation of big men as the epitome of manhood, as "real," transcultural, and transhistorical, "powerful, sexy, virile, and an icon of our masculine identity worthy of our adoration" (p. 14).

The political implications of a reliance upon normative or excessive masculinity as rationale for inclusion and respect are significant, and, I would suggest, cannot but further marginalize non-masculine gay and bisexual men. Men performing masculinity do not deserve respect or inclusion in dominant cultural discourses simply by being sufficiently masculine. Throughout observations such as those by May and Mitchell, bear masculinity is comprehended as "natural" male gender expression, unaffected and unaltered by cultural norms of attractiveness. Mainstream gay male culture is assailed in the process as an inherently denaturalizing force. Such claims mistakenly read the emergence of *any* gender expression as something other than constructed, foundationalized by a tense piecing-together of an ideal into an impossible relation to "real" bodies. May's interesting explorations of "queer manhood"—which have many parallels within the big men's movement—are lost amid the metaphysical essentialism invested in assertions of primal or archetypal masculinity. Though effeminacy remains unmentioned in May's essay, surely, as the antipode to masculinity, it can be understood as the apex of denaturalization and affectation. In practice, the bear movement—along with the big men's movement—is not composed solely by such deterministic, essentialist fragments.

In *Bear* magazine, signifiers of masculinity are foregrounded, though without the camp excess and shaved bodies attached to such signifiers within mainstream gay male pornography. *Bear* has published with two subtitles: "naked hairy homo smut" and "masculinity ... without the trappings." The first subtitle embraces

the anormativity of homosexuality and the perversity of pornography, while the second acknowledges the sexual force of masculine idioms without the “trappings.” But what are the “trappings”? The “trappings” can be understood as more accouterment-dependent forms of masculine sex between masculine men. In this interpretation, the “trappings” are toys and accessories, and not gender-based roles or behaviors. But the divorce of “masculinity” from its “trappings” can also demonstrate that masculinity need not operate within the larger heterosexual matrix. In this guise, as a critique of the solidification of the dominant cultural heterosexual matrix and its gendered components, masculinity “without the trappings” can be figured in affinity with feminist critical efforts.

Beyond the important matter of displacing gay masculine men from the heterosexual matrix, “masculinity without the trappings” is a powerful and ironic constructivist statement, because, in effect, it is the “trappings” that are eroticized in *Bear*—not structurally secured forms of masculinity. Simultaneously “masculinity without the trappings” can also be interpreted as an embrace of a “basic,” thus “natural” male sexuality, lost amid the grooming rituals through which gay men put themselves. Whatever the editorial intentions, *Bear* magazine’s subtitle is an interesting and thought-provoking one, and it can be twisted to make different kinds of sense.

### THE BIG MEN’S MAGAZINE MEDIA

The bear and big men’s magazines publish in a similar format, interspersing photographs and pronographic stories with columns on health issues and political organizing, national and international listings of organizations and drawings. Through the inclusion of contact addresses for organizations, these magazines return the imagined big men’s community to localized sites of group formation.

*Bulk Male*, founded in 1990 and published through Big Bull Productions in Denver, Colorado, is one of two distinctive publications of the big men’s movement.<sup>11</sup> In the premier issue of *Bulk Male*, publisher Ritch Bergland (1991) writes of the purpose of the magazine: to provide a “... unifying voice to let everyone know what’s going on in the rest of the country and world” as well as “to bring you the world’s hottest large men and their counterparts” (p. 11). Bergland writes of the need for *Bulk Male* in light of the “direct discrimination toward large men from mainstream gay life (and the rest of the world for that matter)” (p. 11). Published six times a year, *Bulk Male* draws on erotic codes similar to *Bear*. Models in *Bulk Male* are costumed as knights, football players, truckers, hunters, and mountain men. Each of these fantasy positions is writ large within gay male pornographic conventions. The overwhelming majority of the models in *Bulk Male* are white, between 30 and 50 years of age, with facial hair. *Bulk Male*’s main purpose is to recharge fat gay men as sexually valuable. This recharge is delivered through the valuation of fat men as masculine.

<sup>11</sup>In 1996, Ritch Bergland and Big Bull Productions relocated to Sausalito, California.

