Transforming LGBTQ Lives

BODIES AND BOUNDARIES OF UK BEAR SPACES

Nick McGlynn

ROUTLEDGE

"With this book Nick McGlynn moves beyond an interrogation of 'Bear' as a gay subcultural identity, to examine how 'Bear/yness' is *produced* through the relationships between bodies and places. In doing so, Nick not only offers fresh new insights into who Bears are, what they do, and where. He also demonstrates the value of geographical thinking to understanding contemporary queer spaces and cultures."

Gavin Brown, Visiting Professor of Geography, University College Dublin and CEO of Trade Sexual Health, Leicester

"Nick McGlynn immerses you in the world of Bear spaces - or better, Bear/y spaces as we come to learn - with much humour and insight in this pageturner disguised as academic text. The combination of everyday practices with theoretical insights, and the personal with the political, makes this book appealing and relevant for a broad audience, whether you are a regular to GBQ nightlife in the UK, a feminist, an academic working on sexualities, or just a fan of Bears."

Valerie De Craene, Guest Professor in Geography at Ghent University, Belgium

Bodies and Boundaries of UK Bear Spaces

Bodies and Boundaries of UK Bear Spaces is an exploration of the spaces of the UK's Bear community – and the people who are in them.

This book details a wealth of existing writing and scholarship on Bears – both historical and contemporary – and uses new empirical research to demonstrate and explain the complexity of 'Bear' in the present-day UK. Moving beyond a focus on masculine attitudes, it emphasises the importance of bodily appearance for Bear communities while also demonstrating the variety of bodies in Bear spaces, and the variety amongst Bear spaces themselves. Resisting universalist accounts, this book calls for greater engagement with the conceptual instability and geographic variation of 'Bear'. Written for both academic and non-academic readers, this book combines an engaging conversational style with excerpts from a rich qualitative dataset to help explain new ways of looking at Bears or 'Bear/y' men.

Bodies and Boundaries of UK Bear Spaces is of value to anyone interested in Bears and/or LGBTQ spaces – particularly in the UK context. It also offers much for scholars of men and masculinities, bodies and fatness, gender studies, and sexuality and queer studies.

Nick McGlynn is a senior lecturer in Geography at the University of Brighton (UK). His research has explored the experiences of fat GBQ men in UK Bear spaces; the geographies of LGBTQ equalities and policymaking; and making 'liveable' lives for sexual and gender minorities.

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As a geographer, I know that geographic research on sexualities is relatively niche and that it does not go unquestioned as a legitimate disciplinary endeavour. Furthermore, scholarship using queer and poststructural thought, which I employ in this book, is increasingly under attack from those within and without higher education, some of whom variously and ludicrously claim that such scholarship is socially dangerous, is responsible for the rise of right-wing authoritarian politics, and/or promotes paedophilia. Given this anti-intellectual climate I want to thank colleagues in the University of Brighton's School of Applied Sciences, and across the University of Brighton more widely, for fostering a supportive environment in which to do this kind of geographic research. Special thanks go to my fellow Human Geography academics Rebecca Elmhirst, Paul Gilchrist, Mary Gearey, Jason Lim, and Carl Bonner-Thompson for always reminding me how friendly and collegiate academia can be. Matt Smith took over my teaching during a one-semester sabbatical to help me write this book, for which I'm very grateful and slightly worried that they might have done a better job than me… I also need to thank my fellow Geography and Environment Course Leaders Matt Brolly, Kevin Wyche, Chris Carey, and Laura Evenstar, for working so well together through the many administrative challenges we face in our role. And another massive thank you goes to the students and staff who make up the university's transdisciplinary Centre for Transforming Gender and Sexualities (CTSG). It's an all too rare treat in academia to actually look forward to meetings, but that's how I feel when I see CTSG in my diary! I'm particularly indebted to the centre's leader Olu Jenzen for always being alert to how CTSG might offer additional support, and to Karen Gainsford for helping promote and publicise my work.

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I intended this book to be completed a year earlier. But a combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disastrous state of higher education in the UK resulted in a longer and more stressful writing period than I had wanted. There were times when the book felt like both the most important and most anxiety-provoking thing in my life. So I want to particularly thank Eleanor Catchpole Simmons at Taylor & Francis Publishing for accepting with grace my constantly missed deadlines, and for heretically reminding me that mental health is more important than publishing. Eleanor also kindly sent me a copy of *Bear Cookin'*, a Bear cookbook which had been missing from my collection and which may yet kill me. Charlotte Taylor finally received the draft manuscript, and from there has worked with me to bring it to completion.

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1 Bears and Bearspace
Introduction

My own introduction to Bear space

In 2016, I went to a Bear night:

> *At one point most of our group had their tops off, even the fattest guys, and Nathan (who I had been dancing with and grinding against) said that I should take mine off too, so I immediately did. He said he'd expected I'd need more convincing than that, and actually I did too because I HAVE NEVER DONE THAT IN A CLUB BEFORE. I cannot imagine doing it in another club, I just think folk would be horrified and I'd feel really self-conscious. I just would not do it. But when I took my top off on Friday it felt amazing. I guess the word 'liberating' is thrown around a lot with this kind of thing but it absolutely, absolutely felt liberating. I felt that I could move better when dancing too. I was just exhilarated. I didn't get tons of looks or attention for better or for worse – though Nathan was definitely appreciative…*
>
> *And so I got to dance with people hugging and grinding and running our hands over each other's bare skin, with my tits and my skinny arms and my roll of fat hanging out over the front of my jeans. I feel almost giddy thinking about that now, like I get butterflies in my stomach not at all because it was some kind of big erotic moment, but it was a tremendously freeing experience, like I didn't have the weight of my weight on my mind.*

Personal notes, May 2016

I wrote this in a kind of ecstatic state when I returned to my friend's flat the following morning. At the time I was fresh out of my PhD which had explored partnership policymaking for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) equalities in the towns and countryside of East Sussex (McGlynn, 2015). After years of poring over laws, policies, official guidance documents, and recorded meetings, I was keen to take on something in a different direction. I was also fresh out of a relationship and, I think, the fattest I've ever

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been. So I'd been reflecting a lot – and not always pleasantly or productively – on what it was like to be a fat gay man.

I got to thinking about Bears.

I can't remember when I first heard of Bears, but when I'd lived in Japan for a few years in my early 20s I'd at times described myself as *'kuma'* (Bear) or *'kuma kei'* (Bear-type). I didn't particularly identify as a Bear or even know much about Bears, but I was a big gay man with facial hair, so at the time it seemed an easy slot to fit into, an easy way to describe myself. I knew I wasn't a Twink, and I knew I wasn't a Jock or a muscle guy, so what was I? Returning to the UK a few years later, I lived in and around London where I joined the Bear social media and hookup website EuroWoof, and had a couple of visits to club nights like XXL and pubs like the Kings Arms, both popular with Bears at the time. They didn't work for me. I didn't get any action, or much interest, and I didn't feel much the other way either. So seven years, two relationships, eight stone, and a PhD later, Bear had become a term that I threw about sometimes – generally to refer to bigger bearded guys, and occasionally myself. But I didn't make any point of going to Bear pubs, clubs, or events, and I certainly didn't see myself as part of any kind of Bear scene or community.

But I did see myself as fat.

Fatness is commonly looked upon with horror, disgust, and contempt within gay, bi, and queer (GBQ) men's communities and scenes (Berry, 2007; Blotcher, 1998; Gough & Flanders, 2009; Mosher, 2001; Whitesel, 2014). Fat GBQ men often feel excluded from GBQ men's spaces and marginalised when they go to them (Blotcher, 1998; Giles, 1998; Whitesel, 2014), experiencing shameful feelings of not fitting in due to their bodies (Clark, 2001:126; Yoakam, 2001:141; Goecke, 2001; Suresha, 2001), and hurtful teasing, mockery, and expressions of disgust from young, hairless, and slim men (Adams & Berry, 2013; Gough & Flanders, 2009; Kelly & Kane, 2001:328; Locke, 1997:123; Lopez, 2001:110; Moskowitz et al., 2013:779; Suresha, 2009:314). Though I only rarely experienced active abuse or mockery about my fatness in LGBTQ spaces (though those times stung, horribly), I certainly had feelings of intense embarrassment and disgust about my fat body that became especially pointed in those spaces. Fatness has been a fundamental issue for Bear communities too, with Bear spaces strongly and consistently described as powerfully accepting and even desirous of fat GBQ men (Adams & Berry, 2013; Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; Gough & Flanders, 2009; McGlynn, 2022a; McGrady, 2016; Monaghan & Malson, 2013; see also chapters throughout Wright, 1997a, 2001a; Suresha, 2009). So my perspective and experience as a queer gay man who is fat began to spur a new interest in Bear communities, now through the additional lens of an academic researcher.

The first academic work on Bears I read was Peter Hennen's *Faeries, Bears and Leathermen* (2008), the chapter on Bears still being one of the most important and influential empirical studies of Bear communities. As a queer gay man who wants to support feminists and who feels profoundly alienated by heterosexual norms, I found it alarming in its depiction of Bears as

structured almost entirely by a desire to fit into conventional heterosexual masculinity. I then read the immeasurably valuable *Bear Book* collections by historian and archivist Les Wright (1997a, 2001a), and the superb collection of interviews with and about Bears by anthologist and writer Ron Suresha (2009). From these I found that Bear might be a bit more than the reproduction of hetero-masculinities. But despite the many positive perspectives by and on Bears – as fat-inclusive, as blending masculinities and femininities, as warm-hearted – some entries by Bear writers alluded to or openly expressed the opposite perspectives to these. So when an acquaintance invited me up to a Bear club night in May 2016 I was nervous about how things would go, and particularly worried that I'd encounter a space of aggressively muscular hyper-masculine men, policing others' bodies and ready to growl at any whiff of effeminacy. Instead, I had what still remains one of the most powerfully positive experiences of my life – my first experience of taking my shirt off with a bunch of other GBQ men and being appreciated for my fat belly. This experience became the origin of a new research project – *Bearspace* – through which I've been studying the spaces created and used by Bears in the UK since 2018. And, reflecting on this experience in 2022, I'm still astonished to see how closely it matches those of Bearspace participants (McGlynn, 2022a).

The Bearspace project led to this book. It's a book about Bears – and others – in the spaces used by, created by, and associated with Bears here in the UK. In it I draw on a wide array of research, writing, and scholarship from a variety of academic fields and disciplines (such as Sexuality Studies, Queer Studies, Men & Masculinity Studies, Fat Studies, Sociology, Anthropology, and most especially Human Geography), to help explain and understand what's happening in Bear spaces. I also make extensive use of decades of writing and scholarship by and about Bears, often in our own words. The primary aim is, flatly, to develop our core knowledge of Bears by exploring the spaces created and used by Bear communities. This alone would be an entirely new and, I believe, valuable endeavour. But the book also aims to offer new ways of thinking about who/what 'Bears' and 'Bear spaces' are, that can address consistent definitional ambiguities and inconsistencies; to detail and explain some of the spatial politics of Bear spaces, particularly regarding the different bodies present in them; and ultimately to resist generalising accounts of Bears that frame them (us) as relatively homogeneous, particularly by considering the multi-scalar geographies of Bears in the UK context. It's not intended to be the last word in Bears, but rather to suggest new conceptual approaches for those studying Bears, and (I hope) to spur on more critical engagement with Bears by scholars of all stripes.

What are Bears?

I hate trying to explain what Bears are, what 'Bear' means. 'What are Bears?' is a perennial question from those who hear of us, but writers on Bears have repeatedly pointed out that there are no clear universally-applicable answers to it (Hennen, 2008:96–97; Wright, 1997b; Marks Ridinger, 1997:86–87;

De Mey, 1997:261; Kampf, 2000; Mass, 2001:18; Kaye, 2007; Riley, 2016), and that even those definitions proposed tend to collapse in the face of actual gatherings of people in the spaces created and used by Bears (Sahin, 2001; Suresha, 2009:17).

But it would be churlish to write a book on the topic without giving it a go, so: 'Bear' is a loose categorical label used to describe, discuss, organise, and produce the social, cultural, emotional, physical, and sexual lives of mostly GBQ men, usually but not exclusively applied to those who are bigger (in terms of muscle and/or fat), hairier (in terms of beards and/or body hair), and perceived to be more masculine (in terms of appearance, personality, and/or behaviour) than GBQ men are traditionally envisaged as being. The Bear category varies temporally and geographically and is inherently unstable, being constantly produced and reproduced through everyday language, behaviours, and interactions. The label can also be applied to non-human objects and spaces perceived to have some affinity with Bear men. The rest of this book – particularly Chapter 2 (Bear Identifications) and Chapter 3 (Bear Bodies) – will not only advance but also complicate this definition.

One point of consistency is that it's generally taken for granted that Bears are gay men, with virtually no discussion in writing on Bears about Bears with other sexual identities or orientations, such as bisexual or queer Bears. This doesn't mean that Bears of other sexual identities or orientations don't exist (they do, hence my use of 'GBQ' throughout), but there's certainly an unspoken assumption that Bears are always a) men, and b) sexually attracted to other men, if not necessarily exclusively. Again this doesn't mean that there are no women who identify as Bears themselves (see for example Suresha, 2001:300–302; Suresha, 2009:37–39, 276, 316; Taylor, 2008) or who are identified by male Bears as Bears (e.g. Suresha, 2009:91; Hendricks, 2001:75). And it certainly doesn't mean that there are no trans men who are Bears, or even people with other gender identities (see McGrady, 2016; Suresha, 2009:273–284) – I myself know quite a few trans Bears, two participated in the Bearspace project, and several trans men have won Mr Bear contests in recent years (e.g. Jackson, 2019, 2020).

Aside from these assumptions of Bears' gender and sexual identity/orientation, Bear writers are often conscious of Bear as a relatively recent phenomenon which lacks any essential basis (e.g. the idea that Bear has some eternal, unchanging presence in reality so that some people are inherently Bears – see Fuss, 1989). These writers usually reject any single, universal definition (e.g. Sahin, 2001; Suresha, 2009; Wilkinson, 2001; Wright, 1997b, 2001b), but perhaps unavoidably end up asserting their own personal beliefs about what Bears are or aren't (e.g. Hill, 1997; Suresha, 1997a:42; Wright, 1997b:26–27). This tendency is perhaps best expressed in the writing of Jack Fritscher, who actively frames himself as a key figure in Bear history and responsible for first identifying, labelling, and popularising the Bear as a figure in San Francisco (SF) circa 1979/1980 (Fritscher, 2001; Suresha, 2009:79–96). Fritscher initially argues for an immensely expansive understanding of Bear,

of near-total inclusiveness: *'the concept of "bear" is blank enough to absorb countless male identities and fantasies'* (Fritscher, 2001:xxv). Yet he proceeds to explicitly exclude some bodies and attitudes from Bear-ness while valorising others, positioning himself as an authority whose voice carries more weight. This includes specific ontological claims about what '*Bears are not'* (Fritscher, 2001:xlv) – for example, he asserts that Bears are not fat and are not *'politically correct'* (ibid.), and elsewhere that Bears are not shy (Fritscher in Suresha, 2009:90). Undoubtedly this tendency creeps into my own work too, so I encourage readers to keep the question of 'What are Bears?' productively open even once they've finished this book – the need to do this is in fact one of this book's key interventions.

Bear also has cultural elements including a wider variety of associated practices and iconographies, again often related to a form of masculinity (Monaghan, 2005; Santoro, 2014). This includes 'masculine' modes of speech (Fritscher, 2001:xxiii); jargons such as 'woof', 'grrr', 'husbear', 'cub', 'Bear cave', and more (Fritscher, 2001:xlii; Hennen, 2008:3; Kelly & Kane, 2001:332); and paraphernalias and symbols (Hennen, 2008:111–112; Kampf, 2000; Locke, 1997:104–105; Suresha, 2009:14–15) such as the International Bear Brotherhood Flag and its paw-print logo (Figure 1.1; see Kampf, 2000:16). There are also suggested ways of dressing and styling the body like a Bear, often drawing on popular and stereotypical representations of rural and working-class North American men (McGlynn, 2021), with some noting a degree of pressure to dress in this way (Manley et al., 2007; McGrady, 2016; Suresha, 2009:292). It's worth noting, however that many of these cultural artefacts of Bear are used in a non-serious and tongue-in-cheek way amongst members of Bear communities (Kampf, 2000), perhaps even as a form of Bear camp.

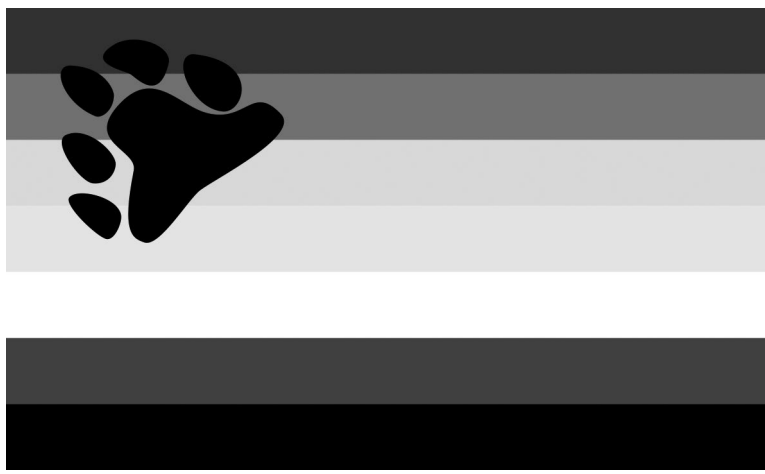

Figure 1.1 The International Bear Brotherhood Flag (Wikimedia, 2020).

Where do Bears come from?

'Bear', as a phenomenon, appears to have emerged in SF, on the west coast of the USA, in the early 1980s (Fritscher, 2001; Hay, 1997; Marks Ridinger, 1997; Suresha, 1997a; Wright, 1997b). Though there is some anecdotal evidence of sporadic self-identified Bears, and Bear groups, from the mid-1960s to late 1970s (for example Wright, 1997b:25–26), these appear to have been small and localised. It wasn't until the early 80s that Bear became a more widely recognised archetype and even identity – and though it had an element of localisation in and around SF, the city's status and popularity as a GBQ men's hub undoubtedly contributed to Bear's geographic spread across the US. Following on from these urban origins and despite Bears' frequent usage and even fetishisation of rural imagery, spaces and lives, and of 'nature' itself (McGlynn, 2021), Bears and their spaces have been and continue to be primarily located in cities (Fritscher, 2001; Hennen, 2008; Suresha, 1997a,b; Rofes, 1997).

Bear's emergence stemmed from the city's role as hub for GBQ men's cultures, communities, and especially media from the 1970s – as GBQ men's historians (Calder, 2016) and Bear writers have pointed out, *'In the 70s, magazines ruled gay culture'* (Fritscher, 2001:xliii). In particular, according to early Bear writers SF-based erotic magazines such as Man2Man and Drummer (Fritscher, 2001; Rand, 1997; Wright, 1997b:27–36), and most especially the more widespread BEAR magazine that was published later (Mauerman, 1997), were instrumental in initially constructing the idea of Bear as a particular **type** of GBQ man or identity, and in popularising the idea of Bear as a community of men. Magazine editor and publisher Jack Fritscher asserts his personal role in developing Bear imagery, identities, symbolism, and vocabularies through his work on such magazines (Fritscher, 2001), and in 1997 Bear historian and archivist Les Wright felt able to write that *'BEAR is the voice of authority in matters of bear community and sensibility'* (Wright, 1997b:36), emphasising the influence of the magazine. Now published online as Bear World Magazine (see http://bearworldmag.com), the publication has a global reach. Another key influence on the development and growth of 'Bear' as a phenomenon has been the SF GBQ men's bar the Lone Star Saloon, identified by several Bear writers as the first Bear bar (Fritscher, 2001; Hyslop, 2001; Suresha, 1997b). Today the Lone Star actively brands itself with this label (see https://www.lonestarsf.com/). However as with BEAR/Bear World Magazine, it's not clear how much name recognition or authority the Lone Star commands today and particularly amongst Bears here in the UK. Before beginning the Bearspace project I had never heard of it myself, and neither is it mentioned by Bears in my own networks. This likely relates to the global dispersion of Bear, out of and away from the USA. The growing globalisation of Bear was noted by Les Wright in the late 90s and early 00s (Wright, 1997b:38, 2001b:3), and more recently Riley (2016) has suggested that Bears are now even more increasingly globalised, particularly through easier access to international travel. Early adoption of the internet

by Bears and Bear communities means that global connections appear to have developed quickly (Dyer, 1997:177; Fritscher, 2001:xliii; Kampf, 2000:62–77; Kucera, 2001; Marks Ridinger, 1997:84–85; Monaghan, 2005; Sahin, 2001; Wilkinson, 2001:108), evidenced particularly heavily through the 'international' chapters of Wright's edited Bear Books (Wright, 1997a:225–278, 2001a:253–283) and Suresha's non-US discussants (Suresha, 2009:306). And, as a globalising phenomenon, Bear has its own cultural and geographic variations so that how 'Bear' manifests in, say, Tokyo, or Beirut, may be quite different to in London (McGlynn, 2021; for just a few examples see Sahin, 2001 on the Turkish context; Tan, 2019 on the Taiwanese context; Unsain et al., 2020 on the Brazilian context; and Yildiz, 2022 on the Iranian context).

