Introduction

*An Ethnographer among Girth & Mirthers*

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

According to one group member, these big men have commandeered the coffee house for tonight, as they do every Friday night, for their own private clubhouse: “It’s our coffee shop when we’re here.” Many have
come to this kaffeeklatsch because it “provides an opportunity to get out of the house on Friday nights.” This is their haven. They “look forward to it all week.” As one member put it, “for a $2 cup of coffee, I can spend five hours laughing and having a ball. It’s a chance to unwind from the stresses of the week.” Gatherings like this are an opportunity for gay big men simply to get together publicly and have what they consider to be a “normal” social life.

Although some may regard these big men as “deviant” because of their size and gay practices, the foregoing scene describes one of their more ordinary events, though the big men engage in more lewd and bawdy displays as well. Nonetheless, the seemingly innocuous kaffeeklatsch is an achievement for the big men, who have found a place where they feel at home. A public gathering like this might come across as a statement of resistance by a group of big men who take up a lot of space, even the entire coffee house. For the group, however, it is more often a claim to be ordinary in a world that sometimes regards them as misfits. These men, who allowed me a privileged look into their group, are members of an Ohio chapter of an international association called “Girth & Mirth” that provides a social support network for big gay men and their relatively few admirers.

Entering the Big Gay Men’s World

Big gay men incur social wounds produced by the stigmas of their size and sexuality combined. As looks are one of the organizing features of the gay world, gay big men have an added exclusion that has not been fully explored. There is the exclusion all gay people experience—a group of people who want equality. Then there is the within-group prejudice big men experience because of their ample size. Gay big men are thus marginalized both for their sexual orientation in a heteronormative society and for their size in gay society, thereby constituting a subaltern within the subaltern. Given their doubly marginal position, they strive for dignity and respect.
How do gay big men respond to the injuries—shaming, desexualization, exclusion, and marginalization—they experience within mainstream and especially in gay society? From the start, what drew me to the Girth & Mirthers, self-described as a club for big gay men, was their refreshing take on “obesity” and the way they creatively and playfully reconfigure the stigma of being fat. That is, they demedicalize being fat and provide a counternarrative to it. This theme underlies everything they say and do and in turn underlies all of my arguments in this book. Constructed to provide a safe space for big men who feel stigmatized, the Girth & Mirth culture has a double appeal for members: It brings out big gay men and engages them in normalizing activities and commensality rituals wherein they can receive friendship in a normal way; it also allows them opportunities to resist stigmatization by playing up their sexual identity through campy behavior and carnival.

In their desire for gay citizenship, Girth & Mirthers engage in a dialogue about ways in which body fascism—the narrow dictates of appearance—warrants reconfiguring, even if it is not always so liberatory. They respond to the shame of fat stigma by playfully disregarding it. As a multiply marginalized group, they use play, sexual display, and eating occasions to achieve a semblance of comfort and carve out a social life for themselves. Their mission is not a fat revolution but a healthy response to oppression. The big men attempt to construct livable and satisfying lives, refusing to be taken out of the running and wanting a fighting chance at being sexually desirable and accepted in gay society. Sometimes they choose an oppositional way of dealing with conformity, using outrageousness and excess as their weapons. Still, they provide an alternative version of gay society that deserves attention.

The Study

For nearly three years, I spent a great deal of time with members of Girth & Mirth. I interacted with them at bar nights, kaffeeklatsches, restaurant outings, pot-luck dinners, holiday bashes, pool parties, game
and movie nights, and weekend retreats. The retreats took me outside of the local scene to regional and national events held in the Southwest and Midwest.

While I go into further discussion in the Methodological Appendix of the study participants and how I collected my data, here I would like to briefly remark on my researcher position. During my time in the local group, I was open with members about my researcher status. I told them of my interest in studying the group and identified myself as a gay man and as an enthusiast of the organization. I was a dues-paying member, active in the club, and served functional roles for the group such as selling Jell-O shots and working the door during charity bar nights. The latter task involved checking IDs and handling cover charges, what some members called being a “door whore.” Because studying the activities meant I had to participate in them, I always created a total written reconstruction of the night’s events at the end of each day. The advantage was that lending a hand at an understaffed event allowed me the opportunity to get to know the men well. The proceeds from my and other volunteers’ work went to a local group that provided meals to people living with HIV/AIDS and to a gender and sexuality center for youth.