*Big Ad*, also founded in 1990, approaches its mission of valuing fat gay men quite differently. Though also featuring semi-dressed and naked big men, *Big Ad* declines to show genitalia. The men featured in *Big Ad* are often considerably bigger than the men in *Bulk Male*. There is a break between the idealization of masculine idioms in *Bear* and *Bulk Male* and a lesser degree of such idealization in *Big Ad*. For the most part, *Big Ad* eroticizes fat men while retaining mass itself as a primary and shared erotic denominator. Further, *Big Ad* politicizes fat oppression explicitly. *Big Ad* also approaches the subject of erotic weight-gain regularly and consistently. *Big Ad*, like *Bulk Male*, is fashioned as a contact magazine; unlike *Bulk Male*, however, the explicit focus of *Big Ad* is not pornographic. Big Ad Productions in 1996 launched another publication, *Heavy Duty*, which follows a format closer to *Bulk Male*'s.

*Big Ad*'s commitment to politicizing body image has engendered a linkage of political affinity between fat women and fat gay men. Lee Martindale, a heterosexual size rights activist from Texas, writes a regular column in *Big Ad*. Larry Woolwine, the editor of *Big Ad*, explained to me that his association with *Dimensions*, a magazine for large-framed women and their male admirers, led him to an acquaintanceship with Martindale. Since 1993, she has written a column for *Big Ad* in almost every issue, discussing a range of activities, from letter-writing campaigns to alliance building with a spectrum of organizations. Martindale, who publishes a size-rights periodical called *Rump Parliament*, is a part of the larger fat activist community within which *Big Ad* clearly situates itself.

Alongside these porn/contact magazines, club newsletters have provided another cohering force. These newsletters are important for their documentation of local events and their solicitation of collective participation. Club newsletters are available only within existing membership networks, and do not enter the commercial market. While big men remain under-eroticized in mainstream gay male publications, *Out* magazine ran a feature story on the big men's community in 1996, and the British magazine *Him* in 1993 also devoted an issue to a series of sympathetic portrayals of the big men's movement.<sup>12</sup>

### GAINING/ENCOURAGING

One particular subset of the big men's movement attaches erotic significance to gaining weight. As I mentioned previously, the gaining/encouraging newsletter *XL* (later *XXXLNT*) first published in 1988. In the mid-1990s, a newsletter titled *Porkers and Gainers Gazette* commenced publication. *Big Ad* in the early 1990s set up a 1-900 telephone voicemail service with recordings of men's

<sup>12</sup>This is an appropriate moment to note that the big men's movement has expanded to western Europe. A London-based newsletter "Bulk Delivery" provides a contact resource for big men, bears, and their admirers. Girth & Mirth Belgium, a particularly active club chapter, has produced a publication titled *The Fat Angel Times*. Both have been in circulation since the early 1990s. See *Him*, issue 70 (April 1993): 17-25, 46-47.

gaining/encouraging fantasies and available contact services. Sample recordings from the voicemail service are regularly transcribed into print and used as advertisements for the 1-900 line in the big men's magazine media. From the transcribed sample recordings come a range of accounts of the erotics attached to gaining. These autocitational accounts are extraordinarily useful in providing a kind of ethnographic information about the linkages between gaining as a practice and the recontextualization of large male bodies as masculine.

I will cite two of these advertisements as examples of the nexus between gaining weight and performing masculinity. Witness the following voicemail notice:

I love working out but I love eating even more. Come turn this big beefy powerlifter into a 300 or 400 pound fat moose. Man, just talking about food and how big you're gonna stuff me is a real turn on to this big, beefy powerlifter (from voicemail recording).

The enduring relationship between the eroticization of weight gain and the eroticization of muscle mass is foregrounded in this voicemail message and in much of the pornography surrounding gaining. A large percentage of men soliciting encouragement to gain weight cite their musculature, their jock histories, and their football-playing pasts. The appellation "ex-jock" is common. Muscle-building efforts within bodybuilding and gym subcultures, clearly, concern themselves with a particular kind of weight gain. Fat-building within the gaining/encouraging subculture draws on a tradition of muscle mass building *as a masculine activity* to masculinize activities of nonmuscular weight gain. Other body parts strongly fetishized within the gaining subculture have very specific gendered valences. The eroticization of the "beer belly," for example, is often tied to the eroticization of older men, sometimes identified as "daddies." This can be read as the reworking of a fetishization of masculinity upon stomachs not gym-toned but bulky. This isolated fetish-object (the beer belly, overloaded with masculine signficatory presence though rarely certified as erotically valuable or valued) holds intense fetishistic meaning within the gainer subculture.