This geographic context for Bear's origins must also be understood as situated within wider social and cultural contexts of the USA's existing GBQ men's scenes and communities in the 70s and 80s (Fritscher, 2001:xxv–xxviii), as well as mainstream hetero-masculinities (McCann, 1997). First, it is clear that Bear neither emerged nor grew in isolation, but that it has always been and continues to be inseparably intertwined with wider LGBTQ communities as well as other GBQ men's communities and subcultures including Leathermen, Chubs, and Girth & Mirth (Hennen, 2008; Pyle & Klein, 2011; Suresha, 1997a; Whitesel, 2014; Wright, 1997b), and in Europe Brown has suggested that these often overlap (Brown, 2001:53). Some writers have also suggested that the early popularisation of Bear identities and bodies should be contextualised within the HIV/AIDS crisis during the 80s and 90s (Hennen, 2008:100; Kelly & Kane, 2001:333–334; Suresha, 1997b:47). Per this explanation, larger GBQ men's bodies as associated with Bears became valorised as visually *'healthy'* alternatives to the *'wasting'* (Blotcher, 1998:359) bodies of young GBQ men living and dying with the virus; subsequently *'there was a need to see burly, healthy, mature men, with hairy bodies, to confirm the idea that they had survived'* (David Bergman in Suresha, 2009:31–32). To me this idea appears speculative, and some writers have been critical of such singular explanations for the popularisation and expansion of Bear communities (e.g. Eric Rofes in Suresha, 2009:17; Michael Bronski in Suresha, 2009:31–32).

Perhaps most significantly for the history of Bear, there is a widespread belief that Bear and Bear identities and communities were specifically created *'for guys who didn't fit into mainstream gay culture'* (Dan Hunt in Suresha, 2009:168) on account of their hairiness, age, and larger body size/weight (Adams & Berry, 2013; Brown, 2001; Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; Gough & Flanders, 2009; Marks Ridinger, 1997; Papadopoulos, 2001:154; Suresha, 2009:297). As such, Bear is often framed as a reaction against beauty hierarchies amongst GBQ men of the 70s and 80s (Greig, 2001; Lopez, 2001; Mauerman, 1997; McCann, 1997; Papadopoulos, 2001; Suresha, 2001, 2009; Wright, 1997b), which valorised *'youth, hairlessness, gym bodies, and wealth'* (Suresha, 2001:291) via the supposedly judgemental 'Twink' and 'Clone' archetypes (Gough & Flanders, 2009:244; Kelly & Kane, 2001:338; McCann, 1997; Suresha, 1997b:41; Wright, 1997b:2). Bears ostensibly countered this

with *'a spirit of inclusiveness and egalitarian-mindedness, [and being] sex positive and relatively "anti-looks-ist"'* (Wright, 1997b:34; see also Hennen, 2008:119; Lopez, 2001:121; Gan, 2001:130–131; Joy & Numer, 2018; Manley et al., 2007:98; Mann, 2010; Papadopoulos, 2001:152). Many have stressed the positive mental, social, and emotional impacts of being and associating with Bears, particularly regarding the inclusion of older, fatter, and hairier bodies (e.g. Clark, 2001:126; Gough & Flanders, 2009; Manley et al., 2007; McGrady, 2016; Suresha, 2009), with my own Bearspace research confirming such beliefs while offering careful qualification regarding the inclusion of fat men in particular (McGlynn, 2022a, 2022c).

How have Bears changed?

Even back in 2001, Bear historian Les Wright was writing that *'The bear movement has grown into something much larger than anyone expected, and different from anything I had hoped for'* (Wright, 2001b:3). Bear is not a static phenomenon, and writers have noted considerable changes over the decades (Hyslop, 2001; see chapters throughout Suresha, 2009). Over the past decades Bear identities and communities have become increasingly well-known beyond GBQ men's communities (Lyons & Hosking, 2014), and some have suggested that Bears are increasingly visible and normalised in mainstream gay and LGBTQ spaces (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015:429; Riley, 2016; Santoro, 2012:130; Suresha, 2009:296). Even more than 20 years ago Bear writers were expressing annoyance and anxiety of this kind of 'Bearstreaming' of GBQ men – McCann, for instance, argued that Bears were drifting too far away from *'getting in touch with their masculinity'* (1997:258), and lamented the belief that *'anyone can now don a flannel shirt and jeans, grow a beard and, hey presto – bear!'* (ibid., 259). But it may be only a limited array of Bear bodies which benefit from such visibility and normalisation – muscles, hair, beards, and small bellies have become increasingly accepted and even valorised in both GBQ men's and mainstream representations of desirable manhood and masculinity, but rarely significant fatness (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015:429; Riley, 2016; Suresha, 2009:296).

Furthermore, for decades, writing by and about Bears has noted concern about the perception of a growing commercialisation of Bear identities and cultures (McCann, 1997; Hennen, 2008:103–105; Papadopoulos, 2001:152; Suresha, 2001, 2009:109; Tan, 2019; Wright, 1997b) whereby men can (or, worse, **must**) buy certain products marked with Bear iconographies or culturally associated with Bear in order to 'be a Bear'. But this might again reflect a romanticised perspective on an imagined Golden Age of Bear communities – historical and reflective accounts are in fact quite candid in acknowledging that *'bears have been commercialised from the beginning'* (Suresha, 2001:301; see also Eric Rofes in Suresha, 2009:14; Pete Vafiades in Suresha, 2009:97–109), particularly with regard to the Lone Star (Suresha, 1997b) and to the erotic magazines promoting Bear bodies and attitudes (Mauerman, 1997;

Jack Fritscher in Suresha, 2009:87). These significant elements in Bear's early days aimed to fill not just an erotic niche but an **economic** niche in gay men's consumer cultures, which then were saturated with the young, muscle-trim, and hairless bodies of the Twink and the Clone (Hennen, 2008:97; Kelly & Kane, 2001:338; Wright, 1997a). And it can be expensive to participate in Bear scenes and communities (Suresha, 1997b:220–221) – for example Heath McKay, at the time holder of the International Mr Bear title, described to Ron Suresha how he couldn't afford to stay at the hotel of the Bear event he was required to attend as a duty of his title (Suresha, 2009:218). From my own experience weekend visits to larger UK Bear events inevitably cost hundreds of pounds not so much from organisers' ticket prices (usually around £30) but from the need for accommodation, travel, meals, and the expectation of consuming copious volumes of alcohol. It is perhaps little wonder that some can feel financially excluded from our communities (Hennen, 2008:113; Rofes, 1997; Suresha, 1997a:45; Papadopoulos, 2001:152). This does not mean that Bear was or is **only** a commercial enterprise, nor that Bear communities and spaces don't offer real comfort and inclusion for men marginalised in other parts of GBQ men's scenes. Nor does it mean that the commercial aspects of Bear are necessarily or entirely negative, as commercial spaces can and do serve important community functions for Bears (Fritscher, 2001; Hyslop, 2001; Suresha, 2009:109) and for LGBTQ communities more widely (Formby, 2017; Valentine & Skelton, 2003). Instead this points to a complicated and multifaceted history, present and future of Bear, without one singular story, trajectory, or meaning.

Research and scholarship about Bears

As a community widely imagined to be composed of and oriented around big, hairy, manly GBQ men, Bears sit at the intersection of at least three broad areas of scholarship. These are men and masculinities (including within Sociology and Gender Studies, as well as Men and Masculinity Studies); fatness and large bodies (again including Sociology but here also including medical/health research and the burgeoning field of Fat Studies); and sexualities (including Queer Theory, Gay & Lesbian Studies, Sociology, and Anthropology). Through my work on the Bearspace project and my training as a Geographer, in this book I also demonstrate the unique significance and value of considering Bears from the perspective of Human Geography. This section outlines how each of these areas of scholarship have engaged with Bears.

Studies of men & masculinities

Bears are almost always considered to be men, and there is an extremely strong association between Bears and masculinity. Understandably then, some of the most influential academic scholarship addressing Bears has suggested that masculinity is the one defining feature of Bear identities and

communities (e.g. Hennen, 2008; Manley et al., 2007; Whitesel, 2014:51). Wider scholarship on men and masculinities tends to focus on heterosexual men (Beasley, 2005:216), so as community of GBQ men allegedly structured around masculinity Bears should be of great interest to such writers. Most academic studies of men and masculinity have stressed their alignment with feminist imperatives to critically interrogate the construction and effects of masculinity rather than assuming it to be a pre-existing phenomenon or standard which must be maintained (Connell, 2005; Kimmel & Messner, 2004; Van Hoven & Hörschelmann, 2005:6–11; Whitehead, 2002). And most such studies follow Raewyn Connell's pivotal book *Masculinities* (2005), which stressed the existence of not just one but multiple forms of masculinity, existing in tension with each other and with femininities (see also Buchbinder, 2013; Gorman-Murray & Hopkins, 2014). Bears, then, are most commonly said to represent GBQ men's reclamation of a masculinity which is natural and authentic (e.g. Fritscher, 2001; Hill, 1997; Mann, 2010; Monaghan, 2005; Rain, 1997; Sullivan, 2003; Wright, 1997b; see also McGlynn, 2021 for critical discussion), often framed in direct opposition to the perceived artificiality and effeminacy of non-Bear GBQ men and especially 'Twinks' (Hennen, 2008:118; Hill, 1997: McCann, 1997; Kelly & Kane, 2001:338; Lopez, 2001:119; Wright, 1997b). But the Bear literature also points to a wide variety of different manifestations of masculinity – of (following Connell) masculinities. As described these masculinities are sometimes rather contradictory. For example, ways have being a masculine Bear have been characterised as being '*gentlemen*' (Hill, 1997:80), as '*nonconfrontational*' (ibid., 82), as '*affable (until provoked)*' (Mauerman, 1997:212), and as primal and aggressive (Lopez, 2001:120–121). Bears do also enjoy and participate in camp and effeminacy (Heath McKay in Suresha, 2009:269; see also Kelly & Kane, 2001:339; Suresha, 2009:278), and some suggest that a particularly positive feature of Bears is their blending of masculinity with femininity (Brown, 2001:51; Hennen, 2008:98; Hill, 1997; Manley et al., 2007; Mosher, 2001:186; Suresha, 2009, 2009:16, 245–246, 273–283; Wright, 1997b:38). So while certainly most Bear writers link Bears to particular views of maleness and masculinity these are neither universal nor fixed. Sinfield has argued that the reclamation of masculinity for gay men has been a critical part of post-Stonewall gay politics (Sinfield, 1997:205–206), and Bears have been described as part of this trend (Fritscher, 2001; Hill, 1997; McCann, 1997:252; Hennen, 2008:10–13; Wright, 1997b). But Sinfield also crucially points out that gay men's gendered roles and expressions can be *'either parodic or in earnest, and sometimes both at once'* (Sinfield, 1997:206; see also Halperin, 2012:376–397).

Due to the multiple and contradictory articulations of Bear masculinities, and Sinfield's reminder of gay parody and camp, I suggest that the (I use the term pointedly) **straight** reading of Bear masculinities as always totally serious, straightforward, and omnipresent, may be worth re-interrogating by scholars of men and masculinities. Some readers will no doubt be appalled that though this book continually – indeed almost exclusively – discusses men,

it rarely discusses masculinity. The reason is partly empirical – masculinity simply did not come up much in the Bearspace project. But I'm also wary of what I see as a tendency even in invaluable critical scholarship to treat masculinity as a kind of master narrative, with a seemingly infinite array of masculinities at the heart of and explaining all of men's experiences (see for example Buchbinder, 2013; Kimmel & Messner, 2004). Such a conceptualisation of masculinities conveniently morphs to fit any data and can gloss over other ways of understanding men's lives (Allan, 2021; Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2012; Moller, 2007), and may result in the contradictions noted above because, of course, it turns out **everything** about men is or can be masculinity! Indeed the study of men is regularly framed as near-identical to the study of masculinities (Buchbinder, 2013; Hearn, 1996; Van Hoven & Hörschelmann, 2005:10–11), in a way that is not true regarding the study of women and of femininities. Of course work on masculinities is invaluable for understanding men – all of the works cited above sit proudly and heavily used in my bookcases and cabinets. And perhaps this book's lack of engagement with masculinity is somewhat of an over-correction on my part. But if so, I hope it's one that will help us glean new insights. What else might turn out to be significant for Bears – for men – if we displace masculinities as the master narrative?[1]

Fat studies

Fatness is a fundamental issue for Bear communities (Brown, 2001; Joy & Numer, 2018; McGrady, 2016), and Bear spaces have been seen as offering a chance for fat GBQ men, rejected by mainstream gay communities, to '*find peace within the gay community*' (Hendricks, 2001:74). Given the significance of weight and fatness for Bear communities, cultures, and identities, the burgeoning discipline of Fat Studies has much to offer and gain from the study of Bear. Stemming from an academic conference in 2004, Fat Studies sits in opposition to what is often termed '*obesity research*' (Cooper, 2010; Colls & Evans, 2009, 2014; Wann, 2009), so that while the former identifies fatness as a problem to be eliminated, the latter '*offers no opposition to the simple fact of human weight diversity, but instead looks at what people and societies make of this reality*' (Wann, 2009:x). Thus the point of Fat Studies is to move away from the singular focus on how to make fat people lose weight as soon as possible, and to recognise that fat is a multi-faceted phenomenon (Cooper, 2010). Fat Studies scholars argue that the instinctive linking of fatness and ill health forecloses the study of other aspects of fatness such as its role in organising societies, its shifting cultural meanings, its historical manifestations, its place in policymaking, and more (see for example Gilman, 2004; Erdman Farrel, 2011; Hester & Walters, 2016; Lupton, 2013; Solovay & Rothblum, 2009), and there is often great resistance to researchers who take approaches (as I do) which deviate from the cultural and political mandate to eliminate 'obesity' (Cooper, 2016; Monaghan, 2008:15; Solovay & Rothblum, 2009; Wann, 2009:x). As Francis Ray White (2012) has noted with regard to the British state's public weight-loss campaigns, '*Nowhere is the suggestion that*

life can be worthwhile, meaningful or ultimately livable as a fat person – it is "less of a life", and one headed swiftly towards death' (9; see also Crawford, 2017). Particularly given the poor success rates for interventions aiming to produce significant and sustained weight loss (Gaesser, 2009; Sikorski et al., 2011:7; Simpson et al., 2019), this should be of the most central relevance to research on Bears and my work has at its heart the idea of making fat GBQ men's lives more livable without the requirement of weight loss.

A key concept utilised widely in Fat Studies as well as obesity research and other scholarship on fatness is 'fat stigma', referring to fat as a physical mark used to categorise certain people as deviant from the norm and as having particular negative characteristics related to this (Pausé, 2017; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Saguy & Ward, 2011; Sikorski et al., 2011; Whitesel, 2014). For example in the case of fat people, we are often framed as inherently unhealthy (Colls & Evans, 2014; Cooper et al., 2014; Crawford, 2017; Evans, 2006; Gaesser, 2009; Monaghan, 2005; Solovay & Rothblum, 2009; White, 2014), irresponsible (Evans, 2006; Monaghan et al., 2013:253), lazy (Wann, 2009; Lupton, 2013; Puhl & Heuer, 2009), and sexually repulsive (Hester & Walters, 2016). Researchers have noted that fat stigma – distinct from fatness itself – can have serious negative impacts on fat people's mental and physical health (Pausé, 2017; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Sikorski et al., 2011). Men increasingly experience fat stigma and health-related impacts (Gilman, 2004; Puhl & Brownell, 2006; Monaghan, 2008; Monaghan & Malson, 2013; Mosher, 2001; Norman, 2013).

But fat-related research only rarely discusses fat men, so that '*To say [Fat Studies] is overwhelmingly concerned with fat female experience is something of an understatement'* (Whitesel, 2014:249, emphasis in original; see also Bell & McNaughton, 2007; Gough & Flanders, 2009; Longhurst, 2005; Forth, 2013; Monaghan, 2005, 2008; Colls, 2012; Klein, 2001; Norman, 2013; Solovay & Rothblum, 2009). Fat Studies and fat activisms (see Cooper, 2016) emerged from feminist writing and activisms (Cooper, 2010; Cooper et al., 2014; Solovay & Rothblum, 2009; Colls, 2012; Bell & McNaughton, 2007), in which male fatness has often been framed as patriarchal privilege (Forth, 2013; Norman, 2013; Bell & McNaughton, 2007:110). But outside Bear communities male fatness is often associated with femininity and weakness (Forth, 2013; McPhail & Bombak, 2015:541; White, 2014), particularly amongst gay men (Durgadas, 1998; Monaghan & Malson, 2013:305; Edmonds & Zieff, 2015:422; Mosher, 2001:175). So while it's understandable that scholarship of fat bodies have concentrated on women, given the longstanding stigmatisation of women's fatness in particular (Forth, 2013; Klein, 2001; Monaghan, 2005; Norman, 2013), given the intensification of fat stigma amongst GBQ men in particular (Blotcher, 1998; Foster-Gimbel, 2016; Whitesel, 2014) it's surprising that Fat Studies and related literatures have so rarely discussed fat GBQ men even when fatness and queerness have been explored together (Harker, 2016; see for example Cooper, 2016:150–152; Hester & Walters, 2016; Longhurst, 2005:255), with those rare references to Bears rarely

meriting more than a page or two at the most (e.g. Cooper, 2016:150–151; LeBesco, 2004:90–91; Monaghan, 2008:104; Whitesel, 2014:50–52). Fat activist Charlotte Cooper (2016) notes that the misogyny and anti-feminism present amongst some Bear communities (see also Gough & Flanders, 2009; Hennen, 2008:98; Manley et al., 2007:100; Suresha, 2009:57) and in some Bear writing (see for example De Mey, 1997; Greig, 2001; Sullivan, 2003) compounds this lack of attention. Some researchers have however linked Bears to Fat Studies and fat activist impulses to resist or challenge fat stigma (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; McGrady, 2016; Pyle & Klein, 2011), with writer Kirk Read even suggesting potentially radical implications of Bear for reshaping GBQ men's understandings of fatness and *'help[ing] queer culture to accept fat bodies as erotic and healthy'* (Suresha, 2009:247). However in my own research I've already noted the permeation of Bear spaces with fat stigma (McGlynn, 2022a; see also Chamberlin, 2018; Hennen, 2008:124; Monaghan, 2005; Suresha, 2009:57–77; Whitesel, 2014:52–55) and the role of fat stigma in the production of Bear spaces as comfortable for many fat GBQ men (McGlynn, 2022c). There are, then, many productive links yet to be developed across Fat Studies and related scholarship, and the study of Bears.

Sexuality & queer studies

Human sexualities are often popularly conceived via an 'ethnic model' (Beasley, 2005:123; Devor & Matte, 2006:402; Epstein, 2002; Gamson, 1995; Lovaas et al., 2006; Seidman, 1993, 2002; Rubin, 1993) which treats sexual orientation and identity as near-synonymous and fixed at birth, unchanging across history and geography. Scholars commonly describe this conceptualisation as 'essentialism' (Beasley, 2005:136–138; Fuss, 1989; Richardson, 2000:266; Sayer, 1997). More scholars have been drawn towards social constructionist approaches which focus on the cultural, historical, and spatial specificities of sexualities (Beasley, 1995:137; Delamater & Hyde, 1998; D'Emilio, 2002; Epstein, 2002; Gamson, 1995; Nash, 2005:117; Phelan, 2000:433; Rubin, 1993; Seidman, 1993:125–127; Weeks, 1985, 2002) and how these sexualities operate within society and as part of regimes of power structures (Beasley, 2005:165; Butler, 1990, 1997; Foucault, 1978; Jagose, 2009; Lehring, 1997:190–191; Seidman, 1993, 2002; Stein & Plummer, 2002). There is no evidence of belief in an 'essential' Bear identity in the associated literature, and writers appear highly aware of Bear's 'constructed' nature and historical and geographic specificity. However I would argue that the bulk of the Bear literature points to the widespread expression of perspectives much more aligned with poststructural queer approaches to sexualities (though I have no doubt most Bear writers wouldn't label them as such). Such approaches focus on analysing and critiquing processes through which some sexualities are made 'normal' (Beasley, 2005:161; Butler, 1997; During & Fealy, 1997:117; Fryer, 2010; Gamson, 1995; Hostetler & Herdt, 1998; Jagose, 2009; Warner, 1993). They also reject the idea of fixed sexual identities

(Beasley, 2005:164–168; Browne & Nash, 2010; Butler, 1997; Currah, 1997; Gamson, 1995; Seidman, 2001), articulating instead the instability, permeability, fluidity, and always ongoing co-constitution of sexualities and related identities (Beasley, 2005; Browne & Nash, 2010; Butler, 1997; Gamson, 1995; Hostetler & Herdt, 1998; Jagose, 2009; Muñoz, 1999). Queer scholarship does, however, recognise the social and material impacts of such identities (Butler, 1990; During & Fealy, 1997:120–124; Epstein, 2002; Seidman, 2002). When pushed, many Bear writers have acknowledged the plethora of shifting and contradictory attempts to define Bear and stressed the impossibility of stable definitions (e.g. Adams & Berry, 2013:316–317; Sahin, 2001; Suresha, 2009:15–17; Wilkinson, 2001:106; Wright, 1997b). Even Jack Fritscher, who has positioned himself as the originator of Bear and who at times expresses the most constricting claims about what Bears are, at other times (even in the same text) opens Bear up to near-limitless fluidity so that *'the concept of "bear" is blank enough to absorb countless male identities and fantasies'* (Fritscher, 2001:xxv; see also Suresha, 2009:79–96). Indeed Fritscher's constantly fluctuating articulations of what Bear is and is not based on the immediate context might be some of the best evidence of the inherent queerness of Bear as a sexual category!