In retrospect, I think my role at one of the extralocal events called the “Super Weekend,” which I describe in chapter 3, was even more compromised than I considered it to be at the time. I was always forthright with my companions, individuals from the local group, who served as “culture-brokers” or intermediaries and whom I consulted to determine how to present myself at the national events. My comrades recommended I attend the Super Weekend as just another member of the local club, which I did, as I came to recognize that explicitly stating my researcher position at the Super Weekend would likely interfere with my interactions with the Girth & Mirthers. Thus, while all of the local Girth & Mirthers who attended the same weekend knew about my research project, most of the other guests did not and assumed I was there with “my club” to have a good time, just as they were.
This decision to withhold my identity, however, led me to experience role strain with regard to which code I should follow: that of the Super Weekenders or that of the researcher. I did not want to assume that transparency was the modus operandi. I understood that a certain amount of masking of identity is tolerated in this context and did not feel that my withholding of information about why I was there was any greater form of exploitation. I was more concerned with how to be as unobtrusive as possible than I was about the ethical compromise of being an observer as well as a participant. I imagine my decision will raise ethical concerns for readers trained in feminist methodologies, as it does for me. My hope is that this “confessional tale” will contribute to the larger literature about appreciating the fruits and perils of making moment-by-moment decisions while being a participant observer.²

In order to protect the privacy of those who contributed to my research, I replaced proper names with pseudonyms in most cases, nicknames in some, though entities like the name of the club, Girth & Mirth, I kept as such, as this is the name of the organization worldwide. The group writ large regards itself as a public entity (they enroll in the Pride parades, for example, with the name of the group). As Girth & Mirth is an already public nonprofit social organization, I wanted to acknowledge it as such, allowing the group to gain greater visibility. In various endnotes, I discuss in more length how I changed certain details to preserve anonymity as best I could without losing context.

As a fieldworker who came alone to Girth & Mirth events, I appeared to occupy the status of a chubby-chaser: a slim-build devotee of gay men of size.³ As the owner of the bar put it, I was “the club’s little admirer.” My own personal hangups notwithstanding, I am thin, and I continue to gain greater appreciation for the appearance-based privileges that come with my body size. My researcher position as both a partial insider as a gay man, and as an outsider, given my thin privilege, allows me to offer a critique of looksism in the gay world. In many ways, I recognize that Girth & Mirth members look for the same opportunities and respect
given to men with idealized body types in the gay community. Indeed, I am an admirer of their cause.

Overview

My examination of the full range of the Girth & Mirthers' activities, from the most ordinary of cultural practices like gatherings at a sidewalk café to the more over-the-top and campy sexualized events, provides a lens for understanding how gay big men cope with stigma by engaging in playful identity reconstruction. In reflecting on the big men's responses to and coping strategies for their doubly marginal position, I lend legitimacy to the ordinary culture of big gay men. I extend what we know about the subjective experience of being fat, the interactional nature of suffering, and the human behavioral responses to size discrimination within the gay community.

In the following chapters, I build on fat studies, disability studies, performance analyses of sexualities, and research on stigmatized social groups to examine the social injuries gay big men incur and their responses to those injuries. My approach departs from existing research in its examination of play as politics. I stretch Erving Goffman's concept of stigma by adding to it Michael Chemers's staging stigma, Chong-Suk Han's defensive stigma management strategies, Marcia Millman's obesity and desexualization, Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque folk culture, Susan Sontag's notes on camp, Gregory Bateson's concept of play, Eve Sedgwick's shame and performativity, and Kathleen LeBesco's politics of performing fatness, all of which is elaborated in this book's Theoretical Appendix. I then use these perspectives to analyze how Girth & Mirthers transform the stigma of being big and gay.

To describe what kind of group Girth & Mirth is, chapter 1 reviews the historical background of the organization, although this history is not sufficient to understand the multiple roles the group plays in the lives of the big men and how it serves to manage their social injuries. This chapter also recounts how some of the members made their initial
contact with Girth & Mirth. Finally, it explores some of the collective identities Girth & Mirth assumes: as a social-sexual club, a dining club, a personal-political group, a normalizing group, or a group with “wounded attachments” to the gay community.4

Chapter 2 characterizes the social injuries gay big men experience because of their “failure” to be height-weight proportionate, a matter that gets exacerbated in the body-conscious gay community. It sets up the scenario of what it must be like to have to cope daily with the social stigma of being both big and gay. Chapter 3 describes a Pan–Girth & Mirth reunion called the “Super Weekend,” held at a gay motel in Oklahoma, where big men redefine themselves as sex objects to remedy the desexualization they commonly experience. This reunion is compared with the big men’s Labor Day Convergence described in chapter 4, which explores why people so dispossessed are compelled to be middle-class consumers or long to become sex objects. Taking place in a mainstream luxury hotel, Convergence consists of seminars, a dance, sightseeing, and outings to museums, all of which are about gay big men’s seeking class validation and respectability à la Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of class distinction. Chapter 5 focuses on alternatives that big men employ to reconfigure shame other than the sexual objectification described in chapter 3 and the class consciousness described in chapter 4. One of these reconfigurations discussed in depth is the big men’s joyful disregard of shame, which remains true to the club’s moniker, “Girth & Mirth,” reflecting its mission. The chapter teases out the possibilities for responding to fat oppression in ways that promote inclusion and healthy acceptance of difference, rather than create or reproduce new hierarchies of marginalization. It identifies the positive and fun-loving strategies that members of Girth & Mirth use to reposition their shame. The Conclusion offers some additional statements on moving beyond stigma management.