In addition to its masculinization of fat bodies, the gaining subculture also mobilizes in part around the trope of disgust. This re-significatory impulse is emblemized by the following voicemail message, transcribed into print and published as an advertisement for the 1-900 line:

A few years ago, at ... 195 lbs., I had a muscular body and worked part time in a club dancing on the bar at night in a tight, leather outfit. I started gaining and got up to 220, added to my outfit and wore a girdle under it to hold in the fat. One night when I was close to 230, I was up there dancing and just busted that outfit, girdle, and all that fat was just hanging out for everyone to see. I lost my part time job because of that. I'm ISO a hard bodied guy to squeeze me into that old leather outfit and a tight girdle and take me out with his friends and then squeeze me till I burst right out and he lets everyone see all that fat hanging out and they all get disgusted at the sight of my fat just busting right out (*Bulk Male* 5.1, 2).

On GainRWeb, an internet site featuring information, photographs, and fantasies of gainers and encouragers, the coincidence of weight-gaining activities and public transgression is central to a collective erotic imagination. Fantasies of extended

eating sessions in all-you-can-eat restaurants, of public presentations of fat bodies on beaches and in other public zones figure prominently in the endeavor of *seeking* disgust or amazement as a response to fat bodies. The figuring of a disgusted reception of fat bodies as a form of erotic gratification suggests that gaining and encouraging fantasies do derive some erotic force from their re-working of cultural processes of corporeal abjection.

In *The Poetics of Transgression*, Peter White and Allon Stallybrass (1986) urge a careful historicization of Mikhail Bakhtin's readings of the carnival and its "grotesque realism" (p. 16). White and Stallybrass complicate Bakhtin's assertions by insisting upon the symbolic role that certain overdetermined categories of people and activities have played in European bourgeois culture as "grotesque" or "low-Other." Among other categories, White and Stallybrass mention the carnival, the gypsy, and the lumpenproletariat (p. 20), and hone in on the history of the pig. White and Stallybrass understand the grotesque as composed of "three symbolic processes" (demonization, inversion, and hybridization [p. 56]). In so doing, they move beyond Terry Eagleton's reading of the grotesque within the carnival as "a permissible rupture of hegemony" (quoted in White and Stallybrass, p. 13).

The nexus of weight-gain and disgust indicates that the gaining subculture is invested in a hybridization of the codes of "grotesque realism" as they foundationalize fat bodies as abject. The symbolic process of "inversion" does not tell the entire story, largely because the very abjection of fat bodies provides a share of erotic charge within the gaining subculture. Inversion by itself would indicate a simple recasting of values and codes attached to fat bodies, while hybridization implies a reworking of said values and codes in a manner that is not only embedded but also invested in the terms of its history of abjection. This history is mobilized as a means of intensifying the erotics of gaining weight beyond the simple inversion of value and meaning. Within the big men's media, gaining receives some attention. *Big Ad* regularly runs how-to discussions of gaining techniques and further investigates the psychodynamics of gaining.<sup>13</sup> While *Bulk Male* is not characterized by a continual weaving of issues around gaining into their pornographic medium, the magazine has explored gaining upon occasion.

A recent attempt to analyze gaining and encouraging outside of the big men's media/movement was written by Richard Klein. Klein's *Eat Fat*, published in 1996, is written in declared sympathy with the size-acceptance movement. *Eat Fat* verges on poetry at times, following up textual readings with explorations of cultural meanings attached to fat people. On the motivations attached to gaining