One of the key thrusts of queer scholarship (Duggan, 2003; Richardson, 2005; Robinson, 2012; Stychin, 2003; Warner, 1993) and activism (Conrad, 2014; DeFilippis et al., 2018) has been the critique of sexual minorities' 'assimilation' into broadly heterosexual society and culture. Certainly Bears have been charged with actively desiring such assimilation (Hennen, 2008), and many Bear writers have stressed the related desire for Bears to be seen as just 'regular guys' instead of the popular image of gay men (Hendricks, 2001:74; Hill, 1997; Manley et al., 2007:99; Santoro, 2014; Sullivan, 2003; Suresha, 2009:235–236; Wright, 1997b:8). Such desires would seem to fit well into what Lisa Duggan (2003) has called the *'new homonormativity'*, referring to those GBQ men (in this case) who can be incorporated into and celebrated within contemporary societies organised around both reproductive heterosexuality and neoliberal capitalism due to their not rocking the social, cultural, or economic boat (see also Johnson, 2002:330; Stychin, 2000, 2003). But as geographer of sexualities Gavin Brown (2009) has argued, all-too-easy deployments of the concept of homonormativity tend to erase the multifaceted realities of GBQ men's lives – which may be highly marginalised in many respects – and can be used to simply disparage them (2012). Other scholars have argued that there is something importantly queer about fat people (LeBesco, 2004; White, 2014, 2014; Wykes, 2014) and that there are significant theoretical and activist affinities between queer and fat scholarship (LeBesco, 2001; Levy-Nevarro, 2009; McPhail & Bombak, 2015; Meleo-Erwin, 2012) particularly in the way that we are often framed as profoundly ab-normal and the inability of clear categories to capture fatness. So I think it would be a mistake to view Bear as a phenomenon of pure homonormative assimilationism – and here queer scholars may benefit from a close and empirically informed look at what's happening in Bear spaces.

Geography

This book is a work of Human Geography. This may surprise some readers, who might expect it to be positioned firmly within more well-known human-focused disciplines such as Sociology or Anthropology. Human Geography is promiscuously interdisciplinary, but its key focus is not society at large nor human cultures, but rather the spatial organisation of human life, and how such lives produce and are produced by particular spaces, places, and environments (for useful introductions to the field see Benko & Strohmayer, 2004; Bonnett, 2008; Hubbard, 2005; Nayak & Jeffrey, 2011). Human Geography has a relatively recent but rich and important body of studies relating to men and masculinities (Gorman-Murray & Hopkins, 2014; Longhurst, 2000; Van Hoven & Hörschelmann, 2005), fatness and bodies (Colls & Evans, 2009; Longhurst, 2005; Hopkins, 2012), and sexualities (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Browne et al., 2007; Johnston & Longhurst, 2010). Geographers argue that such phenomena are not simply spatially differentiated, but are produced within and through spatial relationships – and that spatial relationships are produced through them in turn. Regarding sexual identities in particular, scholars have examined the production of LGBTQ spaces and how these are co-constitutive of LGBTQ identities, communities, and practices (Browne et al., 2007; Knopp, 1998). Despite this, geographers have not yet studied Bears or our spaces. The only exceptions are my own short article outlining the key spatial lenses of North American masculinities, globalisation, and the spaces created by Bears (McGlynn, 2021), and a chapter by Papadopoulos (2001) in Wright's *The Bear Book II* which outlines a broadly poststructural account of '*Bearspace*' which '*straddles the local-global nexus by the grace of information technologies, capital, and civil liberty' (148), with 'ephemeral fixing in localities through bear pride and social events… fleeting fixing in linear cruise spaces, and… permanent marking of the microspace of the body with bear tattoos and piercings*' (ibid.). I'm indebted to Papadopoulos not only for inspiring the title of my project but also for the ambition and holistic nature of his conceptualisation, which encouraged me in turn to address the spatialities of Bears at multiple scales and temporalities in my research.

From the perspective of a Geographer, mindful of significant spatial variations in allegedly 'globalised' queer cultures and communities (see for example Blidon & Brunn, 2022; Brown et al., 2010; Epprecht, 2004; Jackson, 2009; Manalansan, 2003; McLelland, 2000; Patton & Sánchez-Eppler, 2000; Stella et al., 2015), it is notable to me that the overwhelming majority of research and writing on Bears has focused on North America and particularly the USA (McGlynn, 2021). With regard to my own country of the UK, it's difficult to over-emphasise the dearth of scholarship on Bears, with only a couple of reflective pieces (Brown, 2001; Watson, 2001) and a single paper based on 10 interviews from a physical health perspective (Gough & Flanders, 2009). These texts are of great value, but they call attention to the need for more geographically attentive writing and research on Bears in the UK as well as elsewhere in the world. My methodology was also developed with

Geography in mind. Empirical studies of Bears have tended to be based on data collected in a single area (e.g. Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; Gough & Flanders, 2009) or don't address geographic variation (e.g. Manley et al., 2007; McGrady, 2016), and some sites investigated can be highly atypical of Bear communities and spaces (e.g. Hennen's [2008] research at a Bear camping weekend). This isn't to dismiss this work – readers can see how heavily my own research is informed by these scholars – but I do want to address the possibility, even likelihood, of geographic variation in Bear spaces, communities, cultures, practices, and identities, even just within the UK. So as a Geographer, I hope to show that the discipline has much to offer for the study of GBQ men like Bears.

The Bear literature

I utilise each of the scholarly fields above, and hope to introduce Bears to those situated within them. But even more than these fields, I draw heavily on and develop a sprawling and diverse Bear literature – that is, the array of scholarship, critical writing, and historical reflection written by and about us. This is explicitly not limited to 'academic' work published by those working within higher education institutions. Academic work on Bears is surprisingly fragmented, spread thinly across an exceptionally wide variety of disciplines and with no large-scale empirical studies having been undertaken. Perhaps as a consequence of this there are very many aspects of Bear and associated identities, communities, cultures, practices, spaces, and so on which have yet to be explored by academics. But there is a significant body of critical and insightful writing about Bears by non-academic Bears and others, from both scholarly and community perspectives, as well as invaluable personal and reflective accounts. As my hope is clear through my extensive use of it in this book and elsewhere, I don't view this para-academic and non-academic work as merely a supplement to the academic Bear literature, to be dispensed with when more 'proper' academic studies come along. For me it is a vital and under-utilised body of knowledge in its own right, and one which all too often belies the easy generalisations of academic researchers (like myself), particularly those who are not themselves Bears or part of Bear communities (unlike myself). So it's ultimately this rich Bear literature that the book explicitly responds to and develops, focusing as it does on advancing knowledge of Bears in our own contexts rather than asking 'What do Bears teach us about X?' (pace Berlant & Warner, 1995).

The Bearspace project

Despite the sprawling Bear literatures outlined in this chapter, larger and more developed studies are vanishingly rare and researchers consistently call for more empirical research in particular (Manley et al., 2007; Moskowitz et al., 2013; Quidley-Rodriguez & De Santis, 2015). Responding to such

calls and seeking to contribute to the bodies of literature outlined in the previous section, I developed Bearspace – an empirical research project which aimed to investigate the role of UK Bear spaces in the marginalisation and/or empowerment of fat GBQ men. From this aim, readers can see that one of the distinctive elements of Bearspace is that it wasn't about Bears per se – or at least, not only about Bears – but rather the **spaces** created by, used by, and associated with Bears; and about the **people** in such spaces.

The Bearspace methodology was split across two phases.

In Phase 1, I created a Bearspace Database using Microsoft Excel in order to collect and organise information about potential 'Bear spaces' in the UK. Online spaces may be significant Bearspaces (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015:427; Kampf, 2000:62–77; Kucera, 2001; Marks Ridinger, 1997:84–85; Morris, 2009) but this project was primarily interested in physical sites, and so the Bearspace Database focused on these. The database was populated using information from UK-based LGBTQ media (including magazines, websites, and social media groups) as well as recommendations from UK Bear communities which I solicited via email, word of mouth, and social media posts. Phase 1 was designed to identify the most suitable Bear spaces to investigate and collect data from in Phase 2, therefore the Bearspace Database captured information which would help to achieve a geographic spread of sites, to classify sites as Bear spaces, and to assess the ease of data collection.

Box 1.1: Details recorded in the Bearspace database

Main details

Name
UK region
Town/city
Type of space
Activities occurring
Key contact name and contact details

Categorisation as a Bearspace

Evidence of active identification with Bears
Links with specific Bear sub-categories or other GBQ men's subcultures

Ease of data collection

Social media details and/or web presence
Upcoming events, or periods useful for data collection
Local LGBTQ media for advertising

A total of 64 potential UK Bear spaces were recorded in the Bear spaces Database, including pubs, clubs, hotels, B&Bs, saunas, temporary events, and social group meetups. Sites were then negatively flagged if they had only tentative links with Bears (e.g. through lack of iconographic or textual reference to Bears), which were not in the UK, or which appeared to be defunct; sites were positively flagged if they were clearly linked with Bears and if they would facilitate easy sampling (per Box 1). Consequently 27 sites were coded as **unsuitable** for Phase 2; 29 sites as **potentially suitable**; and 8 sites as **ideally suited**. Ethical approval for primary data collection was granted by the University of Brighton's research ethics committee (Ref. 2018–0476). The owners/organisers of 5 of the 8 ideally suited sites (see Box 2, and Figure 1.2) were able to support data collection and granted informed consent for it to take place, generously assisting me to secure participants by sharing my recruitment materials (see Figure 1.3) via their own advertising and activities, as well as making site attendees aware of my presence as a visiting researcher. Some organisers also participated themselves. At fixed sites data collection was scheduled to coincide with social meetups or activities to support sampling.

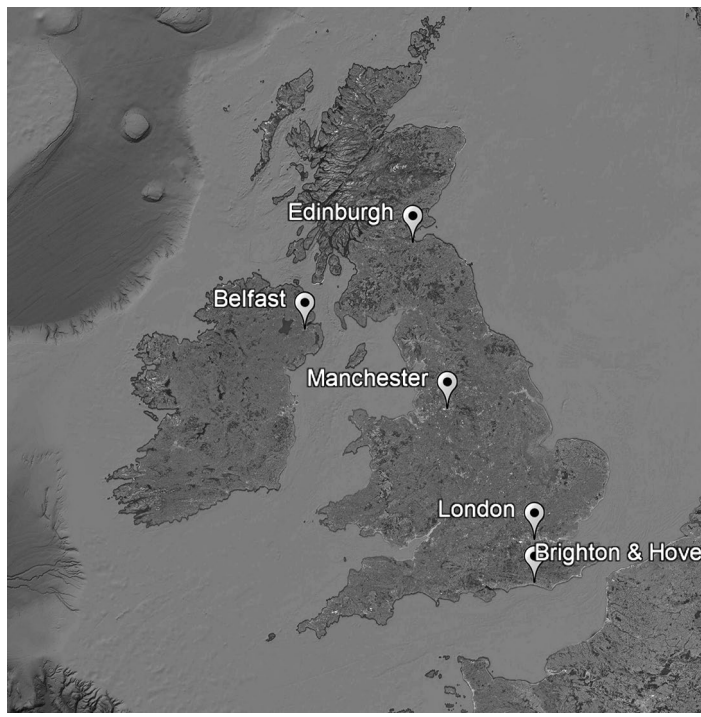

Figure 1.2 Map of case study site locations within the UK, created by the author using Google Earth Pro.

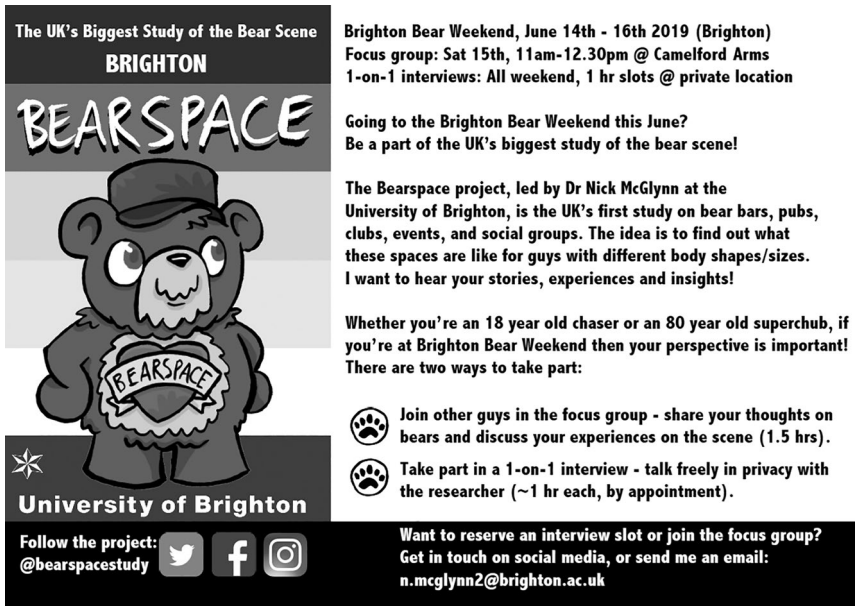

Figure 1.3 Bearspace promotional flyer for Brighton Bear Weekend, designed by Phil Corbett (www.philcorbett.com).

Box 1.2: Bearspace data collection sites

- **Manbears Pre-HiBearnation** (2018, Manchester) – multiple events and club nights over 3 days
- **BritBears Sunday Social** (2019, London) – social meetup in an LGBTQ pub associated with Bears
- **BearScots Saturday Social** (2019, Edinburgh) – social meetup in an LGBTQ-friendly pub
- **Belfast Bears** (2019, Belfast) – activity-based social meetup in a non-LGBTQ space
- **Brighton Bear Weekend** (2019, Brighton) – multiple events and club nights over 3 days

In Phase 2, I generated primary qualitative data through three methods. First, I facilitated a focus group on the site itself immediately before, during, or after the event or activity, intended to capture intra-community discussion and to support participants in addressing the site itself. A semi-structured focus group schedule invited participants to discuss their relationships with Bear

and with Bear communities, plus their experiences in that specific Bearspace. Second, I conducted one-to-one interviews in the days immediately following the focus group. These were originally intended to be follow-ups with focus group participants, to explore more personal issues around bodies and to allow for the sharing of private thoughts and experiences with less encouragement to 'perform' in-group Bear norms (as suggested by Mosokwitz et al., 2013). In practice numerous people who weren't able to attend the focus groups requested to take part in an interview. Therefore two semi-structured interview schedules were used, the first (for those from the focus group) concentrating on Bear bodies and fatness plus issues from the focus group, and the second (for those not from the focus group) merging this with the focus group schedule. This meant that all participants were able to discuss the full range of prompts. Both focus group and interview participants were given information sheets and signed consent forms after data collection was complete – these also gathered participants' rough ages, and a table of basic demographic details was later generated using this and participants' audio-recorded self-descriptions (see Table 1.1). Some participants requested that certain discussions were cut from the dataset, and these requests were always honoured. Third, I wrote or audio-recorded my own auto/ethnographic observations and reflections before, during, and after site visits. In line with Hayano's (1979) original conceptualisation of autoethnography as ethnographic research which both utilises and critically interrogates researchers' '*native vantage points*' (101), my approach synthesises my 'ethnographic' observations of Bear communities and spaces with my 'autoethnographic' reflections on my experiences as a member of Bear communities and participant in Bear spaces. I use the term 'auto/ethnographic' to capture these two linked facets. These observations and reflections were unstructured aside from being written with the project in mind. The final qualitative dataset comprises 5 focus groups and 24 interviews recorded across 32 hours of audio. My transcribed auto/ethnographic writing comprises 120 pages of A4, and the total transcribed dataset consists of 868 pages. Transcription was completed by a professional transcriber familiar with LGBTQ communities and terminologies. All 32 participants except for myself have been given pseudonyms, and have had their demographic details left vague to ensure anonymity (see Table 1.1). Data that might have potentially identified them have been made more generic, or have been cut from the dataset.

To analyse the Bearspace data I used the NVivo software package to help organise the dataset, and Ginny Braun and Vicky Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to actually analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). RTA is a very flexible approach to qualitative data analysis, which focuses on answering specific research questions and which incorporates a critical reflective element (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Basing my analysis on Braun and Clarke's recommended six stage process, I analysed my data by (1) reading the entire dataset alongside the recorded audio to familiarise myself with it; (2) labelling chunks of data (e.g. 'coding') to help navigate the dataset, with

Table 1.1 Demographic details of Bearspace participants

Name	*Age*	*Self-describes as Fat*	*Self-describes as Trans*	*Self-describes as Person of Colour*	*Location*
Dougie	Late 20s	Yes	No	No	Manchester
Scott	Early 30s	No	No	No	Manchester
Ben	Mid 30s	Yes	No	No	Manchester
Timothy	Early 20s	Yes	No	No	Manchester
Ryan	Early 30s	Yes	No	No	Manchester
Guy	Mid 30s	Yes	No	No	Manchester
Levi	Early 60s	Somewhat	No	No	Manchester
Carolus	Mid 40s	Yes	No	No	London
Jeff	Late 30s	Somewhat	No	No	London
Aaron	Early 50s	Yes	No	Yes	London
Malcolm	Mid 40s	No	No	No	London
Chuck	Late 30s	Yes	No	Yes	London
Gerald	Late 40s	No	No	No	Edinburgh
Gregory	Mid 20s	Somewhat	No	No	Edinburgh
Rex	Mid 40s	Yes	No	No	Edinburgh
Jay	Mid 40s	Yes	No	No	Edinburgh
Frank	Mid 40s	No	No	No	Edinburgh
Alex	Early 40s	Yes	No	No	Belfast
Kevin	Late 40s	Yes	No	No	Belfast
Joe	Late 50s	Yes	No	No	Belfast
Cillian	Mid 30s	No	No	No	Belfast
Ross	Early 40s	Somewhat	No	No	Belfast
Arthur	Mid 60s	No	No	No	Belfast
Oscar	Mid 20s	Yes	Yes	No	Brighton
Daniel	Mid 30s	Yes	Yes	No	Brighton
Jonathan	Mid 30s	Yes	No	No	Brighton
Justin	Late 50s	No	No	No	Brighton
Christian	Early 60s	Yes	No	No	Brighton
Brian	Mid 60s	Yes	No	No	Brighton
Robin	Mid 30s	Somewhat	No	No	Brighton
Stephen	Late 50s	Yes	No	No	Brighton
Nick (researcher)	Late 30s	Yes	No	No	All

a total of 261 codes created; (3) developing a list of potential themes; (4) reworking and refining these potential themes; (5) finalising a list of themes with titles and summaries; and (6) producing a thematic report with analytic interpretations of data excerpts. During each stage I made analytic notes linked to the data itself and also in separate memos, much of which has been developed into the discussions in this book. RTA doesn't come with a 'built-in' theoretical framework and Braun and Clarke stress the importance of users explaining the framework/s they use. For myself, my analysis is informed by poststructural geographic accounts of space and place (see Doel, 1999; Massey, 2005; Murdoch, 2006) whereby space is not simply a singular static container within which objects are positioned and their coordinates

noted, but a dynamic field of many related spaces constantly being created and re-created in tension with each other and a wide variety of human and non-human actors (Murdoch, 2006:11–23; Whatmore, 2002). I also draw on queer poststructural accounts of sexualities and sexual subjectivities which reject the idea of 'essential' (Fuss, 1989) unchanging and innate sexualities, instead recognising the instability, fluidity, porousness, and constant re-construction of sexual categories (Browne & Nash, 2010; Butler, 2012). This is **not** to say that such categories don't have real social and material impacts (During & Fealy, 1997:120–124; Epstein, 2002; Seidman, 2002), nor to claim that such fluidity and porousness is limitless (Butler, 2012). But the focus of such accounts is on how (in my case) definitions and identifications of GBQ men and Bears operate within society and as part of wider power processes (Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1978; Jagose, 2009; Lehring, 1997:190–191; Seidman, 2002; Stein & Plummer, 2002). My Bearspace Findings Report (McGlynn, 2022a) and short Community Summary (McGlynn, 2022b) have already presented my RTA specifically with regard to the Bearspace project's aim. This book presents further themes (organised by chapter), plus additional data and analysis, which were less strictly linked to the aim and thus cut from the report, but which I believe to be of immense relevance for understanding UK Bear spaces.