<sup>13</sup>See Averill Dupois's ongoing "Sliding Scale" column in *Big Ad*. Of particular interest is his "Primer for Encouragers" (1996a) in *Big Ad* 44, "Cutting it Down to Whys" (1996c) in *Big Ad* 41 and "Howzaboutit: A Basic Primer for Gainers" (1996d) in *Big Ad* 43. In these and other articles, Dupois examines the psychodynamics of gaining, medical research on gaining, and other matters of relevance to gainers and encouragers. See also Randy Summer's "Deliberate Weight Gaining and Encouraging" in the June/July 1993 *Big Ad*. See as well Phil Barrigan's "The Anatomy of a Gainer" (*Big Ad* June/July 1993) and Blkpigbear's (1997) "Sexy Food" (*Big Ad* 49) for two further accounts.

weight among gay male gainers, Klein (1996) writes:

“Waddling” seems to be the crucial term here, the verbal equivalent of whatever it is that turns these guys on. They love the waddle, the side-to-side movement of fat bodies on short legs. Fat fantasies of waddling flesh feed the erotic imagination of these men, who love the swaying rhythm of fat, and the jiggle—the jerky, gently, lightly moving that makes fat flop and fly (p. 220).

This account is noteworthy for its attempt to streamline encouraging/gaining desires into one particular appearance of fat men as “waddling,” “swaying,” with a “jerky” jiggle. At the same time, there is an odd quasi-anthropological distancing of the author from the desires of the men within the gaining subculture, as evidenced by the words “whatever it is that turns these guys on.” Such phrasing re-marginalizes gaining desires by implicating that such desires are inexplicable. Later in the same chapter, Klein speculates on the etiology of the desire to gain weight or to encourage weight gain: “Perhaps the erotic pleasure, the pleasure of feeding or being fed, has its origins in some infantile fantasy or early experience of being attracted to fat men” (p. 220). While acknowledging that it is not necessary to formulate such etiological genealogies in order to understand gay male attraction to big men, Klein seems to be invested in precisely this kind of a genealogical mapping—relating it, in turn, to his own experiences as a child surrounded by fat adults. While I applaud Klein for placing himself within his text as an embodied subject, I believe that this personalizing theorization ends up simplifying instead of respecting the complexity of desires around intentional weight gain and weight gain encouragement.

## **TWO PARALLEL MOMENTS: HIV/AIDS AND ROSEANNE**

The effects of HIV/AIDS on gay and bisexual men in the United States have been severe and intense. Any number of aesthetics, ideologies, and lifestyles have been transformed by AIDS and the community-wide suffering that it has engendered. Both the bear and the big men’s movements, representing alternatives to mainstream gay male culture, have flourished since AIDS became an epidemic. Les Wright (1997b) notes: “The rise of the bear movement is inseparable from the AIDS epidemic. This [inseparability] includes the first broadly accepted sexualization of abundant body weight; in the early days thin equaled sick or dying from AIDS, while fat equaled healthy, uninfected” (p. 15). Ron Suresha (1997), also commenting on this phenomenon, writes that “by the mid-1980s, the slim-waisted look became quite unfashionable, as the lives of most gay urban Americans had been touched by the loss of loved ones to AIDS” (p. 47). Reflecting on the parallels between tuberculosis in the mid-nineteenth century and AIDS in contemporary times, Elizabeth Kelly and Kate Kane (1998) write of “forms of denial operating in the generously fleshed bear body in which amplitude and health once again cohere. The bear—at least iconographically—embodies comfort, security, and safety” (p. 75).

Note that in each of these quotations, bears' bodies are interpreted as healthy and uninfected *on the basis of their bulkiness, their fatness*. Generous size is a counterpoint or opposite to signs of "sickness." HIV-positive status is comprehended as thinness. It is not the bear's hairiness or stance that is referenced as "healthy," but his size. Replacing girth with muscles, similar observations can be made regarding the gym cult within mainstream gay male culture over the last decade. There are, however, other possible reasons why bear and big men's communities have grown as a result of the epidemic. Les Wright (1997b) argues that in San Francisco in the 1980s, bear social space was a kind of intersubcultural haven (pp. 11–12), where all sorts of men culturally marginal to the gay male mainstream could feel comfortable and desirable. In an era in which a disease has ravaged lives and institutions, the value of such counter-hegemonic spaces cannot be minimized. Bear and big men's movements in the 1980s responded to AIDS by replacing the imperative to achieve a homogenized, singular corporeal ideal with another—the imperative to collectively and individually regard one's "self" and its body as sexy and desired. Both movements have also provided institutional apparatus for such cultural work, through the development of networks, memberships, social codes, and physical spaces.

In his essay "Academics as Bears," Eric Rofes (1997) comments on the *constructivist* utility of working-class or blue-collar aesthetics within bear social spaces as fetish-objects of masculinity. The favored iconographies of the big men's magazine media consist of contemporary working-class aesthetics, and do not signify membership in the working class. The cultural resuscitation of working-class aesthetics and bodies—clearly, overwhelmingly white ones—in bear and big men's subcultures came during the cultural moment of *Roseanne*. On the television sitcom *Roseanne*, Roseanne Barr endeavored to present working-class bodies, lives, and values in a non-abjected, non-dismissible manner. Barr and John Goodman, her sitcom husband, were fat. Class and size, so often intertwined in U.S. cultural discourses, were reclaimed in *Roseanne* as experiences that demanded respect and empathy. Barr made unfettered white working-class life and drama humorous, refusing to accept the televisual pigeonholing of working-class people so pervasive in dominant U.S. prime-time television.

Barr and Goodman's bodies found a cultural home within this working-class terrain. In the United States, fat bodies are over-associated with working-class people and are inimical to status climbing. However facile the adoption of working-class aesthetics within the bear and big men's movements may be, this adoption is clearly no accident. The bear and big men's communities have largely grown in opposition to mainstream gay male culture. Given the alienations bears and big men experience from the overwhelmingly middle-class representations, ideals and aesthetics of the gay male mainstream, it is not surprising that an oppositional class-based calibration of aesthetics and aesthetic evaluation would grow in value and applicability. This process, however, is hardly simple. If Eric Rofes is correct in assuming that a sizeable number of bears are solidly middle-class men in

working-class drag, then it would appear that to some degree bear aesthetics further the erotic reliance on working-class masculinities across generations of male homosexual writing and cultural fantasy.

Some of these considerations complicate simple summations, but they do not disqualify an important observation: the coincidence of the revalencing of size and class within sectors of the U.S. gay/bisexual male population during the parallel cultural moments of HIV/AIDS and *Roseanne* is not random. Cultural shifts in the meanings of class and social eruptions as a result of the spread of HIV/AIDS have significantly textured the evolution of gay and bisexual male cultures.

### FEMINIST AND LESBIAN BODY POLITICS

The understanding of fat oppression as an issue of concern to feminism has been vocalized with some regularity from the 1970s through the present. In 1973, the Fat Underground (Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran) wrote the "Fat Liberation Manifesto." In 1983, Lisa Schoenfelder and Barb Wieser co-edited *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*. Throughout, there has been a specifically lesbian emphasis on this question of fat oppression, noted by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994b) in her treatise on fat in *Tendencies*.<sup>14</sup> Such an emphasis can be traced in part to the immediate radicalism of 1970s lesbian-feminism, which strove among its many political projects to question an extraordinary range of cultural and subcultural conventions. Such a politics led its practitioners to examine not just those oft-cited major vectors of power within contemporary culture—race, gender, class, sexuality, and production, to name a few—but others as well.

This politics returns often to the physical body, as both source of knowledge (a position exemplified by Audre Lorde's (1978) *Uses of the Erotic* and Adrienne Rich's (1976) *Of Woman Born*) as well as a site of variable reception and contestation. Given this commitment, lesbian-feminism produced an incredibly ambitious, continually radical politics. Feminist fat activist Vivian Mayer (1983) analyzes the ground shared by lesbian-feminism and radical fat activism as in part due to the fact that "lesbian feminism offered a haven wherein a fat woman could affirm her beleaguered sense of womanhood and could almost forget that she was fat" (p. xiv). Mayer also notes one powerful homosocial effect of lesbian-feminism on fat women in the mid-1970s: "The companionship of other women offered fat women a social environment in which—often for the first time in their lives—they could be loved for their intelligence and personalities, and their 'ugliness' according to conventional standards could be overlooked" (p. xiv).