Chapter outline

Having read this introductory chapter, I hope that readers have gained a better knowledge about Bears and associated communities, cultures, and spaces, as well as how the study of Bears might fit into and contribute to various fields of academic inquiry. Readers should also have an understanding of how I developed and conducted the Bear spaces research project which this book is based on. In the coming chapters, my primary aims are to describe what's happening in UK Bear spaces, and to demonstrate the importance and utility of geographic thinking for studying Bear lives, communities, cultures, and spaces. The rest of this book will present empirical evidence from the Bearspace project along with my analyses, organised in a roughly scalar structure. I make extensive use of excerpts from the dataset to present Bears' perspectives and to evidence my arguments and analyses, rather than asking readers to simply take my word for it! Each chapter presents its own set of findings from the Bearspace project, but they also introduce and gradually develop three key overarching interventions into the study of Bears.

Chapter 2, '**Bear Identifications**', begins my intervention into debates around defining Bears, or what Bears are. Noting that scholarship on Bears – from the Bear literature and beyond – has consistently described Bear as an identity, the chapter demonstrates Bearspace participants' widespread ambivalence about identifying as a Bear and their light-touch engagements with Bear spaces and communities. 'Bear' is shown to be a convenient conceptual slot that GBQ men might 'fall into' and decide to 'go with', not something

that they were particularly attached to themselves. Nevertheless it was useful and important specifically for the lack of wider commitment required to access socialising. Moving away from 'identity' as the definitional basis for Bears – in the UK context at least – the chapter then develops and responds to an 'appearance vs attitude' definitional framework from the Bear literature. Against this literature's prioritisation of 'attitude', the chapter shows that bodily 'appearance' is the default criterion used by men to identify themselves and others as Bears, and argues that we should consider Bear as a loose conceptual category based primarily (not exclusively) on bodies.

Chapter 3, '**Bear Bodies**', further develops my focus on GBQ men's bodies begun in Chapter 2. The chapter begins by rejecting any limited or universally applicable definition of Bears based on bodies, and stresses the inherent looseness of Bear as a category specifically because of it basis in bodies. It then explains terms used to address this looseness by guys in UK Bear spaces, and introduces the first of my overarching interventions – my own term '**Bear/y**' as a tool for grappling with the inherent ambiguity of Bear as a category. The chapter proceeds to explore the highly specific bodily features of significance for 'fitting in' with Bear, through a 'bodily topographies' approach adapted from Geographer Rachel Colls (2007). This approach identified three significant features of Bear/y bodies for 'fitting in'. These are the positioning of different bodily tissues (e.g. muscle, fat, skin); the sensuous qualities of such tissues as they 'intra-act' with each other (e.g. the feel of hard muscle vs soft fat); and their 'performativity' (e.g. their movement and interaction with clothing, furniture, etc.).

Chapter 4, '**Bear Venues**', describes the case study sites visited through the Bearspace project. It notes a dearth of permanent self-described Bear spaces in the UK, with the vast majority being temporary and ephemeral spaces like club nights or social meetups. The chapter explains why participants felt this was an issue for Bear communities. It then presents my suggestions for how we should understand and define a 'Bearspace'. Following Geographers of Sexualities I argue that Bear spaces cannot be inherently such but are instead produced, and that they too are 'Bear/y' rather than unambiguously 'Bear'. I then introduce the second of my overarching interventions by explaining how a **critical mass of proximate bodies** is a key way in which space becomes a Bearspace or is 'Beared'. The chapter does however also note the significance of Bear-related imagery and signage, and also perceptions of a particular Bear 'atmosphere'. Against predominant readings of Bear spaces as focused on appropriating traditional masculinities, this chapter highlights that atmospheres of friendliness and socialising were those felt to define a Bearspace in the UK context.

Chapter 5, '**Bear Cities**', advances my critique of universalising approaches to 'Bear'. Noting evidence in the Bear literature of inter-national variation in Bear, the chapter develops this by exploring intra-national variation in the UK. Focused on different cities, it demonstrates the importance of London for UK Bear communities but shows that the capital's Bear spaces and

communities were perceived to be dominated by men with trim muscular bodies and negative attitudes. Bear spaces in smaller UK cities were felt to be necessarily friendlier and with more bodily inclusivity – necessarily, because the smaller population enforced more mixing and sharing of space. The chapter thus elucidates the third of my overarching interventions, i.e. a **critique of universal accounts of Bears**, which can frame Bears and Bear communities as relatively homogeneous. The chapter then assesses how the city of Manchester was positioned as slipping between these two extremes, again as a function of its population size. Together, these explorations emphasise the need for geographically sensitive approaches to understanding Bears, so that even national-level studies reveal internal differentiation.

Chapter 6, '**Bear Boundaries**', finally tackles the unspoken assumption that Bear spaces are men's spaces. It argues that simple misogyny is not the only or even the primary reason for GBQ men's desire to maintain Bear spaces as men's spaces. Some men had experienced stigmatising objectification and body-focused mockery from women, making them wary. But in the chapter I also show that women's mere presence in Bear spaces, absent any problematic behaviour, disrupted the critical mass of Bear/y bodies needed to produce and maintain a Bearspace. This in turn made bigger and fatter men in particular feel uncomfortable about their bodies in spaces where they would be more visible and performative (e.g. clubbing spaces) – in more relaxed Bear social settings women's presence was felt to be less of, or not, a problem. At the end of the chapter I grapple with the fraught politics of potentially excluding women from Bear spaces, suggesting that certain Bear spaces are worth maintaining as men's spaces in their capacity for offering comfort and inclusion for highly marginalised (e.g. by age and body size) GBQ men.

Finally in Chapter 7, '**Bear Spatialities**', I re-emphasise my advocacy for a geographically-sensitive approach to studying Bears. Here I also synthesise what I see as three modest but important overarching interventions, developed gradually across each chapter, that expand our knowledge of spatialised Bear experiences, and indicate potential new approaches for grappling with Bear in future research, scholarship and community organisation. First, I establish the significance of achieving what I call a 'critical mass' of proximate bodies for defining Bears and Bear spaces, and consequently for assessing some of their inclusions and exclusions. Second, I argue for the importance of grappling with the inherent instability of the term 'Bear' through an array of related but deliberately ambiguous terms, captured through deployment of the new term 'Bear/y'. And third, I demonstrate that the use of geographically-sensitive research, extended participation in Bear communities, and engagement with the Bear literature challenges supposedly universal accounts and supports future research investigation both inter- and intranational variation amongst Bears.

It's possible that some scholars and academic readers may feel that this book isn't theoretical enough, that it doesn't apply or develop social and sexual theoretical frameworks to an advanced degree, or that it is too

'descriptive'. But as I've argued elsewhere (McGlynn, 2021) there is a widespread lack of data and knowledge about **what is actually happening** amongst Bears and in Bear spaces, particularly here in the UK – the actual, lived, embodied experiences and realities of Bears and others in and around Bear spaces. My intention is indeed to describe these realities and experiences to readers, so as to lead to greater understanding in the future. The book, then, is neither a love-letter to nor an indictment of Bears, but rather a caution against over-generalisation, and an encouragement to follow the example of Geographers and to actually go to places.

Note

1 For a similarly *'wild'* suggestion that we might *'study objects, that include men, without masculinities'*, see Allan (2021).

2 Bear identifications

Researching Bear identities

Is Bear an identity? Certainly for decades LGBTQ scholars, activists and cultural commentators have pointed out that 'identity' has become the primary lens through which LGBTQ lives are understood, and the primary concept through which our lives are politically fought for, represented, and mobilised (Altman, 1996; Bernstein, 2002; Epstein, 2002; Gamson, 1995; Miceli, 2005; Nash, 2005; Seidman, 1993:110; Thompson, 2004). Identity and the nature of identity has long been the subject of much scholarship amongst GBQ men (e.g. Cohen, 1991; D'Emilio, 2002; Foucault, 1978; Ortiz, 1993; Sinfield, 1997). Countering essentialist accounts of being 'born this way' (e.g. that gay men have an innate, fully fledged gay identity, bi men a bi identity, etc.), GBQ men's scholars (e.g. Altman, 1997; Cohen, 1991; Ortiz, 1993; Sinfield, 1997) as well as scholars of identity more widely (e.g. Hall, 2000; Holstein & Gubrium in Woodward, 2002; Du Gay et al., 2000; Teather, 1999; Woodward, 2002) have shown that far from being universal phenomena, contemporary sexual identities like gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. are geographically, temporally and culturally constructed and emerge out of particular contexts, and not static, fixed, or internally consistent or coherent – though this certainly does not mean that they are **completely** fluid or without constraint. Queer scholarship and activism has taken an even more destabilising approach to the idea of an authentic sexual identity, resisting the idea of identity as an innate and unchanging essence (Bell & Valentine, 1995:22; Currah, 1997; Hostetler & Herdt, 1998; Rahman & Jackson, 1997; Seidman, 2002), or the idea that there can be a single (albeit socially constructed) definition of a sexual identity (Epstein, 2002; Gamson, 1995; Phelan, 2000:433; Rubin, 1993; Seidman, 1993:125–127; Weeks, 1985, 2002). Poststructural queer scholarship instead stresses the multiple, shifting ways in which LGBTQ people and others define and identify themselves (Beasley, 2005:164–168; Browne & Nash, 2010; Butler, 2012; Currah, 1997; Fryer, 2010; Gamson, 1995; Halberstam, 2005; Jagose, 2009; Rasmussen, 2006), with such identities always in the process of being re/constructed and never 'complete' (Browne & Nash, 2010; Butler, 2012; Hostetler & Herdt, 1998; Jackson, 2009).

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Most texts on Bears generally take for granted that Bear **is** an identity and use this term to explain what Bear is (see for example chapters throughout Wright, 1997a, 2001a; Suresha, 2009). At times Bears are said to be defined through men's identification as such, so that Bear archivist and historian Les Wright has suggested that *'In theory, anyone who self-identifies as a bear* **is** *one'* (Wright, 2001b:4, emphasis in original). Despite the destabilising and often outright anti-identity thrust of most queer and much GBQ men's scholarship, writers on Bears (Hennen, 2008:110; Hendricks, 2001; Monaghan, 2005) have suggested that the majority of men in Bear spaces seem to 'identify' as Bears in a relatively fixed and static way, and recently Quidley-Rodriguez and de Santis (2019) have provided a concept map of Bear identity. This appears in line with Hennen's participants at Bear camping weekends, who framed their Bear identities as both stable and natural and who actively resisted the idea that they might be at all fluid or constructed (Hennen, 2008:23, 110). Some other writers on (and critics of) Bears have suggested that Bears are in fact obsessed with their identities. For example, in a pair of excellent blog posts discussing the expansion of Bear identifications in the UK, Morris (2009) describes Bear as an identity with discrete *'integrity and essence'* which is not *'compromise[d]'* by its movement into different contexts or adoption by different men. He sees Bear as distinct from but *'swallowing'* other GBQ men's communities rather than being hybridised and produced through them in turn. He suggests Bears are captives of this identity: *'as much as bears can delimit the boundaries of their shared identity, as much as they can propagate that identity, they cannot for a second break free of that identity'* (ibid.)

But there has been little interrogation of what Bear-as-identity might actually mean. The expected move of a scholar with a background in queer studies (as I have) here would be to present a poststructural queer approach to Bear identity. And indeed this is what I've suggested in my initial forays into the conceptualisation of Bear (McGlynn, 2021). But it's not quite the move I'm going to make in this chapter. Instead, I want to suggest that scholars' fixation on identity as the main conceptual tool for defining Bears – whether essential, socially constructed, or in poststructural fluidity – as a bit of a trap. I'll argue that assuming that Bear is best conceived of as an identity, and that identifying as a Bear is how Bears are best defined, might create or reinforce a lot of incorrect assumptions about Bears, UK Bear spaces, and the people in them.

Some scholars attempt to make clear distinctions between terms such as 'identity', 'self', 'subject', 'agent', and other terms, though they can often be used fairly interchangeably by scholars as well as by people in everyday language (Woodward, 2002). This may seem like a fairly pedantic point about conflating terms, but in fact it cuts to the heart of some of the most critical scholarship on identity – for, as Paul Du Gay, Jessica Evans and Peter Redman have argued, *'the term "identity" often provides only simple cover for a plethora of very particular and non-transferable debates'* (Du Gay et al., 2000:2). That is, the term 'identity' might be getting used a lot to discuss

quite different kinds of phenomena. Consequently Du Gay et al. stress the importance of identifying and understanding what 'identity' might mean in specific contexts rather than applying general rules or theories of identity to that context. They also argue in favour of properly **describing** what these identities are (something they believe there has not been enough of) prior to developing theories. I've found their argument striking when trying to analyse identity in the Bearspace project data, because when reading texts on identity I have rarely found anything that seems to describe the kind of identity indicated by phrases like 'I identify as a Bear'. Certainly, unlike other apparent identities (e.g. 'gay', 'white', 'Scottish') there is virtually no belief (within or without Bear communities) in 'Bear' as an inherent, unchanging and universal feature of some people. That is, aside from occasional assertions of Bears as 'real' or 'natural' men (for examples see Hennen, 2008; Kampf, 2000; Suresha, 2009), there exist no serious essentialist accounts of Bear identity. Most Bears and people who know about Bears seem extremely aware of Bear's fairly recent emergence. Hennen (2008) presents Bear as a relatively coherent and stable identity, while Quidley-Rodriguez and de Santis describe the *'fluid nature of Bear identity'* (Quidley-Rodriguez & de Santis, 2019:72). But Quidley-Rodriguez and de Santis view this as a *'limitation'* of their study and an artefact of researchers' lack of conceptual consistency. Their aim still appears to be to establish fixed characteristics of a Bear identity – an identity which develops over time into a relatively static and complete final form. I've previously suggested that the Bearspace project and discussions from the wider Bear literature suggest that the inconsistency of Bear identities isn't so much a limitation as a feature of Bear as a phenomenon (McGlynn, 2021; also suggested by Gomes Bastos, 2022). But my aim in this chapter is to show not only that the Bearspace project doesn't support the conceptual framing of 'Bear identity' as coherent and consistent, but also to move us away from using 'identity' as the default conceptual tool for defining Bears. Instead, I'll argue in favour of thinking about bodies to define Bears.

One of the strongest interventions of this chapter is my evidenced argument that the idea of 'identity' as it's most usually conceived of by theorists of identity and amongst LGBTQ communities – as a deeply held sense of authentic selfhood – just doesn't appear particularly relevant in understanding what's happening in UK Bear spaces. As noted in the Bear literature, GBQ men's identifications as Bears or with Bear cultures/communities can be seen to change in meaning, intensity, and emotional qualities over space and time (e.g. Suresha, 2009:248, 297–298), and participants in Bear communities include those who don't identify as Bears (Hennen, 2008:100; Suresha, 2009:35, 204; Wright, 2001b:59). There are also very substantial overlaps with other GBQ men's communities (Fritscher, 2001:xxix; Hennen, 2008). But when analysing the Bearspace data, what surprised me the most about how men talked about 'being a Bear' was how **ambivalent** they were about it. For most it just didn't seem like a big part of their lives and certainly not a sense of 'who I really am'. So in this chapter I'll argue that whether static or fluid, 'identity' as a concept is not the most useful or appropriate lens

through which to understand Bear (in the UK at least). I will demonstrate, first, that men's identification as Bears tends to be surprisingly casual, tentative, and ambivalent, and that labelling one's self as a Bear is often simply a matter of nonchalant convenience rather than personal importance. Second, I show that men's engagement with Bear spaces, scenes and communities – the ways in which they interact with and participate in them – similarly tends to be light, temporary, and nebulous. Third, following Du Gay and Rorty's injunctions to describe and contextualise apparent 'identities', I'll suggest that what could be interpreted as individualised Bear identities in the dataset and elsewhere might actually be something quite different. Drawing on and reformulating a common 'appearance vs attitude' definitional framework from the Bear literature, I argue that in the UK context Bear is often and simply used as a loose category to describe certain people (almost always GBQ men) based primarily on their physical appearance, but with a relaxed and body-positive 'attitude' as a common supplement. This is notably at odds with the extant Bear literature, which as I show has tended to prioritise a masculine 'attitude'. For those of us who want to understand what's happening in Bear communities, cultures and spaces, these three points suggest that a focus only on self-identified Bears could give a false impression of what's happening in Bear spaces, scenes and communities – and for those we might believe to identify as Bears. This is one of the most important points for those wishing to understand Bear and Bear spaces, which I believe has been overlooked due to the instinctive conceptualisation of Bear as individual identity.

To be clear, my intention is explicitly **not** to suggest that identity is independent from body (or vice versa), or to establish an untenable mind vs body account of Bears. The pivot suggested is instead away from identity as the go-to conceptual tool or even casual discourse for defining 'Bear' (as a phenomenon) and 'Bears' (as people). And as I show in the following chapter, my account of bodies retains their psychic, social, and discursive nature. I'm also not presenting this as the one single 'correct' way of understanding Bear, 'What Bear really is'. Such declarations would rip apart on contact with Bear spaces and lives across any degree of space and/or time, and in future chapters I show how concentrating on Bear bodies is particularly important in the contemporary UK context. Instead my intention is to present a new and, I argue, important way of understanding Bear – a shift in perspective which can be taken – which involves moving beyond identity-based accounts. Ultimately I suspect having a variety of different intellectual approaches to use – including ones which aren't about identity – will benefit all of us interested in Bears.

'I just go with it' – ambivalent identifications

Scholarship on identities generally discusses a unified sense of self (even if critiquing this supposed unity as poststructural queer scholars do), and present identities as highly significant in people's lives – as deeply important to and constitutive of who we 'really' are (Du Gay et al., 2000).

But this doesn't seem to be the case for men in UK Bear spaces.

Bearspace participants, recruited from the men who were actually in UK Bear spaces, only very rarely said that they 'identified' as a Bear, or used words like 'identity' or 'identify' to describe their or others' relationships with Bear. This is undoubtedly related to the design of the project's data collection methods – neither my interview nor focus group questions/prompts used the words 'identity' or 'identify', or asked participants if they 'identified' as Bears. This was an explicit choice so as not to actively lead the men into this kind of language. Instead, participants were more usually asked if they 'See themselves as Bears'. It's important to consider that the relative lack of explicit use of words like 'identity', 'identify', etc. cannot in and of itself be taken to mean that Bear identity **never** refers to a deeply held sense of self for some men. And it could be the case that these men were using other words to express identities. But in a wider LGBTQ cultural context within which identity discourse has become perhaps the key way of articulating an 'authentic self' for sexual and gender minorities, I found it surprising not to see the language of 'identity' used by participants.

To demonstrate and discuss how Bearspace participants actually described their personal relationships with Bear, here I present an extended discussion from the Edinburgh focus group:

Nick: Do you guys all see yourselves as Bears?

Gerald: Yeah.

Gregory: Yes and no.

Frank: Yes and no?

Gregory: Yeah… 'Cause I used to be bigger and I lost a lot more weight recently. It's getting to the point where I'm there going, "Well, can I classify myself as a Bear?". It's more "Am I allowed to?", than "Am I actually a Bear". Because I'm younger as well, it also… There are things like Cubs and Otters and things like that, the definitions are rather… There's a lot of different subgroups. So it's difficult to then define how I feel about myself. So again, yes and no.

Gerald: I think for me, I always think of Bears being taller or wider, but I'm short and thinner. Although I've got the belly, still my body frame doesn't match. But when you think of Bears, with hair and beards, then yeah I do. I'm not an Otter any longer 'cause I've got the belly, and I'm not a Cub 'cause I'm far too old, so what the hell? What defines a Bear? What defines a Cub, what defines an Otter? What defines a Twink? What defines anything?

Gregory: And there lies my problem as well.

Jay: I think I would identify definitely as a Bear, but I have been told by several more classic Bears that I'm just a Chub with facial hair. But hey, that's their opinion.

Rex: I feel very Bear, but as a general term. The Bear community was the first place that I managed to feel that I properly belonged to, when it first started appearing many years ago. And although I would only use the word Cub to describe myself back then, I

think all the way through I still felt like I was one of the Bears? And I'm not hairy, so I'm not classic bear at all, but Bear… Bear fits me probably better even than gay sometimes.

Frank: I think I'm comfortable with it in a general way. I don't get hung up on any sub-labelling or anything like that, that doesn't concern me. I think I'm comfortable with it because it describes a scene and a group of people that I feel comfortable with… I identify with… my early experiences of the Bear scene being this non-judgemental space…

Gregory: I rather agree with that and that's why I feel like I am a Bear, because it's less judgemental. It's less, "You need to fit into this stereotype". Even when I was bigger, I could feel comfortable being myself.