<sup>14</sup>Though a number of the essays, poems, and other narratives in Schoenfelder and Wieser's (1983) anthology are written by lesbians, one essay in particular deals with the nexus of fat politics and lesbian politics: thunder's "coming out: notes on fat lesbian pride." Sedgwick (1994b), unfortunately, does not elaborate beyond the following descriptive statement: "It is with lesbians ... that much of the original and liberatory thinking on fat has originated" (p. 204 n18). *Fat Girl*, described briefly later in this section, attests to some particular valences of lesbian desire for fat women.



Vivian Mayer's foreword to Schoenfielder and Wieser's (1983) anthology provides a synopsis of the history of "the first ten years of the feminist fat liberation movement" (p. x). Differentiating feminist fat liberation from the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance—previously the National Association to Aid Fat Americans—(NAAFA), Mayer claims that, in 1983, "feminist fat liberation is the only fat voice that offers a cogent and radical analysis of fat oppression" (p. x). Mayer provides a chronological account of the birth of feminist fat liberation in Los Angeles, which she started with Judy Freespirit. After breaking from the Los Angeles chapter of NAAFA in response to its unwillingness to confront the medical establishment, Mayer and Freespirit continued organizing until 1977, faltering then in response to a number of internal conflicts within the Los Angeles radical feminist community (p. xv).

Feminist politicization of body size has endured within United States feminisms since the second-wave feminist mobilizations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Boston Women's Health Collective's (1992) *Our Bodies, Ourselves* iconized a certain relationship of the body to politics, decimating the Cartesian mind/body duality while insisting upon the importance of producing knowledges of the body—among other kinds of knowledges—from positions of embodied feminist urgency. Body size and consciousness have been key elements of a number of feminist conversations. A continual feminist politicization of body size has been launched in a range of vernaculars and for a range of publics.

One index of the centrality of body image to feminism can be found within *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is a paradigmatic example of organic intellectual activity as described by Antonio Gramsci (1971). Though Gramsci understood organic intellectual activity to be rooted in communities based in Marxist-conceived "classes," the idea of the organic intellectual can be appropriated from this model in order to describe the work of cultural actors whose intellectual and political work is directed toward communities of allegiance as opposed to communities of accreditation. The 1992 edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* opens with an eight-page chapter on body image. The fact that a canonical U.S. guide to women's health and well-being starts with a chapter on body image is telling, and indicates the degree to which contemporary North American feminist perspectives of health *begin* with the body as a political, material subject; a subject constituted by and through representation. The boxed essay "Being Fat in an Antifat Society" in the first chapter draws extensively on the insights of Judith Stein and Rae Rae Sears of Boston Area Fat Liberation (p. 27). Throughout the chapter, issues of body size and (dis)ability are discussed as inter-related.

Of note here is the explicit join of one print media element of the big men's community—*Big Ad*, its clearly more activist arm—with a heterosexual and non-feminist women's parallel. This join is of note given the specific history of feminist and lesbian organizing around fat, a history of which Lee Martindale (the size-rights activist who writes a regular column for *Big Ad* and whom, granted, I am taking

as representative of a certain school of size-rights activism) does not seem to want to be a part. In one column for *Big Ad*, Martindale (1996) makes mention of her “trepidations” regarding participation in a NOW convention. Martindale writes: “I’m not a member of NOW. Nor do I consider myself a feminist. And, as many of you know, I maintain that ‘fat’ is a human rights issue, not just a ‘feminist’ one” (p. 12). Martindale’s assertions here verge on a denial of the explicit outgrowth of one trajectory of radical fat consciousness from radical feminist and lesbian politics. Furthermore, the integration of Martindale’s criticism into *Big Ad*’s activist orbit provokes questions about the *kinds* of non-gay male coalitions that the big men’s community has historically sought out.

With the arrival of *Fat Girl* on the ‘zine scene of the mid-1990s, a politics of pleasure and a politics of body consciousness came to interweave defiantly. *Fat Girl* depends on the ongoing politicization of fatness and body-size prevalent in feminism throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s while introducing a specific lesbian eroticization of fat women. A central mission of *Fat Girl*, clearly, is the eroticization of fat women within a framework of lesbian desire. The ‘zine publishes round-table discussions on size-based oppression, body image and identity, covers events of interest and/or concern to fat dykes, and works an aesthetic of desire for fat women. The collectively produced ‘zine complexly addresses a range of political, sexual, and cultural issues that surround fat women. One of its baseline insinuations is upon the affirmation of fat women as attractive, beautiful, and sexy *by other women*.

The big men’s magazine media has political, social, and sexual dimensions. For the most part, however, a sexual focus predominates. There is strong evidence to suggest that feminist and lesbian organizing around “fat” or “size acceptance” has provided some of the political grounds of possibility for the emergence of a gay male network of big men “and their admirers” (as one of the big men’s magazines has it), although it is not clear that this influence has been named or observed from within the big men’s movement. While the most immediate bearings for the big men’s movement are, I believe, located in the erotic terrain of gay reconstructions of masculinity, feminist and lesbian insinuations upon the body as materially central to politics have influenced the flourishing of the big men’s movement in the 1990s. This influence is particularly clear in *Big Ad*, where opportunities for size-rights activism and a politicization of issues affecting fat people are woven into the fabric of the magazine.

Without question, there is a continual politicization of body image within feminist and lesbian politics. Gay male politics, less intimately textured by feminism, have historically been much less preoccupied with the politicization of bodies and bodily norms. The dynamic, complicated debates featured in *Fat Girl* are not to be found within *Bulk Male* or *Big Ad*—largely, I believe, because gay male cultural politics have not been founded upon an engagement with as sweepingly radical an analysis as lesbian cultural politics have been.

### DESIRES AND/FOR FAT MEN

Homosexual desires have been figured in multiple manners, across varying temporal, cultural, and epistemological sites. Sexologists understood homosexual men and women (or “inverts”) in gender-based terms, reading gender variation as essentially equivalent to homosexuality; following this logic, extreme gender variation suggested extreme homosexual tendencies. Throughout the many conceptualizations of homosexualities that followed, two general directional aggregations of same-sex desires have been posited. One of these modes is *intersubjective*; the other is *oppositional*. An intersubjective organization of homosexual desire suggests that both partners will be basically similar to one another, at least in respect to qualities deemed significant; an oppositional one implies that partners can be characterized more by their differences from one another along certain diacritical lines. To understand the germination of forms of desire within the big men's magazine media and larger movement, it is crucial to observe the distinction between these two aggregations of desire.

Since the years around the Stonewall Inn rebellion in 1969, U.S. lesbian and gay cultures have, for the most part, idealized sexual intersubjectivity. Into recent years, homosexual desires have been theorized within lesbian and gay studies often within the terms of an *intersubjective* dynamic of sameness—notably in the writing of Earl Jackson, Jr. and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.<sup>15</sup> This dynamic has been understood at turns as primarily “Western” or “U.S.,” as in Sedgwick and Tomás Almaguer.<sup>16</sup> The contemporary elaboration of lesbian (neo-) butch-femme, among other examples, has assaulted the dominance of this model of homosexual desire by stressing the qualities and textures of *oppositional* forms of homosexual desire. For example, the 1997 anthology *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, edited by Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker, places this post-lesbian-feminist tradition of butch-femme into a chronological/theoretical trajectory, which demands a reconsideration of lesbian desires as they have often been configured in North America since Stonewall; that is, as *intersubjective*. In Harris's and Crocker's (1997) analysis, butch-femme forces a re-evaluation of homosexual desire as a *desire for the same*.

Butch-femme lesbian relations, like daddy-boy relations, insist upon the erotic charge prevalent in the existence of gendered and sexualized opposition. In both cases, the intersubjective mirror-effect of homosexual desires and relations is bypassed in favor of a riveting difference-effect. There are subjects and objects in butch-femme and daddy-boy sex. Unlike the intersubjective model, in which likeness is idealized along with the disappearance of division or distinction, butch-femme and daddy-boy relations *fetishize* such divisions and distinctions.

<sup>15</sup>See Jackson's (1991) “Scandalous Subjects” (esp. 114-19) and Sedgwick's (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet* (esp. 158-59).

<sup>16</sup>Almaguer's (1991) “Chicano Men” makes this claim in some depth.