Edinburgh focus group

Among these participants we can see a variety of qualified identifications with Bear. Only Jay (mid 40s, fat with no facial hair) says that he *'identif[ies]'* as a Bear, but distinguishes himself from *'classic Bears'* – as does Rex, who *'feel[s] very Bear'* but *'as a general term'*, suggesting a degree of identification while resisting specifying Bear. Rex (mid 40s, fat with a beard) also describes how Bear *'fits'* him, as though his relationship with Bear is like a comfortable set of clothes which match his body. Gerald (late 40s, bearded and with a bit of a belly) initially answers in the positive, but this seems almost a default category he has ended up in due to bodily changes meaning he is no longer an Otter or a Cub, *'so what the hell'*, Bear will have to do! Gregory (mid 20s, with a belly and a little facial hair) has also experienced bodily changes, having lost weight, and questions if he is *'allowed to' 'classify'* himself as a Bear. His final response is that he does *'feel like [he is] a Bear'* due to his experiences of Bear spaces as *'less judgmental'*, rather than any kind of personal identification with specific characteristics of Bears. This is in agreement with Frank (mid 40s, bearded and with a bit of a belly), who expresses the least active and most qualified identification with Bear – he's *'comfortable with it in a general way'* and doesn't get *'hung up on sub-labelling'*.

What is happening here? Some of the positive identifications with Bear here could, potentially, be taken as proxy language for something we might call Bear identity. But the idea of Bear as being part of your authentic self just doesn't appear particularly significant here. Quite the opposite – participants in both their direct responses to related questions and their wider discussions throughout the dataset revealed their qualified and ambivalent relationships and identifications with Bear (*'Yes and no'*) and with regard to what Bear might refer to (*'What defines anything?'*). Far from men in UK Bear spaces actively identifying as Bears in a consistent, internalised, and actively expressed way, we instead see a great deal of qualification, of ambivalence, of questioning, of nonchalance. I want to stress that this wasn't an exception but rather the norm across the dataset, at all case study sites. And neither were these men first-timers, rare visitors, or 'hangers-on' in Bear scenes – two

of these men were regular visitors to the Edinburgh site, two were organisers of a Bear social group, and one was a former title-holding 'Mr Bear'. Later down in Brighton, Justin, another Bear group organiser, discussed the potential Bear identities of others at the Brighton event we had both attended:

> *I've just been to [non-Bear gay men's event] at the weekend. The group of thirty of us there, probably none of them were Bears. There were some big men, men with beards. Would they call themselves Bears? I'm not sure they would. Half of them went to Brighton Bear Weekend, but would they call themselves Bears? It's like our committee, there's the wonderful Hugo, he's about the only Bear I would say is a Bear! The rest of us are just halfway there… halfway Bear! <laughter>*

Justin, Brighton interview 4

Justin points out what has become apparent across these excerpts and throughout the wider Bearspace dataset – that people who attend and even organise UK Bear spaces, who might well match some or all of the supposed 'classic' characteristics of Bears, tend to have a very ambivalent sense of themselves as Bears (*'halfway Bear!'*), if any at all (*'Would they call themselves Bears? I'm not sure they would'*). In fact a common way in which men described their relationship with Bear was as a category that they *'fell into'* unintentionally or as a matter of convenience:

Malcolm: We're going back, say late twenties, early thirties. I was young, skinny, and then I started doing steroids – I'm very transparent about that. I got bigger and hairier, and I actually metamorphasised into a Bear! And then I realised that was the category I fell into, but I didn't deliberately do it.

Chuck: Was it the category that did it for you?

Malcolm: I was delighted that I ended up in that category, I was very happy about that.

London focus group

Alex: Years ago I would have very much gone, "I'm part of the Bear community!", [but] now I go, no, I'm an individual who can easily slot into it. But whenever you're on certain social media platforms and they're asking you to categorise yourself, you really have no choice … You're going "Well, that's the obvious category that I fit into".

Belfast interview 1

Brian: I was just given the label by others and I adopted that, which makes me sound a bit mindless, doesn't it, 'cause I can't follow my own route? But yeah, I kind of just fell into it. Plus I'm hairy and big… It's something I feel comfortable with, so I just go with it!

Brighton focus group

These exemplars demonstrate three distinct ways in which 'falling into' Bear as a category could occur. For Malcolm (mid-40s, trim and highly muscular with a little facial hair) it appears to have been a self-realisation based on seeing his body becoming *'bigger and hairier'*. He very much presents this as anything but an active choice (he *'didn't deliberately do it'* and simply *'ended up in that category'*). Alex can *'slot into'* Bear despite having dis-identified with the Bear community in recent years. But he notes the role of social media, possibly including phone-based hookup and dating apps, through which *'you really have no choice'* but to *'categorise yourself'* amongst the options provided, so that one category (Bear) inevitably becomes the *'obvious'* one, despite his degree of dis-identification. And for Brian the *'label'* has come from other people so that he *'kind of just fell into it'*, expressing a kind of half-hearted fatalism. These excerpts again emphasise men's ambivalent relationships with Bear. Rather than expressing a consistent and strongly held sense of selfhood we might call an identity, Bear appears to simply be a convenient label. Other participants themselves speculated that this was a common story. Justin suggested that many of those labelled Bears are simply GBQ men who have *'fallen through the net with other [LGBTQ] groups'*, particularly *'big men who're getting older and want to fit somewhere'*. And Dougie in Manchester described *'the Bear thing'* as just a *'container'* for *'the outcasts of the gay community'*. But although these men might not have chosen to fall into Bear or be labelled as Bear, they weren't seriously struggling against it. Malcolm was *'very happy'* with falling into Bear, and Alex despite his disidentification was still attending Bear spaces and utilising his capacity to *'slot into it'*. But it's Brian who really captures the essence of Bearspace participants' relationships with Bear. Despite having just *'fell into it'* Bear is a category which Brian has consequently found *'comfortable'*, and so despite not strongly caring about being a Bear he finds it easy not to resist and to *'just go with it'*. Describing one's self as a Bear then seems more a matter of convenience rather than strong personal identity. Indeed this might be part of why Bear as a phenomenon may appear to be on the rise. As Justin said, *'There's always gonna be big men who are getting older and want to fit into somewhere. Who move on from being pretty and twenty-five, from discos and nightclubs'*. Bear simply offers such men a convenient label and a chance to *'fit in somewhere'* as their bodies change.

The variability, ambivalence, and qualification of these men's relationships with 'being' or 'identifying' as Bears very much surprised me. Though I've spent years reading about and studying Bears as well as visiting Bear spaces for socialising, my own sense of whether or not I 'am' a Bear has always been very hazy. What struck me about how my participants spoke was how closely a lot of what they said matched my own feelings of ambivalence (see also McGrady, 2016:1710–1711). Before and even during the project I suspected that I wasn't a 'proper' Bear but maybe just a casual Bear, a Bear of convenience. For the vast majority of my time, including in and around Bear spaces,

being or not being a Bear was never a big deal for me. This is similar to a point made by Bear activist Eric Rofes, who has written that while being a Bear matters to him in Bear spaces, *'the other twenty-nine days of the month, it's not so central to me'* (Suresha, 2009:23). Consequently, when starting the Bearspace project I felt like a bit of a fraud at times, as someone whose relationship with Bear was rather light-touch – only when I came to analyse the data did I realise that this appears to be the norm for guys in UK Bear spaces.

'I just dip in and dip out' – nebulous engagements

The ambivalence of men's relationship with Bear as an identity was mirrored in their identification and engagement with Bear communities, scenes and spaces. Far from describing some kind of intense and important sense of selfhood – the 'real me' – Bear instead appears to be of relatively minor significance to men in UK Bear spaces, particularly when not in proximity to places and people categorised as 'Bear'. For a long time I struggled to find the language to express what I suspect is happening with regard to men's engagements with Bear, the way it shifts over time and space. Drawing on Sociologist Michel Maffesoli's (1996) work on post-modern communities, I've settled on the word 'nebulous' to suggest the idea of a cloud representing these engagements across the complexity of a person's life – slowly moving and shifting, stretching in different directions to touch on different parts of that life, congealing and thickening in some times/spaces, while dissipating and thinning in others (ibid., 145). As I discuss some of the Bearspace participants' engagements with Bear communities, I hope that the 'nebulosity' becomes clear. Notably, what I show in this section is that ability to have nebulous engagements and casually convenient identifications with Bears was seen to be a positive feature, so that 'Bear' was valuable **because** it didn't have to be important.

As with Bear as a supposed identity or simply a label, men tended to heavily qualify the strength, depth, and frequency of their engagements with Bear spaces, scenes, communities and so on, and framing such engagements as temporary, ephemeral, at times even trivial. One of the most common ways they did this was with the phrases 'dip in' and 'dip out'. These specific phrases occurred regularly across the dataset:

Brian: I like to dip in and out. So I don't feel like I need to be in the community. Being accepted is enough for me.
Robin: I think I'm more like that, I dip in and out.
Brian: I see it, but I don't need to be in the middle of it. Just being accepted and being welcomed is enough, and then I can remove myself if needed.
Robin: It's not a lifestyle, it's a choice.
Brian: Yeah just in and out, and I could dip into anything… I don't need to be in it, just accepted.

Brighton focus group

Ross: I think I'm quite content not being labelled one way or the other… I've never really committed to the Bear scene here. I step in and out as it suits me and I'm good with that. Same as with [going to] the Bear events… I'll dip in and out but I don't want to be going, "This is who you are now!". I'm a wee bit hesitant that way, to fully commit.

Belfast focus group

Levi: I just come to Bear events. Like the event here. I haven't signed up for anything, I just dip in and dip out of what I fancy doing.

Manchester focus group

These three excerpts show this phrase being used by different men in Bear spaces. Brian (mid 60s) and Robin (mid 30s) were both larger and hairier men, bearded, who fit more 'classic' Bear physical archetypes and who described themselves as Bears. Ross (early 40s) was slimmer and with a little facial hair, and though he was attracted to Bears he emphasised that his participation in Bear spaces was about more than this and he actively resisted being labelled a 'Chaser'. Levi (early 60s) was moustached and with a belly, and completely ambivalent about being described as a Bear or not. But all of these men described engagements with Bear spaces, scenes and communities which were nebulous, not *'really committed'*. Participating in Bear spaces, scenes and communities seems to be a relatively minor and infrequent part of most of these men's lives, something that they did occasionally at certain times/places, and – mirroring their identification with the Bear label discussed in the previous section – without a great deal of personal investment in or engagement in the rest of their lives. Another extended discussion from the Edinburgh focus group best encapsulates how men in Bear spaces explained the significance of 'dipping in' and 'dipping out' of Bear:

Gerald: It's not the be-all and end-all.
Frank: Yeah I'm not hung up on it, yeah.
Gerald: It's part of me. You kind of identify yourself as a Bear, and I come to these events, but it doesn't mean to say that I don't go to straight bars or to cinema, it's not like every second Saturday, "Oh I need to go to Bear Scots because if I don't I'll self-combust". It's just a part of me, the same as I've got a grey beard and… whatever, you know.
Rex: I think that's right.
Gerald: It's something that I enjoy going to and I enjoy the space, and enjoy meeting other guys, but … I don't live on the Bear scene, the same way I don't live on the gay scene.

Frank: But you know it's there for you.
Gerald: Yeah! I can dip in and out, as and when I feel the urge.
Gregory: Yeah I think it's more having the space and having the place where you know if you do go you're going to be welcomed… rather than going "It's something I have to be involved in"… [For social groups when] I was at university it was more of a case of you have to be involved for there to actually be a community. Whereas this is almost like a sort of self-sustaining space you can visit as and when you want to? And sort of as [and when] you feel you need to almost, sometimes.

Edinburgh focus group, emphases in original

Gerald leads this discussion and stresses temporary engagements with Bear, whereby Bear spaces appear to be the most critical geotemporal points at which Bear is most strongly engaged with. At other times engagement and identification appear weaker – in fact he actively dis-identifies from Bear as something of wider significance in his life, describing it as *'not the be-all and end-all'*. Even when he more actively identifies himself with Bear Gerald qualifies this. When one might *'identify yourself as a Bear'*, he qualifies this by saying *'***kind of** *identify yourself'*, and though he suggests Bear is *'a part of me'* he alludes to this being almost a banal and trivial point, merely *'the same as I've got a grey beard and… whatever'*. Others like Frank and Rex notably agree, with Frank stating that he too is *'not hung up on it'*. These kinds of conversations are not exceptions or outliers – casual, qualified, ambivalent and nebulous identifications and engagements with Bear, though congealing into greater significance in proximity to Bear spaces, were extremely common across the dataset and at every case study site.

And it's not just that participants' **own** relationships and engagements with Bear tended to be ambivalent and nebulous. They also expressed a degree of cynicism and even pity towards those men who they perceived to be overly invested in Bear identities and scenes:

Alex: *I can drop in and out of the Bear community without necessarily having to self-identify all the time, as "I'm a Bear". I don't necessarily think that's healthy. I think it's nice to be able to join a certain group, but not necessarily have that as your persona or as your identity.*

Belfast interview 1

Nick: Did he describe himself or identify as a Bear?
Cillian: I told him he was, and then he sort of embraced it a wee bit too much.

Belfast interview 4

Jeff: I've always been a bit careful not to be too Bear, not to be too into that, like. There's a whole wide world outside that, there's even another gender, I think they call them 'women'… The Bear scene, would I be immersed in it? Yes, it's fair to say I am. Would I be in somewhere like <name of club night popular with Bears> every weekend? No, maybe once every eight weeks, once every three months.

London interview 2

Alex, Cillian, and Jeff were not alone in suggesting that you can be *'too Bear… too into that'*. It wasn't always clear exactly what men meant when they made statements like this, but for Alex it appears to refer to *'your persona or your identity'* and for Jeff it's a matter of being overly *'immersed'* in *'the Bear scene'* such as attending particular venues too often and not associating with those outside of it (particularly women). Both Cillian and Jeff stress that you can be *'too'* into Bear, so that stronger and more active relationships and engagements with Bear are seen as negative (even not *'healthy'*), and with the implication that more ambivalent and nebulous modes such as to dip in/out or *'drop in and out'* are to be preferred.

Evidence from the Bearspace project provides a direct rejoinder to charges of universal identity-obsession in Bear scenes. This is very demonstrably **not** the case for participants, including Bear title holders and Bear group organisers and volunteers. The opposite was true – those who were believed to be too engaged with Bear as either phenomenon or identity were looked upon with suspicion. Here there are resonances with research on socio-cultural identifications and being a 'try-hard'.[1] Such research has noted the importance of presenting one's identifications as effortless in order to be seen as 'authentic' members of a variety of groupings, with those considered try-hards often dismissed as inauthentic (see for example Read et al., 2011 on school-age girls; Larsson, 2013 on heavy metal music scenes; Hodkinson, 2002 on the Goth subculture). Certainly writers have noted the significance of 'nature' and being 'natural' for Bears, as opposed to being 'artificial' (Fritscher, 2001; Hennen, 2008:118; Mann, 2010; McGlynn, 2021; Wright, 1997b). But I'm not convinced that authentic Bearness is the relevant factor here. After all, I've shown that participants rarely if ever presented themselves as authentic Bears, and if anything were often rather blasé about the whole thing. These participants are also not claiming that the 'try-hards' are not really Bears. There can be some light gatekeeping over who is and who is not a Bear – which I note in the following section – but it is not based on the appearance of effortlessness. Instead these participants seem to express a degree of **concern** for those who are *'too Bear'* and for their relations with others.

Other participants were notably sympathetic – Rex, for example, strongly criticised what he saw as the *'ridiculing'* of those who *'had Bear tattoos done ten years ago'* and who *'put the word Bear in every sentence and Bear in every screen name'*. He suggested such actions were from men *'desperate to fit in, to be part of a group, to build that family'*. Rex thus highlights the potential value of Bear. Bear scenes have often been described as offering a space for those who don't *'fit in'* and who lack acceptance in LGBTQ communities and their everyday life (e.g. Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; Hendricks, 2001; Mann, 2010; Marks Ridinger, 2001; McGrady, 2016; Suresha, 2001). So the ambivalence and nebulosity of these men's engagements and relationships with Bear should not be taken to mean that Bear or Bear spaces are of no importance at all. Gerald himself notes that Bear spaces are something he *'enjoys'* and both Frank and Gregory suggest the importance of *'know[ing] it's there for you'*, with Brian and Robin in Brighton expressing the same sentiment in valuing a milieu in which you are *'accepted'* and *'welcomed'*. The Bearspace findings report (McGlynn, 2022a) clearly demonstrated that Bear spaces are of great and particular importance to fat GBQ men in particular. And as Gregory points out, even though engagements with Bear might be limited there may be times when men feel they *'need'* to engage. So it's worth acknowledging that amongst participants the ability to *'dip in and dip out'* was seen to be a **positive** thing. Though ambivalent about the label 'Bear' and not seeing it as an important part of them, men still valued its convenience as a label. And though their engagements with Bear could be ephemeral and trivial most of the time, they valued that these could at times congeal into genuine connection and importance. In the UK context, Bear as a category is valuable **because** of its ambivalence, its nebulosity. It's valuable because it can be conveniently 'fallen into' and casually 'dipped into' to feel comfort, connection and even safety, without the need for strong identification or engagement.

'It's very physical and it's kind of an attitude' – the loose category of 'Bear'

I've argued that 'identity' – particularly when conceptualised as an internalised and deeply held sense of authentic selfhood – might not be a useful lens through which to explore the experiences of men in Bear spaces. But at the same time it's clear that there **is** some conceptual wrangling occurring over what Bear means, and who is and isn't to be called a Bear. Bearspace participants (myself included!) were clearly referring to **something** when we described our relationships and engagements with Bear identities, scenes and spaces, when we described ourselves and others as Bears, and wondered if we were or weren't Bears. So if it's not an identity we were talking about, then what was it?

Ross: *I think I identify with the Bear scene. I don't think I particularly look like your standard Bear, but yeah, I don't know. I'm not sure other people would identify me as a Bear is probably the point. I think I see myself in that category, but I'm not sure everybody else would.*

Belfast focus group

In this excerpt, Ross describes how *'other people would identify'* him without saying that he identifies as a Bear. *'Identify'* in this context appears much more related to identifying of a plant as a particular type, or identifying a typo – to quickly classify something and to place it into a conceptual box bearing that label. He introduces the term *'category'*, often used by men across the project, which reinforces this alternative usage of Bear as an 'identity'. We can see this idea of so-called identity as simply a rough descriptive classification amongst other LGBTQ communities. Formby's detailed exploration of UK LGBTQ communities found that many respondents stressed the value of their sexual and gender identities (e.g. lesbian, transgender woman, gay) not as an internalised sense of selfhood but as an *'understandable narrative'* through which they could quickly and easily communicate some elements of their lives and experiences to others, though of course without the expectation of perfect *'translation'* (Formby, 2017:23–26). They also made use of those categories which would 'work' in particular contexts (ibid.), despite not feeling that their sexual or gender identities were big parts of their lives in all places and at all times. It was simply (and in line with my preceding discussions) convenient. Hutson, too, notes that *'sexual identities'* are often used to simply categorise people for the purposes of easing communication and community building (2010:214–215). So there does appear to be some wider potential value in backseating heavily identity-oriented accounts of LGBTQ lives. I suggest that when men identify or describe themselves or others as a Bear, in the context of UK Bear spaces, they're usually using 'Bear' as a loose and convenient descriptive label for a category of person.

But how are these labels assigned, and to which people?

When not describing Bear as an identity, the other main lens through which the Bear literature frames the question of 'Who is a Bear?' is a matter of having a particular **appearance** and/or a particular **attitude**. Regarding **appearance**, Bears are usually described as bigger, hairier, and often older GBQ men (Mann, 2010; Quidley-Rodriguez & de Santis, 2019; Wright, 1997b, 2001b), though the body shapes, sizes, weights and types in Bear spaces can actually vary greatly (Brown, 2001:39–40; Mass, 2001:34), and this variation in bodies might have increased in recent decades (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015:421; see also Kirk Read in Suresha, 2009:247). Having beards and body hair are particularly significant (Hay, 1997:227; Hill, 1997:73; Webster, 1997:241; Wright, 2001c:212), as is a heavier body weight and a larger body size (see chapters throughout Suresha, 2009; Wright, 1997a, 2001a). Both hairiness (Brown, 2001:47; Clark, 2001:127; Pyle & Klein, 2011:80; Wright, 1997b) and body weight/size, including fatness (Brown, 2001:100; Mass, 2001; McGrady, 2016; Wright, 2001c), are connected throughout the Bear literature with ideas of masculinity and masculine attitudes, though at times muscle can be valorised over fatness (Brown, 2001:45; McGrady, 2016; Tan, 2016). Indeed representations of Bear bodies – distinct from the actual bodies in Bear spaces – often display body size via muscularity and only a

limited degree of fat (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015:427; McGlynn, 2022a; Suresha, 2001). Regarding **attitude**, dispositions relating to manliness or masculinity are the most commonly noted attitudinal attribute and as necessary no matter one's appearance (Clark, 2001:125; Fritscher, 2001:xxxi–xxxii; Hill, 1997; Mauerman, 1997; McCann, 1997; Pyle & Klein, 2011:80; Toothman, 2001:228; Whitesel, 2014:50–51; Wright, 2001b:59). Indeed Hennen argues that the most critical element of all Bear definitions and identifications is gender and particularly masculinity (Hennen, 2008:109). So the Bear literature has tended to emphasise a masculine attitude, over appearance, as the primary and true marker of a Bear.