Chubby-chaser relations, like butch-femme and daddy-boy relations, oppose through their very presence the “democratic” values of intersubjective homosexuality widely idealized in the decades following Stonewall—that is, they contest the metaphor of the mirror at the heart of mainstream gay male (and to a lesser extent in the 1990s, also lesbian) constructions of desire. Chubby-chubby relations, on the other hand, celebrate a kind of democracy, and can be compared to any number of other intra-group intersubjective pairings around shared diacritical characteristics: gym bunny/gym bunny; of color/of color; Filipino/Filipino; deaf/deaf, and so on. In situations where an intersubjective pairing consists of people marginalized from a lesbian or gay mainstream, the subcultural idealizations organizing it cannot be glibly compared to those organizing the narcissism of dominant cultural actors. Very likely, different kinds of values are expressed and sustained by such relationships. A subcultural intersubjective pairing, in other words, is not solely about fulfilling a vaunted ideal as it might be about forging alternative values or aesthetics.

Both intersubjective and oppositional structurings of desire exist within the big men’s magazine media, although the intersubjective mode tends to be the favored expression. The charge produced by an intersubjective structuring of desire within the big men’s media is striking. *Bulk Male*, which generally features a two- or multi-partner photo essay per issue, focuses almost exclusively on chubby-chubby couplings. The big men’s video pornography industry features videos that showcase chubby-chubby couplings and group sex scenes, with some inclusion of non-chubby men. The inclusion of non-chubby chasers within the big men’s media remains the exception as opposed to the rule.<sup>17</sup> To a limited degree, dynamics of chubby-chaser relations are discussed within the print media. In the inaugural issue of *Heavy Duty*, for example, Kristopher Michaels (1996) discusses sex solely in reference to the chubby-chaser dyad in a short how-to essay titled “Cumfort Zone.”

## CONCLUSION

In looking over this essay, I find myself pulled toward something of an explanation of my investment in this research. I understand myself as a chaser, and while there are other identity-vectors much more stable than this one for me, my desires for fat men, as I have discovered them, have exploded my own boundaries of desire. These desires have led me to pleasures I could not have foreseen or imagined, and that I had certainly not yet experienced. The big men’s media under discussion here is one piece of a larger erotic terrain that recruited me to such pleasures. The desires provoked in its pages have in many cases and with some

<sup>17</sup>Exceptions include spreads in *Bulk Male* 1.1 (24–28), 4.1 (13–17) and 6.1 (9–12).

alterations become my own. These desires have not always been simple or easy. As a man whose body approaches a normative gay cultural ideal, sex and desire for sex with men whose bodies do not meet such cultural qualifications can be extraordinarily complicated if not outright problematic. Though I am outside the big men's community, I am inside the desires it fosters and sustains.

In cultural and political terms, the big men's movement draws upon decades of recontextualizations of idioms of masculinity and, in turn, merges with adjacent collectivities like the "bear" movement. Simultaneously, the movement cannot be viewed as external to and disconnected from the politicized revisions of body image and body politics as they have been conceived over decades of feminist and lesbian cultural efforts. Without figuring the big men's movement into some vanguard position relative to the rest of the gay male community, clearly the movement can be seen as an important internal pressure-point, compelling the gay male community away from the rigidity of dominant constructions of attractiveness, and toward more plural conceptions of sexiness and desirability. In this undertaking, representational apertures are widened and the narrow arc of what constitutes an attractive body is stretched. While the critiques from gay and bisexual men of color regarding the pernicious ways that racialization has conditioned constructions of a hegemonic gay male imaginary and those critiques that have come from the big men's movement are, in most cases, very different in motivation, aim, and idiom, both substantively tussle with and address the hierarchization of a limited number of bodies and ideals over all others.<sup>18</sup> I hope that these pages of research mark only the beginning of the project of plotting the genealogy of the big men's movement into the historical and cultural trajectories of male homosexuality in modernity.

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Note that citational irregularities for *Big Ad* reflect the different ways *Big Ad* has been indexed.

<sup>18</sup>See, among other examples, Richard Fung's (1991) "Looking for My Penis," Essex Hemphill's (1992) "Does Your Mama Know About Me?," Quentin Lee's (1992) "The Sailor and the Thai Boys," Kobena Mercer's (1994) *Welcome to the Jungle* (especially chapters 5 and 6), Christopher Ortiz's (1993) "Hot and Spicy," and Marlon Riggs's (1989) *Tongues Untied*.

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