Much of the existing Bear literature and research on Bears has utilised this 'appearance vs attitude' binary framework, through which people (almost always GBQ men) can be labelled as Bears (or not) via particular physical characteristics or aesthetic choices; via particular emotional dispositions or behavioural characteristics; or, via some combination of the two (e.g. Hennen, 2008:96–97; Wright, 1997b; Marks Ridinger, 1997:86–87; De Mey, 1997:261; Kampf, 2000; Mass, 2001:18; Kaye, 2007; Riley, 2016). I want to turn back to this Bear literature now, and both use and develop this 'appearance vs attitude' framework. Though only occasionally articulated in precisely these words, the framework was very often referred to by Bearspace participants when they attempted to explain what it meant to be a Bear:

Nick: What makes you a Bear or not a Bear?
Levi: Well for me it's physical basically, you know? You're a big, normally masculine type of guy, so that is what I would consider to be a Bear.
Timothy: I think it's very physical and it's kind of an attitude, a little bit. I wouldn't necessarily say masculine though, 'cause from what I've seen there's a lot of the feminine.

Manchester focus group

Nick: Can straight men be Bears?
Ross: You know what, there are guys who I've seen out and about who I've gone, "He's a lovely big Bear like," but he's maybe with his wife? He certainly has that look, whether or not-
Joe: <interrupting> But it's more than just the look, it's definitely more than a look, it's all of those characteristics that we talked earlier on about. Being more relaxed, being more chill, being more laid back. Less conscious of how you look, I think… For me there are intrinsic values like honesty, openness and truthfulness that are part of my Bearness if you like? I think those are important things… And a straight guy could well have all of those attributes as well, so I suppose…

Belfast focus group

Carolus: In [my home country] there are people who call themselves Bears but [for me] they are not Bears, because the concept of Bears is different to me. [Bears] are welcoming, they are overweight, they are probably stocky, but I don't think that Bears are only stocky or overweight. Being a Bear is not just being those things.

Nick: What else is it?

Carolus: It's a frame of mind, it's not just a physical thing, it's much more. It's being content with what you are, how you are. To be accepting and be fine with that.

London interview 1

A dynamic emerges in these excerpts which also occur across the entire Bearspace dataset. It goes like this: One person (firstly Levi, then Ross, then Carolus) suggests that Bear could simply be a matter of having *'that look'* – so that even (gasp!) *'a straight guy'* could be described as a Bear. This is then countered (by Timothy to Levi, by Joe to Ross, and by Carolus to himself) by actively asserting the additional importance of more attitudinal characteristics. This dynamic presents two opportunities for reassessing the attitude/appearance binary outlined above.

First, for Bearspace participants the majority of characteristics on the 'attitudinal' side were different to the hegemonic heteropatriarchal (or 'traditional') masculine attitude suggested in the Bear literature (e.g. Hennen, 2008; Whitesel, 2014:51; see for example Fritscher, 2001; Hill, 1997; Rain, 1997; Sullivan, 2003). Elements of such masculine attitudes were mentioned only rarely and in passing by participants. The most common attitudinal elements in Bearspace were felt or emotional qualities such as being *'relaxed', 'chill', 'laid back'* (Joe), and *'content'* (Carolus), as well as more interpersonal or even ethical qualities such as *'honesty, openness and truthfulness'* (Joe) and being *'welcoming'* and *'accepting'* (Carolus). Per scholarship on multiple masculinities (Buchbinder, 2013; Connell, 2005; Gorman-Murray & Hopkins, 2014) it's possible that these qualities could be interpreted as different variety of masculine attitude (albeit one notably distinct from that posited in the literature). But I think it's important to question the instinct to view everything about Bears through the lens of masculinity – particularly when numerous respondents such as Timothy actively resisted such a reading. Indeed other participants – Rex, Scott, Dougie, Oscar, Cillian, Chuck, and more – stressed the importance of embracing gayness, camp, effeminacy, and domesticity for being a Bear. This isn't to suggest that Hennen, Whitesel or others are incorrect – I don't doubt the veracity of their accounts or the quality of their analysis – but rather that what's happening in UK Bear spaces might be quite different to the US. I explore this further in Chapter 4, when I discuss the intangible atmospheres of UK Bear spaces.

Second, across the entire dataset, the dynamic almost invariably **begins** with physical characteristics being posited as what it means to be or to be identified as a Bear. That is, these physical characteristics are the **instinctive** first way of identifying or defining Bears. This becomes even more apparent when talk moved away from these specific discussions oriented around defining Bears. Beyond these discussions 'attitude' – as a significant element in describing, identifying, or being a Bear – all but disappeared and it was almost entirely about 'appearance'. And 'appearance' didn't refer to particular clothing, aesthetics or styles. One of the notable elements captured in my auto/ethnography is that the stereotypical 'denim and plaid' Bear 'uniform' (see somewhat heightened examples in Kampf, 2000) is actually very rare in UK Bear spaces. Often I was the only one wearing anything like it, leading one focus group participant to joke *'nobody does [that] anymore, I haven't seen that for ages'*! Instead 'appearance' referred almost exclusively to men's physical characteristics – their **bodies**. I'm not claiming that only men of particular body types are Bears (see Chapter 3) or are in Bear spaces (see Chapter 4). But in difference to the Bear literature, I do suggest that within the established appearance vs attitude framework it's bodies – and not traditionally masculine attitudes – that are the default, instinctive means through which someone may be classified as a Bear in UK Bear spaces. 'Attitudes' are a **supplement**, a corrective factor. This can be used to include people with whose bodies don't match Bear archetypes, or to exclude those whose bodies do match but who are felt to be socially objectionable (see discussions of trim, muscular men and Muscle Bears in Chapter 5). So while a *'relaxed'* attitude in particular serves as a vital corrective to incorporate those who stretch the elasticity of the appearance element too far, it is bodies which are the primary, instinctive element used to label and identify men as Bears (see also Enguix Grau, 2021; Gomes Bastos, 2022).

Developing the Bear literature (which has stressed the importance of masculine attitude over appearance for being a Bear), in the remainder of this chapter I've argued that in fact appearance is primary, and that it tends to mean physical bodies. Rather than describing Bear as an identity, defining Bears through self-identification, or using 'identity' as our instinctive conceptual tool for grappling with who is and isn't a Bear, I suggest that we should draw on the Bear literature and consider Bear to be a loose and convenient category applied to one's self or others primarily (though not exclusively) based on bodily appearance. This focus on bodies is what I explore and develop in detail in the following chapter, and attending closely to bodies in Bear spaces is shown to be important throughout the rest of this book as a whole.

Conclusion to Bear identities

In this chapter I've engaged with definitional debates around what Bear is. I've argued that thinking about Bears as well as UK Bear communities, scenes and spaces through the lens of individual identity isn't justified by the data

gathered through the Bearspace project. Participants rarely talked about 'identifying' as Bears and were both nonchalant and ambivalent about being Bears. And, unlike strongly identity-based communities (e.g. Hodkinson's [2002] Goths), participants' engagements with Bear communities, scenes and spaces were light-touch, ephemeral, nebulous, limited to particular times and places at which they assumed significance. Previous scholarship on Bears – almost exclusively focused on the USA – has suggested that alignment with 'traditional' or even reactionary masculinity is the key to men's identification with and as Bears (e.g. Fritscher, 2001; Hennen, 2008; Hill, 1997; Mann, 2010; Monaghan, 2005; Sullivan, 2003; Whitesel, 2014; Wright, 1997b). But in the contemporary UK Bear appears to be not particularly important for these guys in Bear spaces. Instead it seems more about convenience and comfort for men, whether they themselves described themselves as Bears or not, so that through labelling from others or a series of happy accidents they could 'fall into' Bear and decide to 'just go with it'. Notably, this was considered to be a positive feature which supported GBQ men's access to comfort and inclusion without the need for wider commitment or investment. In some ways this is consistent with the small number of 'post-Bears' and 'ex-Bears' noted in the Bear literature, who despite distancing themselves from Bear identities similarly maintain and value connections with Bear communities and spaces, and who appear indifferent to being identified as Bears by others (Fritscher, 2001:lxii; Suresha, 2009:297–298). So what might in other contexts be characterised as post-Bear or ex-Bear might be the norm of being a Bear in the contemporary UK. But it's important to note that participants didn't see themselves as beyond the Bear category entirely, but rather in an ambivalent and fluctuating relationship with it.

Since we still do need to understand what 'Bear' refers to, I consequently I grappled with the common 'appearance vs attitude' binary framework, well-established in the Bear literature and with writers tending to prioritise attitude. Through the Bearspace data I've argued that appearance (specifically bodies) is in fact the instinctive default criterion used to conceptualise and identify Bears, with attitude (not necessarily a 'masculine' one) being used as a supplement to incorporate more people into the category. This means that in the UK context we could think about Bear not as an identity, but as a loose category applied to people based on their bodily appearance.

By now you may well be thinking 'What a fool!'. Imagine writing a book about men in Bear spaces, and the second chapter says Bear isn't a real thing and isn't all that important! But I think acknowledging the instability of the Bear category, the ambivalence of men's identifications, the nebulosity of their engagements with Bear – this apparent lack of wider importance – is essential if we want to understand what's happening in UK Bear spaces. This shift away from using 'identity' as the default concept for understanding what Bear is also strengthens the case for the geographic approach taken in this book, which focuses less on self-identified 'Bears' and more on the people who go to and participate in Bear spaces. There's an important methodological point

here. Participants were recruited from 'men in UK Bear spaces' rather than 'men who identify as Bears'. But, even those who said they were Bears, or who said they 'identified' as a Bear, were ambivalent about this and expressed a fluid conceptualisation of Bear. So my findings are not due to a failure to recruit the 'right' people. This is a crucial issue for future research and/or writing about Bears to grapple with – such work cannot only focus on those who straightforwardly 'identify as Bears', nor assume that Bear is a strong feature of such men's lives outside of specific contexts.

Note

1 I'm indebted to Gavin Brown and Valerie De Craene for both identifying this element.

3 Bear bodies

Researching bodies

It's all well and good to say that Bear is a category applied through reference to bodies – but what are bodies? This might seem like an obvious question and I shan't dwell on it for too long – that's not the point of this chapter – but it's one which has troubled scholars for centuries. And despite the 'body' of work written about it, most scholars of bodies have argued that it is extremely difficult to clearly state or describe what bodies are (Fraser & Greco, 2001; Longhurst, 2001; Nast & Pile, 1998; Shilling, 2012; Teather, 1999; Turner, 1991). As an example of how difficult it might be to define 'the body', it is worth looking at the introduction to Elizabeth Grosz's often-quoted description:

> *By **body** I understand a concrete, material, animate organisation of flesh, organs, nerves, muscles, and skeletal structure which are given a unity, cohesiveness, and organisation only through their psychical and social inscription as the surface and raw materials of an integrated and cohesive totality. The body is, so to speak, organically/biologically/naturally "incomplete"; it is indeterminate, amorphous, a series of uncoordinated potentialities which require social triggering, ordering, and long-term "administration", regulated in each culture and epoch by what Foucault has called the "micro-technologies of power". The body becomes a **human** body, a body which coincides with the "shape" and space of a psyche, a body whose epidermal surface bounds a psychical unit, a body which thereby defines the limits of experience and subjectivity… [It is inscribed] by a set of socially coded meanings and significances (both for the subject and for others), making the body a meaningful, "readable", depth-entity.*
>
> Grosz (1998:43–44)

In addition to highlighting the complexity of trying to write a definition of the body, this quote from Grosz also introduces four key features of the body which are all important for this chapter. First, that 'the body' is not one thing,

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one slab of identical substance. To describe it with even a trace of accuracy we need to distinguish between its many components, and their arrangements and relationships. Second, that the body is not biologically static but is rather *'incomplete'* – it changes over time. Third, that the body matters to us and is often crucial to our sense of selfhood. And finally, that the body has social, cultural and psychic meanings attached to it which may vary across space and time (see also Longhurst, 2001:12; Teather, 1999:7).

Geographers, too, have worked on conceptualising and understanding the body, coming from spatially sensitive perspectives (for excellent overviews see Longhurst, 2001; Nast & Pile, 1998). Stressing the importance of such perspectives, Longhurst argues that *'geographers have been effective at looking at the broader picture but this has sometimes been at the expense of finer detail'* (2001:134). And indeed for a long time the body has been viewed as irrelevant for study within Geography (Holliday & Hassard, 2001; Longhurst, 1995; Teather, 1999), or even inappropriate, with Geographers researching actual bodies having experienced both condemnation and ridicule (Binnie, 2007; Longhurst, 2001). In fact most scholarship on human society rarely considers actual material, fleshy bodies (Fraser & Greco, 2001; Shilling, 2012; Turner, 1991). Part of this has been due to the long assumption of bodies being distinct from minds and with the latter privileged as 'rational' and the former as 'irrational' (Fraser & Greco, 2001), with this binary framework also having a gendered component so that women have been linked with emotionality and out-of-control bodies, and men with rationality and disciplined logical minds (Grosz, 1994; Holliday & Hassard, 2001; Longhurst, 2001:13; Teather, 1999). Scholars engaging with 'the body' or 'bodies' have been somewhat reticent to engage with or privilege biological processes and the materiality of flesh, perhaps due to a risk of seeming to 'essentialise' human social difference (Fraser & Greco, 2001). But in the past two decades there has certainly been an upsurge of interest in bodies amongst Geographers (Longhurst, 2001; Longhurst & Johnston, 2014), and the relationships between bodies and space (Holliday & Hassard, 2001; Nast & Pile, 1998). Geographers have increasingly studied bodies **in** spaces and bodies **as** spaces – as sets of surfaces and sites upon which things happen, which are the interface between 'us' and the world, which allow 'us' to perceive space (e.g. Teather, 1999; Longhurst, 2001). They have also explored the co-constitution of bodies and their environments (Grosz, 1998; De Craene, 2017; Nast & Pile, 1998), in which sense there is some overlap with Sociologist Chris Shilling's desired 'corporeal realism' which similarly appears to stress the ongoing constitutive relationships between bodies and their environments (Shilling, 2012:250–256).

And yet there is still a lack of research – and possibly an ongoing squeamishness – within geography regarding the *'messy materiality'* (Longhurst & Johnston, 2014:273) of *'the meaty body'* (Nast & Pile, 1998:3), in favour of neat and clean theoretical bodies. Scholars and researchers seem happy to write about 'the body' (conceptually, theoretically, abstractly), but

less so about specific 'bodies' (Fraser & Greco, 2001; Holliday & Hassard, 2001; Longhurst, 2001 – see for example Turner, 1991; Shilling, 2012). And so the Geographer of sexualities Valerie De Craene has rightly argued that Geographers

> *think they/we have done much work on the body, while in fact we have only begun to investigate the fleshy, fluid, messy, sweaty, leaky, bloody, volatile bodies… Although the importance of the body in the production of knowledge has been acknowledged* **theoretically** *every now and then, it seems that* **actual research practices** *in this regard are lagging behind.*
>
> (2017:266, my emphases)

Informed by De Craene's pointed observation, though without wanting to overstate how much my data dwells on her *'leaky, bloody, volatile bodies'*, the rest of this chapter will present empirical rather than purely theoretical research on actual bodies. I'll reveal the overwhelming importance of bodies for understanding Bear as a phenomenon and people's experiences in and around UK Bear spaces. In the following sections I aim to demonstrate the looseness of the Bear category, while also showing how attention to the specific features of actual, fleshy bodies helps us understand what's happening amongst Bears and in Bear Spaces. I start by rejecting the idea that using bodies to define and categorise Bears limits Bears to a fixed set of physical characteristics. Acknowledging Grosz's assertion that bodies also involve *'a set of socially coded meanings and significances' that makes it 'meaningful, "readable"'* (Grosz, 1998:44), when we look at the specific bodily features cited we can see just how loose the Bear bodily category actually is. I then discuss how guys in UK Bear spaces grappled with this looseness of Bear as a category, through frequent use of qualified terms like 'Bear-y', 'Bear-ish' and 'Bear-adjacent' to describe people and places. I posit such terms as vital for future Bear research to incorporate, and introduce my own term 'Bear/y' as a way to capture the inherent ambiguities of Bear bodies. Then, further investigating the fleshy realities of Bear/y bodies I'll show that bodies were men's main area of concern with regard to 'fitting in' to Bear as a category as well as fitting in in Bear spaces. I then build on this discussion – and specifically which bodily features might cause one to **not** fit in –, I'll introduce a geographically informed way of thinking about bodies beyond simple labels like fat, thin, big, small, and so on. Through feminist geographer Rachel Colls' idea of *'bodily topographies'* (2007), I'll explore what we could call the micro-geographies of bodies and their material components – fat, skin, muscle, hair, and even clothes, as well as how and where these sit on the body. I'll conclude by showing how a bodily topographies approach to GBQ men's bodies enhances our understanding of how Bear is described and conceptualised, as well as spatial politics of inclusion and exclusion in and around UK Bear spaces. I highlight some of my own auto/ethnographic reflections in this

chapter, as one of the explicit aims of using this method was to capture these kinds of in-the-moment thoughts about bodies from a fat GBQ man in Bear spaces (i.e. me!). It is possible that my undertaking of the project at the same time as generating these reflections might have made me more conscious of my body and its topographies than normal. But comparing them with my constant, daily awareness of my body both before the project and now after it (when I'm less fat), I can honestly say that the only difference is my discomfort in seeing these intimate and often embarrassing reflections written down.

'What counts as Bear-y to you?' – Uncertain boundaries of Bear bodies

In the previous chapter, I showed that bodily appearance is a key way through which Bears are labelled and defined. I want to develop this line of thinking now, by moving past the purely conceptual or abstract 'body' and zooming in on the specifics of real, fleshy Bear bodies. By attending to these specifics, we can begin to grapple with the complexities of using bodies to define Bears and to label and categorise people as Bears. The scholarly literature on bodies has noted a wariness that prioritising bodies in social and cultural theory as well as politics and activism could lead into a retrogressive and exclusionary essentialism (Fraser & Greco, 2001; Shilling, 2012). In other words, the primacy of bodies for identifying and categorising Bears could be taken to suggest a kind of essentialist understanding of Bear, a highly **limited** way of categorising, so that we might pinpoint who is and is not a Bear through some kind of physiological test or survey. But to say that bodies are the primary (not exclusive) way of categorising Bears in fact shows us just how loose and flexible the category really is. Bodies are, as Grosz (1998) and others (Longhurst, 2001:12; Teather, 1999:7) have emphasised, not separate from the mind but are both physical and conceptual, filtered and produced through the social and the psychological. Let's take an example:

Nick: What is it that you would say makes people Bears?
Justin: I would say they have to be hairy, with or without a facial beard. I tend to think they would need to be of a bigger stature, so I'd struggle with seeing someone a 5'3" Bear. I think the sort of masculine stereotype. Probably getting on to 6', probably stocky but not sort of flabby. Maybe a rugby player build kind of thing. So yeah. Could be camp in a way, but it's not a Chub.

Brighton interview 4

At first glance Justin's explanation appears to heavily limit the category of Bear based on fairly strict bodily features – Bears *' have to be hairy', 'would need to be of a bigger stature', 'not sort of flabby', 'not a Chub'*, again with some attitudinal elements (*'could be camp in a way'*) added as a corrective.

But look at the sheer number of bodily elements involved! Body hair, facial hair, overall *'stature'*, height, body fat, with muscle likely alluded to via *'rugby player build'*. And what do any of these terms mean in practice? Who counts as *'hairy'* and who doesn't? What counts as a beard? What is a *'bigger stature'*, a *'masculine stereotype'* body? What does a *'stocky'* body look like, and what is the difference between that and one that's *'flabby'*? These are mostly matters of comparison between one body and another. Let's take myself as an example. Compared to a 28" waisted man my own body, with its fold of soft and squishy loose skin around the midriff, would likely be seen as flabby – **I** see myself as flabby. But compared to a 48" waist man I could be (and at times am) described as 'stocky' or 'thicc' instead. And while I've got a thick beard and a reasonably hairy chest, there isn't much other body hair on me – I might be hairy compared to a classic Twink, but not compared to many of the other men in Bear spaces. With the number of bodily elements potentially involved or not, and the open-ended definitions of what these elements 'should' be like, Bear as a category based primarily on bodies appears remarkably open-ended already. Justin's account is also full of qualifiers – *'I tend to think'*, *'I'd struggle'*, *'sort of'*, *'probably'*, *'maybe'*, *'could be'*, opening up even more space for bodily variation. This is best captured by Turkish Bear and writer Mehmet Ali Sahin, describing his entry into Bear scenes over 20 years ago:

> *I stepped into the Bear scene. I saw that identification as a Bear is not static, nor does it have exact limits. Everybody has his own definition. There are many types of Bears, varying from big to small, hairy to hairless, bearded to clean shaven, depending on the varying taste of guys in the Bear scene. If I tried to define a Bear, it would be a mix reflecting myself, my own taste in Bears, and my Bear ideal and my definition would not match, word-for-word, anyone else's.*
>
> Sahin (2001:258)

Sahin reminds us that even when we're primarily using bodies to label people as Bears this still leaves Bear a very open, loose and fluid category, with our own self-images, desires, and ideals of Bears all impacting on how we delimit it, and with the potential corrective of 'attitude' loosening the category even further. It's worth remembering the specificity of the UK context here – Tan (2019) and Lin (2014), for instance, have suggested much more stringent bodily requirements for the Bear category in Chinese contexts. But for these guys in UK Bear spaces, the looseness and variability of the Bear category was so widely recognised and internalised that particular terminologies had emerged to grapple with it:

Daniel: [The club night] was very Bear-y I thought…
Nick: So what counts as Bear-y to you, in that kind of situation?
Daniel: Chunky, hairy, bearded, that rough-and-ready style.

Brighton interview 2, my emphasis

Scott: I started hanging out with people who would peripherally be… Who are Bear-adjacent. Who would be termed Otters and Bears and stuff like that. Hairy beardy guys… Bear is a very broad term, so I came up with, without even thinking, the term "Bear-adjacent" to describe men who have some traits that would be considered Bear traits but are not Bears. Otters, any hairy guys, any beardy guys, any guys with… Well, I think that's kind of it really. Any hairy guys, beardy guys, chubby guys who don't identify as Bears.

Manchester interview 2, my emphasis

Gerald: There's a hotel doing something the night before that's Bear-esque, so I might go up for that.

Edinburgh interview 1, my emphasis

Arthur: There's no set type [at the event], it's Bear-ish.

Belfast interview 6, my emphasis

These terms – *'Bear-y', 'Bear-adjacent', 'Bear-esque',* and *'Bear-ish'* – were so prevalent that I found myself increasingly using them in my auto/ethnographic memos. In the excerpts above, they seem to express a kind of partial Bear-ness of both people and spaces, with Bear-y by far the most common term like this used across the dataset. Predictably this was usually with reference to people's bodies. Scott, for example, used *'Bear-adjacent'* as a kind of catch all term beyond even the *'very broad term'* of Bear, and particularly for those who *'don't identify as Bears'* – but only such men's bodies (*'hairy', 'beardy', 'chubby'*) and not anything related to their 'attitude' counted. Participants mostly viewed 'Bear-iness' of people and spaces as a positive feature, often preferring to be amongst Bear-y men and opting to visit Bear-y spaces despite their by definition not being completely or unambiguously 'Bear'. In most discussions Bear-y appeared to be the preferred term (at times even over plain old 'Bear') to clearly mark the flexibility and fluidity of Bear as a category – it suggests a kind of 'degrees of Bear' framework or being 'sort of Bear' or 'Bear to an extent'. Participants also used terms like 'Bearier' to suggest that some bodies and spaces can be more or less Bear than others. But at the same time, and as I've shown above, this should not be taken to imply the existence of a pure 'Bear', nor that everyone shares a stable idea of what counts as more and less Beary.

I want to encourage engagement with 'Bear-yness' for future research and scholarship on Bears. So, based on my analysis of Bear's inherent definitional instability and fluidity, and participants' frequent usage of deliberately

ambiguous terms like Bear-y, I here introduce the term **Bear/y** as a useful conceptual tool for understanding Bears and our lives, communities, scenes, and spaces. Signifying 'Bear and/or Beary' but vocalised simply as 'Beary', the term leaves it deliberately unclear if we're talking about Bears or Bear-y guys – because **it is always, already, unclear**. The intent is to force a reminder of the instability, the fluidity and the impurity of the Bear category, to leave us always that little bit uncertain that we know for sure what people, what bodies, what spaces we're talking about. In Chapters 4 and 5 I'll demonstrate the utility of 'Bear/y' for understanding what's happening in the UK context specifically, grounding this approach in poststructural scholarship through a more detailed synthesis at this book's conclusion.

'I'm not the big fat hairy one' – fitting in due to your body

Having established the significance of bodies for categorising people as Bears, we can examine what this means for guys' experiences in UK Bear spaces. In Chapter 2, participants' use of the label 'Bear' tended to involve finding convenient categories, spaces and scenes where they 'fit in'. That is, 'Bear' seemed less important for themselves as isolated individuals and more important for their relations with others. The Bear literature stresses how Bears often feel that they (negatively) stand out and don't fit in in mainstream, non-Bear LGBTQ spaces (Clark, 2001; Goecke, 2001; Suresha, 2001:298–299; Whitesel, 2014; Yoakam, 2001). In Bear spaces these men do feel that they fit in (Brown, 2001; Edmonds & Zieff, 2015:427–428; Gough & Flanders, 2009; Monaghan & Malson, 2013; Suresha, 2009:14). This was echoed by findings of the Bearspace report, particularly for bigger and fatter guys (McGlynn, 2022a). In fact 'fitting in' was one of the most prevalent and significant themes developed from the entire dataset, highlighting the importance of thinking about **relationships between and amongst GBQ men in Bear spaces** rather than individualised identities. While this anxiety around 'fitting in' could be read as mere conformity, I do think it's vital to put the idea of fitting into Bear as a category and Bear scenes and spaces into context. First, a pervasive everyday context of mainstream society and spaces in which fatness is highly stigmatised (Andreyeva et al., 2008; Cooper, 2010; Cooper et al., 2014; Hopkins, 2012; Longhurst, 2005; Wann, 2009; Sikorski et al., 2011; Pausé, 2017; Puhl & Heuer, 2009). And second, the context of non-Bear LGBT and queer cultures and spaces in which both fatter guys and older guys are extremely marginalised (Berry, 2007; Blotcher, 1998; Gough & Flanders, 2009; Holden, 2019; Joy & Numer, 2018; McGrady, 2016; Monaghan & Malson, 2013; Pyle & Klein, 2011; Santoro, 2014; Whitesel, 2014). In these contexts 'fitting in' need not be about mindless conformity but about relief, belonging and inclusion – indeed for precisely the same kinds of reasons most LGBTQ people seek out LGBTQ communities and spaces (Formby, 2017).

And when it comes to fitting in in Bear spaces, Bear/y bodies are a key element. In this excerpt from the Brighton focus group, we discussed our experiences at the various Bear events (including a relaxed afternoon garden party and a sweaty club night):

Jonathan: I didn't feel awkward about not fitting into any box or anything.
Robin: Neither should you, neither should anybody! Takes me back to <name of popular London gay club> when I was told to get out, 'cause I was big!
Nick: How do you guys feel about having your body shapes and sizes and types in those [other] spaces?
Oscar: I actually really like what you <gestures to Brian> said earlier about how when you're in your work setting, you're classed as a specific type. You're the bigger body, you're the hairier body.
Brian: I'm "the Bear", I'm "the Bear".
Oscar: Yeah I relate to that a lot as well, and I think when you come into a Bear space or just being around Bear people you're then comparing different things… I'm not the big fat hairy one, I fit in just like everyone else…
Robin: Yeah I agree with that. It's society's pressure innit? It's the media, it's not just the women that get this pressure, blokes do as well, I don't care what anybody says. If I'm at work and they're all really slim and I'm there, I sometimes think "I just don't feel right". 'Cause they're talking about size whatever clothes and I go to Rent-A-Tent or something.

Brighton focus group, emphasis in original

This conversation was oriented around the participants feeling that they fitted in or didn't fit in – both with regard to the potential categories such as Bear seen as available to GBQ men (*'I didn't feel awkward about not fitting into any box'*), as well as with regard to those around them in Bear spaces (*'I'm not the big fat hairy one, I fit in just like everyone else'*). As I've suggested elsewhere (McGlynn, 2022c), it's not simply men's individual bodies but their relationships with other bodies – their similarities and/or differences between the other bodies in proximity to them – that matters. In a private interview the next day, we reflected on the focus group discussion and Oscar expanded on how he thought his body fit Bear as a category:

Oscar: In a setting like at the [Bear event] or something like that, I feel like how my body is perceived isn't out of the norm, so I don't think about it. Whereas if I'm at what's usually a straight club doing a gay night or something like that, and I'm not seeing other people who share similar body types to me I'm hyperaware of it

> at that moment… Not only is my body a trans body, it's a fat body, it's a hairy body, it's a very queer body. And the identity and category of Bear feels like the place that I fit best. It took me a while to get there, but that's where I've settled.

Brighton interview 1

Here Oscar again leashes together the ideas of fitting in with Bear as a category and fitting in in Bear spaces. And in fact Bear as a category is described in highly spatial ways here, almost as a place itself – a loose description and set of associations into which his body can potentially fit, and so after *'a while to get there'*, *'that's where [he's] settled'*. But despite the looseness of Bear as a category, and despite men's ambivalence regarding being a Bear seen in Chapter 2, when in and around Bear spaces some men did express anxiety that they might **not** be Bears. Unlike with other identity-based subcultures and communities this didn't appear to be related to the idea of an internalised identity, of behavioural or aesthetic 'authenticity' or related 'gatekeeping' from others (e.g. Lawson & Langdridge's 2020 study of the UK puppy play community, or Hodkinson's 2002 work on Goths). Across the dataset I saw very few examples of men disputing of others' Bear-ness – but it usually came down to their bodies. Twice this was with regard to men who might be *'just fat'* rather than Bears, and several times Twinks were positioned as a kind of polar opposite of Bears due particularly to their perceived thinness, youthfulness and hairlessness, though at times their being *'artificial'* or *'loud'* was also noted (see also Hennen, 2008:117; Hill, 1997; Lopez, 2001:119; McCann, 1997; Suresha, 1997a:41; Wright, 1997b:2). But in fact the charge of 'not being a Bear' based on bodies was most commonly levelled at trimmer and more muscular men and 'Muscle Bears' (which I address further in Chapter 4). For participants, too, bodies were at the heart of their worry about not being a Bear – which was a worry about not fitting in and thus feeling uncomfortable. And so – very counterintuitively! – the worry about **not being** a Bear appeared to be more significant for men in Bear spaces than **being** a Bear. With regard to the 'attitude vs appearance' binary, **no-one** in the dataset framed their concerns about 'not being a Bear' as a matter of 'attitude'. It was **only** about their 'appearance' – their bodies. One of the men who was concerned about potentially not being a Bear was Daniel (mid 30s, fat, with a little facial hair):

> *Daniel:* I felt like at Pride, it was very much that there's a Bear body, you know? I dunno who's a prime example, but it's very much ticking boxes… It's portrayed you've got to have a beard and a belly, really hairy and stuff like that, but if you've not got that then… I feel like I'm an outsider sometimes 'cause I've got two tummies, I haven't got the round one, I feel like I'm not a Bear. Or how it's portrayed.

Brighton interview 2

Daniel's concerns here are related to his comparison with other Bear/y bodies (*'you've got to have the beard and a belly, really hairy and stuff like that'*) and his consequent *'feel[ing] like [he's] an outsider'* because of the materiality of his body (*'I've got two tummies'*). This could also be the case with regard to GBQ men of colour and the racialisation of bodies:

Aaron: You never mention ethnicity… I've been out in the Bear scene since about the 1990s, a long time ago, and I always felt that I didn't quite fit in… [In a Bear group] we had little pictures of ourselves made, and me and the other Chinese guys were hidden behind letters whereas everybody else was round the front, 'cause they looked more the typical Bear… You're not quite sure you fit with the Bear image because the Bear image is always of a White guy, hairy, Grizzly Adams sort of thing, and I don't really fit into that. so I'm not sure. I like Bears, but I'm not sure if I am one.

London focus group

Based on research on Bear communities in the USA, Hennen has rightly noted that *'Bear culture advertises itself as racially inclusive but remains overwhelmingly white'* (2008:114), with many Bear writers making similar observations (Brown, 2001:53; Clark, 2001; Ingraham, 2015:127; Lopez, 2001; Manley et al., 2007; Papadopoulos, 2001:153; Suresha, 2009:243–245, 251–262; Wright, 2001b:4–5) and GBQ men of colour pointing out instances of being made to feel invisible or unwanted in Bear spaces (Gan, 2001; Suresha, 2009:243–245) and of overt racist abuse (Suresha, 2009:253; Siriprakorn, 2019). Coming from a Chinese background, Aaron (early 50s, fat, some facial hair) was one of only two participants of colour and the only one to discuss race and ethnicity in detail. In the excerpt he describes how his racialised body, one less likely to be *'hairy'*, results in him being *'not sure'* if he's a Bear or not and more difficult to fit into Bear and into Bear spaces (see also Luna, 2017; Siriprakorn, 2019). Though here he describes the *'Bear image'* as *'always of a White guy'*, at other times he described those most fitting into Bear as *'White or Middle Eastern, Moroccan or Spanish, Latin-looking'*. Aaron's discussion of racialised Bear/y bodies consistently focused on the capacity for these different bodies to grow thick facial and body hair (see also Tan, 2019:568). This suggests that more complex modes of racialisation than simply 'White men vs men of colour' may be at play. But nevertheless, Aaron did suggest elsewhere that White men would be the most desirable in Bear spaces – pointing out me specifically:

Aaron: You just don't feel like you're wanted, you're not the golden kid, yeah?
Nick: What would be the golden kid? What is is that they want?
Aaron: I think they would want White, probably people who look like you.

London interview 2

At the time I was astonished by this, having always felt myself to be physically underwhelming compared to other Bear/y guys. Later, in my research notes, I wrote that *'due to my lack of muscle and the flabbiness of my belly fat… I was almost shocked to be framed as a kind of ideal Bear'*. This is because my own thinking – and anxieties – about bodily inclusion and categorisation had focused primarily on fatness and muscularity. But Aaron's intervention was a potent reminder of the unrecognised significance of the Whiteness of bodies – unrecognised by White men like myself, that is, but in sharp relief for Aaron.

Though in this case linked directly to the racialisation of GBQ men's bodies and of Bear spaces, Aaron's account of not feeling like a Bear mirrors accounts from other men in the Bearspace project. Due almost exclusively to comparisons between their bodies and those around them in Bear spaces (though with representations of Bears – *'portrayals'* in *'the media'* – potentially leashing in other spaces too), men can feel that they are not Bears. As with Daniel, Aaron's questioning of his Bear-hood (*'I'm not sure if I am one'*) appears to be about his doubts that he *'fit[s] with the Bear image'*. For Daniel this is about fatness (*'two tummies' vs 'the round one'*); for Aaron, the racialisation of Bear/y bodies. For both, being a Bear is about a relational comparison between their bodies and the other bodies in Bear spaces and representations, and the subsequent anxiety that their bodies *'don't really fit into that'*. When it comes to fitting in and not fitting in with Bear/y categories and spaces, these are produced through bodily comparisons. But not just bodies in the abstract, or in general. Both Daniel and Aaron describe specific bodily features which are the subject of comparison (e.g. Daniel's belly, and Aaron's racialised phenotypes). It's these specific features that I explore in the rest of this chapter.

'The tell-tale ripple of flab' – Bear/y bodily topographies

I've discussed the great significance of bodies for understanding Bear as a label and for men's experiences of 'fitting in' (or not) and around Bear spaces. But it's crucial to understand that this doesn't mean that only particular body types are present in Bear spaces, part of Bear/y communities and scenes, or are labelled Bear/y (by themselves or others). It's the differences amongst Bear/y bodies that I want to dig into now.

From the previous excerpts from Daniel and Aaron, we can see that their bodies caused them some anxiety about fitting into Bear – not their bodies in general, but some quite specific elements of their bodies. When you're a bigger, fatter, hairier man surrounded by a large number of smaller, thinner, smoother bodies, the contrast might seem as binary a one as I've framed it here. But where there are more bigger guys, more fatter guys, more hairier guys all together, the bodily contrasts become more nuanced. Suddenly the differences **between** bigger bodies, say, and **within** the category of 'bigger',

are brought into sharp relief. You might be surrounded by other bigger men, but they might be bigger in quite different ways to you. So thinking about bodies in UK Bear spaces forces a critical reappraisal of fat/thin, big/small and other bodily binaries. In my previous work (McGlynn, 2022a, 2022c) I've already stressed that being less fat than the other fat men around you is highly significant for men's feelings of comfort in UK Bear spaces. The Bear literature is also peppered with subtle injunctions against being 'too fat' in Bear spaces (see for example Brown, 2001:54; Hennen, 2008:108; Kampf, 2000:44; Mass, 2001:36) – as one of Ron Suresha's interviewees notes, *'It's nice not being the biggest guy at the bar for a change!'* (Suresha, 2009:216). But in this section I'm going to show that there's more to the differences between bodies in UK Bear spaces than simply 'how fat' they are. Geographer Peter Hopkins has already alluded to the significance of bodily distinctions like height and where fat is on the body for fat people (2012:1237), and Monaghan has similarly touched on differences between 'organic composition' and 'body composition and build' (Monaghan, 2008:23) for bigger GBQ men. More recently, Krems and Neuberg (2022) have demonstrated the importance of the location of fat women's bodies ('fat deposition location' as they put it), and not simply their weight, for fat stigma.

I want to develop this idea further, to consider the **many** ways in which differences between Bear/y bodies might be significant. To do this I use Rachel Colls' (2007) work on 'bodily topographies'. Drawing on Karen Barad's work of 'intra-active'[1] material objects, Colls notes that *'A body is separated into discrete body parts to form distinct body topographies of areas of movable flesh and bumps and folds that come into being through clothing and the comportment of sitting'* (Colls, 2007:354). Though neither I nor, I suspect, Colls wants to treat bodies as made up of completely separate elements which can be considered in isolation, she nevertheless highlights the importance of a geographic approach to material bodies. In particular she is thinking of real, fleshy bodies as active and changing, not passive or static, and 'intra-acting' with other matter such as skin, clothing, and other non-human objects (ibid. 358). Colls' work as a feminist geographer of bodies and of fatness (e.g. Colls, 2012; Colls & Evans, 2014) has been a foundational influence on my thinking and on the Bearspace project as a whole. Her work on bodily topographies pushes into more theoretically advanced areas than the Bearspace dataset justifies me in following, but her initial exploration of bodily topographies via the poetry of Susan Stinson captures well the kinds of issues I want to explore regarding bodies in Bear spaces, as well as the geographic approach of doing so. In the rest of this chapter I'll take Colls' bodily topographies approach to the bodies in UK Bear spaces, and explore the different areas of bodies (e.g. bellies, arms, arses), the qualities of different types of bodily matter (e.g. skin, muscle, and adipose), and the 'performativity' of this bodily matter (e.g. through movement, posture, and clothing), and their importance for fitting into Bear/y spaces and categorisations.

'Bellies' and stomachs were the most usual part of the body which participants discussed in the Bearspace project, and which made them understand themselves to be fat. This is unsurprising as the project explicitly invited participants to share their experiences in relation to fatness. But a close analysis of the data revealed that men in UK Bear spaces are also conscious of there being different **kinds** of bellies, and different kinds of other areas of their bodies too:

Jonathan: The whole Bear community was created from people that didn't feel like they fit the mould, right? So then they created their own community where they could feel accepted amongst each other, [but] now it's "You don't have the right beard or enough body hair or the right body shape, and you're not a Bear".

Brighton focus group

As Jonathan alludes to here, anxieties around fitting in to Bear as a category and to Bear spaces aren't just about **having** a beard, or body hair, or a belly, but **having the right kind** of them. To be clear, men without those types of material bodies that are valorised or referred to as 'right' in the dataset are still going to Bear/y spaces, and are still labelling themselves and being labelled by others as Bears. And neither are the 'right' and 'wrong' elements of bodies universally agreed upon or clearly identifiable. But nevertheless, it does seem that some manifestations of bodily elements can be considered more positively and some more negatively by the GBQ men going to UK Bear spaces. One of the most common ways of describing bodies seen as less valorised in Bear/y spaces was with regard to fat (adipose) deposits. Scholarship on GBQ men's embodied experiences has noted that fat men's bodies are often associated with femininity (Durgadas, 1998; Edmonds & Zieff, 2015:422; Forth, 2013; McPhail & Bombak, 2015:541; Monaghan & Malson, 2013:305; Mosher, 2001:175; White, 2012), and yet also masculinity (Adams & Berry, 2013; Gough & Flanders, 2009:244–245; Mass, 2001:34; Monaghan & Malson, 2013:307). Aside from these cultural and indeed personal and erotic variations in meanings attached to men's fatness (see also Forth, 2013; Gilman, 2004; Monaghan, 2008), there are also other **material** variations in GBQ men's bodies which have relevance here:

Carolus: In [my home country] they focus more on the shape of the belly.
Nick: Okay, can you tell me more about the shape of the belly?
Carolus: In [my home country] people think that Bears – again this is my perception, my experience, nothing set in stone – I was told that if you have a rounded belly, one single belly rounded, you're a Bear… My belly's not shaped like that. I've got three mini bellies, so I was told I'm a Chubby. The fact that I'm hairy is a plus, but

it does not define me as a Bear. A Bear needs to have broad shoulders and a round belly.

London interview 1

As with Daniel's *'two tummies'* (referring to his large rolls of fat) in the previous section, Carolus distinguishes between his own rolls of fat (*'three mini bellies'*) and the more singular *'rounded belly'* which he felt was more associated with being a Bear. Like Daniel and Carolus, I've often described my own belly not as one thing but as being split into distinct parts:

> *My roll of fat was on my mind. People were talking about me being attractive, and I could almost hear myself thinking "Oh this t-shirt must be covering up my roll of fat really well", or "Oh it's busy enough so that people can only kind off see my upper half", like they can't see the tell-tale ripple of flab, that flap of fat hanging over my belly, hanging over my waist, and over my belt. And taking off my shirt in the club didn't feel as liberatory as it has in other spaces. Because I'd been looking around at other guys, seeing if they had the same kind of roll of fat… I felt they didn't have quite as obvious a kind of big, sagging roll of fat as I do.*

Edinburgh auto/ethnography

This *'tell-tale ripple of flab'*, the *'sagging roll of fat'*, is the lower part of my belly below my belly button, a distinct *'flap'* of fat-filled skin (see Figure 3.1).

So understanding the significance of differently fat bodies for guys experiences in Bear spaces means considering not just what parts of the body the fat is on (e.g. on the belly), but also the different areas of those parts (e.g. the lower part of the belly). A detailed **topography** (per Colls, 2007) of fat on the body. Furthermore, as some writers on men's fatness have noted, it isn't just fatness itself which matters for men or even where the fat is, but the **matter** of fatness – fat's actual, material qualities, and in particular fat that is soft and wobbly, versus fat that is hard and tight (Bell & McNaughton, 2007:124; Norman, 2013). The *'sagging'* (a term also used by numerous other Bearspace participants) of my fat belly referred to above was a repeated concern across my auto/ethnographic reflections in 2018 and 2019, the most common way of describing my belly which stressed its drooping shape, its looseness and its movement. When discussing fat bellies, bums, thighs, arms and more, Bearspace participants also referred to their softness and mobility in relation to fatness:

Rex: I have a big belly, I know that, and I quite like my tummy. I've also got quite big thighs, although over the years as I've aged they're not quite as firm as they used to be, so they're a wee bit more loose.

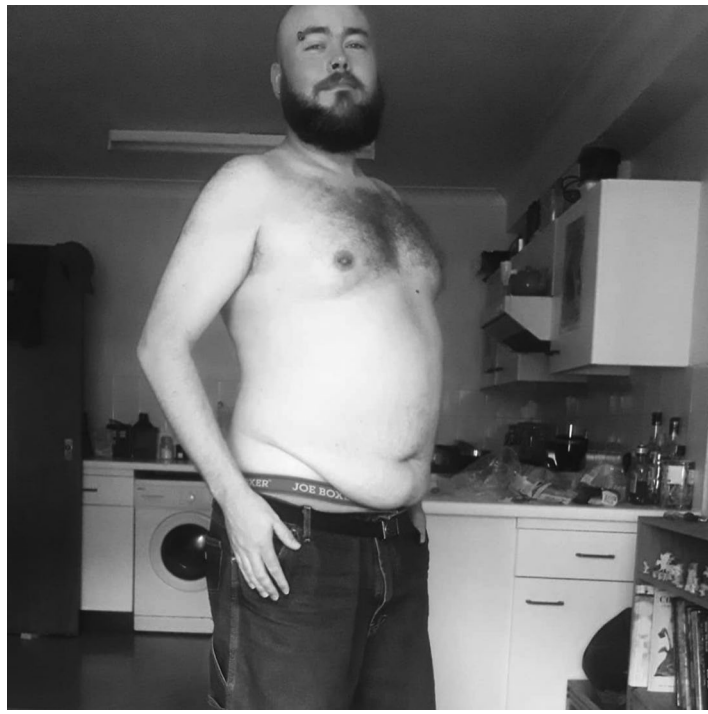

Figure 3.1 Self-taken photo showing fat roll, May 2019.

Edinburgh interview 4

Joe: My legs are fat, but at the same time I think of my legs as being really good legs, partly because I've had to carry all of this around for so long. They're well-shaped, good strong legs. So my belly I think of as fat, my arse is kind of fat but it's not saggy or anything, it's just there.

Belfast interview 3

Nick: Are there parts of your body you particularly think are fat?
Oscar: My stomach definitely, my stomach and love-handle areas. Yeah, 'cause I don't have a beer belly or anything like that, I have flabby fat on my stomach and my sides, and my thighs as well.

Brighton interview 1

These participants each explicitly framed the fat parts of bodies where the fat was **softer** and more mobile (*'loose', 'saggy', 'flabby'*) as less desirable, and in opposition to parts which are still fat but **firmer** (*'not quite as firm as they used to be', 'well-shaped, good strong', 'a beer belly'*). As was so often the

case, during my analysis of the dataset I found the same theme occurring in my own auto/ethnographic reflections. In the following excerpt, I reflect on an experience hooking up with another fat man at a club night:

> *We were both sat topless next to each other, and I put my arm around him. And I was thinking "Oh my belly's just like kinda sitting out there, on my lap basically". And I was slightly leaning into him, so my belly was flopping off to one side. I was self-conscious about that a couple of times… I loved his belly cause it was round, and taut, and I had my hands on it when we were kissing. And it was big. And I just wanted to get my face in it and slap it with my hands.*

Edinburgh auto/ethnography

Despite both myself and my hookup being fat, with large bellies, the material differences I (literally) felt there to be between our fat bellies – mine *'flopping'*, his *'round, and taut'* – again stress the negative associations with fat which is softer and more mobile, and positive associations with that which is firmer.

This sagginess was of course not only a matter of adipose deposits also but these deposits' relationships (their *'intra-actions'* as Colls [2007] would put it) with other body tissues such as skin. For example, Daniel and Jeff discussed the impacts of their weight **loss** on their bodily topographies:

Daniel: I still get quite a lot of [negative comments] online, people saying I'm too fat or too chunky, just not for them, 'cause I've got quite a lot of loose skin and stuff. 'Cause I've lost a significant amount of weight, I've lost elasticity.

Brighton interview 2

Jeff: You lose definition when you lose a lot of weight, and your skin stretches, so the arms and things like that, I feel that's fat round there.

London interview 3

Though I was considerably fatter when Daniel and Jeff spoke to me, as I've lost weight over the past two years I've often found myself explaining this to people. When you lose fat, that skin doesn't just go away or immediately spring back taut against a firm body. The excess skin remains for a long time – I still have plenty even now, and being the overripe old age of 41 I expect I'll always have a bit of a saggy wobble around my midriff. During the project I even reflected on the visual quality of the skin covering my roll of fat:

> *I was looking at my stomach up close… Not just the size of it but the texture of it, and it was looking kind of… I don't even know how to describe it… Not segmented… Like flabby and almost like the stretch marks were all over it, like it wasn't smooth, it was almost kinda like rough but soft at the same time? Yeah. I didn't like that.*

Belfast auto/ethnography

At the time I was simply repelled by the skin on my belly, but looking back I suspect this was the result of losing a little weight which caused the skin to contract and wrinkle, thus appearing even more *'flabby'*. As Jeff and Daniel point out, that intra-action between skin and fat can mean that you still feel or look fat through the consequent lack of *'elasticity'* and *'definition'*, so that losing adipose can even **increase** (visually and to the touch) the negative sagginess of your body. Another body tissue of vital importance in these discussions of GBQ men's bodily topographies, in addition to fat and skin, is muscle. Though the Bearspace project was primarily focused on fat men, muscle and muscular men in Bear spaces were occasionally discussed and in my analysis I identified muscle as important – even essential – for understanding fatness in Bear spaces. As Bell and McNaughton have argued with regard to men in general, *'fatness, muscularity and masculinity are intertwined'* (2007:108) and this may be particularly the case for GBQ men (Fogarty & Walker, 2022; Hutson, 2010:224–225; McGrady, 2016; Robinson, 2016). For example, one of the most common ways in which muscle was discussed was through reference to specific locations on the body:

> *I was looking in the mirror earlier and looking at my limbs again. I'm tall, and I'm fat, but I'm lanky as well, I've got really kinda long slender limbs. My thighs are quite thick. But no matter what I do, I can't really build up any mass in my forearms or my lower legs, like it just doesn't seem to be the way that my body works. That's the bit I look at all the time now and I just think <sighs>… I feel disproportionate to the rest of my body. Like I would be much happier with the current state of my torso fatness if, god I keep thinking sometimes like "Oh I wish I had like fatter arms!" <laughs> But I don't, I've got skinny arms and skinny lower legs… What I want for my body is that when I'm resting my arms don't look skinny. That they look proportionate to the rest of my body. <big sigh>*

Belfast auto/ethnography

> *Gerald: [I've got] the belly, a small belly, and love handles. But skinny arms and skinny legs. And that's the only bit of me that gets any crap, at any time.*

Edinburgh interview 1

The negativity of 'skinny' here doesn't refer to the lack of fat – for me the idea of desiring fat arms was ridiculous enough to inspire laughter, and elsewhere Gerald expressed disgust at the idea of fat arms and thighs. And if not a matter of fat, then it is likely muscle – and the lack thereof – that makes *'skinny arms and skinny legs'* a negative bodily trait. Muscular limbs would, per my own reflections, balance out the fat sitting elsewhere on the body for a *'proportionate'* build. But the importance of muscle wasn't just a matter of having big, muscular limbs vs skinny limbs. Participants' discussions also highlighted the ways in muscle relates to and 'intra-acts' with other bodily tissues:

Ross: He was this big, dark guy. Dark hair. He was big, not huge by any means, but he had a bit of weight on him. Well-shaped though.
Nick: What's 'well-shaped'?
Ross: Big in the chest. He was carrying weight, but not excessive. This big, broad guy. I'd say probably a little over six feet tall, slightly taller than me… You could say that while he was carrying weight, he must have worked at something quite physical because he had a good muscle structure underneath him.

Belfast interview 5

Scott: The frame, body type, body structure, [they have] different impacts on how fat one can be, and still be perceived as a certain level of masculine. I think there's a gradient there. There are definitely fat guys [where] the way that it sits on their body overlaps with what could be perceived as musculature more than in others.

Manchester interview 2

Men's bodies are often imagined, desired, or expected to be hard and solid (Longhurst, 2001; Norman, 2013). As Ross and Scott indicate here, the combination or intra-action of muscle with skin and adipose may provide elements of the positively viewed qualities of fatness (firmness, tautness) due to its own sensuous and material qualities.

These kinds of reflections again point to the instability or even inadequacy of 'fat' or 'fat men' as categories of analysis, particularly regarding the Bear/y bodies in Bear spaces. A fat man with muscular arms and a framework of abdominal musculature to firm up his belly might experience such spaces (and be experienced himself) quite differently to, say, a fat man with a drooping white belly and skinny arms. Muscle is rarely discussed in any detail in research on fat GBQ men, but in UK Bear spaces it was perceived as ameliorating the supposedly negative qualities of fatness (in no small part through its intra-action with adipose and skin). Perhaps as a consequence,

the relationship between more and less muscular fat men was looked on with concern by a number of participants:

Rex: There's definitely been a shift towards [clubbing Bear spaces] having a top tier of pretty circuit Muscle Bears… There definitely is a group of Bear men who work very hard on their bodies… A lot of them are still fat but they're also largely muscled, and therefore are probably in the skimpiest clothing or have their tops off the second they get into the club.

Edinburgh interview 3

Jeff: People I would perceive to be very heavy and fat, generally, are not as relaxed in that [Bear club] anymore compared to where they would've been fifteen years ago. I think it's changed massively, and I think what's perceived as attractive in the Bear community [is] where you have almost a minimal degree of body fat, and [you have] muscle… That's what's perceived as successful, as attractive, as popular… [Previously] the [Bear] movement if you like, or Bear spaces, were generally to accommodate all shapes and sizes. But I think it's gravitated to a more alpha muscular type. Away from fat, or away from those that are heavier set.

London interview 2

Numerous participants expressed a degree of uneasiness or even distaste for Muscle Bears. It's conceivable that this could stem from the classic Bear valorisation of 'natural' bodies rather than an 'artificial' body you have to *'work very hard on'* (see McGlynn, 2021). But my analysis above indicates that muscularity was seen as instinctively desirable by participants (myself included), suggesting that bodily comparisons and subsequent anxieties are at play rather than a neat natural/artificial binary. Though Jeff mentions the Bear *'movement'* and *'community'* at large, both he and Rex ground their discussions of *'pretty circuit[2] Muscle Bears'* and *'alpha muscular type[s]'* very much in particular kinds of spaces, e.g. clubbing environments. Such men tend to be positioned at the top of a hierarchy of Bear/y bodies (McGlynn, 2022a). Though Bearspace investigated club nights attached to larger Bear events, circuit parties and large clubs were not the kinds of spaces investigated by the project. This was partially due to the expected difficulties in collecting interview and focus group data from such sites, but more so because of their dubious status as Bear spaces – the small number identified in the UK made only scant reference to Bears, if any, and consequently weren't labelled as ideal case study sites. However, I do develop this exploration of muscular men and Muscle Bears further in Chapter 5 (Bear Cities). For now, we can see that Bearspace participants certainly perceived muscularity

as ameliorating fatness, and that muscularity with (or without) fatness was more desirable than fat without muscle. In his study of fat Bears, McGrady notes that Muscle Bears have recently become an important element of Bear scenes for bigger guys to *'negotiate'* (2016:1716), as their very presence can make non-muscular fat men feel uncomfortable (see also McGlynn, 2022a; Tan, 2019 on similar trends in Taipei). When thinking about GBQ men's bodies then, it is vital that muscle as well as fatness and slenderness is considered. This isn't just about Muscle Bears, but rather muscle's intra-action with other tissues (e.g. fat and skin) as part of a bodily topography.

The final element of GBQ men's bodily topographies I want to discuss here relates not to the location of fat on the body, or the intra-activity of different bodily tissues, but the responsiveness of the body to movement, pressure, and other materials. We could call this the 'performativity' (Butler, 1990; Gregson & Rose, 2000) of the body, meaning the way in which our bodies aren't static or passive but are always **doing** things (Butler, 1993; Colls, 2007; Longhurst, 2001) – whether we mean them to or not! In an interview, Gregory described a moment at which he'd felt his belly fat was particularly on his mind:

Gregory: I was slouching in the chair as well, so obviously it was more prominent.

Edinburgh interview 2

Gregory's reflection here reminds us that bodies move and that the configuration of some parts (e.g. bellies) can change in response to the movement and changed configuration of other parts (*'I was slouching'*), as well as from inter-action with other material objects (*'in the the chair'*). Consequently his belly stuck out more and became *'more prominent'* than it might when he was standing up. Several of my extended auto/ethnographic accounts reflected on similar occurrences:

> *It's different when you're walking about. Posture's different. Body's held different. You look fatter when you sit down. Body hunches over… I think I hold my body in certain ways to make myself look smaller and less fat. And that's why I hunch over, because that hides my… well it stops my tits sticking out quite so much. Like if I stand up like fully straight, that really emphasises that I have a huge chest.*

Edinburgh auto/ethnography

> *I stretched myself up to my full height, which I don't usually do because it shows off my belly and my tits, makes them stick out more. Gives me, I always think, a quite unnatural shape to my body.*

Brighton auto/ethnography

As these excerpts show, for GBQ men in UK Bear spaces bodies aren't just a matter of weight but of configuration, of arrangement and posture. And while sitting down might emphasise fatness by causing the belly to be concentrated in a smaller space and thus squashed outwards, standing up to a *'full height'* can equally arrange other parts of the body (*'my tits'*) in undesirable ways so that they, too, *'stick out'* and even feel *'unnatural'*. And just as the arrangement of the body matters, so too do the other objects our bodies are inter-acting with. Gregory has already alluded to chairs, but clothes, too, are highly significant for the performativity of the body:

Daniel: I've dressed differently some days and people have commented on the way I look, or said I look slimmer even though I know I'm not, it's just the way I've dressed.

Brighton interview 3

Daniel comments on something which several Bearspace participants also noted. Clothes don't just sit on the body but materially inter-act with it by framing it in certain ways, making you *'look slimmer'* or even fatter – the latter of which participants described with regard to the very large and badly-fitted t-shirts which fat men often find themselves having to wear. And again, these differences between tighter clothes which make you look slimmer, and looser clothes which make you look fatter, emerged in my own auto/ethnographic data too:

> *I had worn my blue Brighton Bear Weekend 2019 vest… During the day I caught sight of it in the mirror of the toilet and in windows once and twice, from the side, and I wasn't quite happy with how it looked. It seemed to be kind of baggy around the waist band, which is what I don't like. 'Cause it kind of makes my chest, my belly stick out and makes me look fatter. It just kinda hangs. I want things that are tight, cling to my body, rather than hanging loose, tent-like off of it… Certainly when I wear that kinda tight stuff people have asked me, or said to me, "Oh you look like you've lost weight, you look really thin". And it's purely 'cause I'm wearing tighter clothes. After Ali and I [finished having sex] I slung on my black Nike top, also tight, pits smelled a bit, 'cause I was conscious that I was stretching my vest too much, and I was trying to save it for the night… And then I looked at the black t-shirt in the mirror and thought, "Oh that looks good". I thought it'd be a stretched out after a previous day of wearing it, but it was fine.*

Brighton auto/ethnography

Throughout these periods of data collection I slowly became conscious of my careful rotation of clothes so as to ensure those worn on my upper body were *'tight'* and would *'cling to my body'* rather than *'hanging loose, tent-like off of it'*. My rationale for this was that tighter clothes would hug my fat body and make it look slimmer. Loose shirts hit the outmost point of a fat belly and then go straight **down** to create a silhouette suggesting a greater volume of fat than is present.[3] Tighter shirts will follow the flesh of the belly back inwards to the groin, lending shape and even that desired firmness to the fat. But of course clothes have their own 'performativity' as they interact with the body, changing during the course of the day. And so by wearing my Brighton Bear Weekend vest my body stretched the clothing fibres *'too much'*, to the point at which it began to hang and *'[make] me look fatter'*.

Considering bodies in UK Bear spaces, where there are more bigger and fatter men's bodies, brings to the fore the material differences within categories like 'big', 'fat', 'muscled' etc. These don't refer to just one kind of material body. My foregoing writing on Bear bodies has highlighted the significance of the volume of fat (e.g. 'how fat' you are) as a very significant material difference between GBQ men in UK Bear spaces, so that men often experience such spaces as comfortable because they recognise that they aren't the fattest man present (McGlynn, 2022a, 2022c). But as well as being **more or less** fat, bodies can also be **differently** fat, differently thin, differently muscular. A bodily topographies approach, following Colls' (2007) work, guides us to explore the location of fat (and other corporeal tissues) on the body; the material and sensuous qualities of these intra-acting tissues; and the performativity of moving, changing bodies. In the case of GBQ men in and around UK Bear spaces, it seems that fatty parts of bodies which are more soft and mobile are seen more negatively, and those which are harder and firmer are seen more positively. While some literature on fat men – most particularly Norman's (2013) superb research on hard and soft fat – has indicated that these types of fatness are linked with femininity and masculinity respectively, Bearspace participants didn't explicitly make these kinds of connections, instead linking fat materialities to feelings of fitting in (or not) with Bears and Bear spaces, and with bodies more or less stigmatised through fatness. Both muscle and skin, as tissues which contribute to these material qualities of fatness, are essential to consider in work on GBQ men's bodies and particularly in and around Bear spaces. A bodily topographies approach helps us to examine in detail the kinds of bodily anxieties that are produced within Bear/y spaces and through comparisons between Bear/y bodies.

Conclusion to Bear bodies

In this chapter I've developed my pivot towards bodies as a key way of categorising or defining Bear in the UK context, which I introduced in Chapter 2. Having suggested that we understand 'Bear' as a loose category

used to label GBQ men, based primarily but not exclusively on their bodies, I've nevertheless argued against strict bodily limits for defining Bears. There is much variance and uncertainty regarding what kinds of bodies can be categorised as 'Bear'. This means that Bear is inherently a shifting and unstable category, despite (or even because of) its linkage with bodies in the UK context. Following participants' regular use of terms like 'Bear-y' and 'Bear-ish' to acknowledge and work with the fluidity of the Bear category, I introduced my own deliberately ambiguous neologism 'Bear/y' to force a recognition of this.

Developing my consideration of Bear/y bodies, I showed that bodies are crucial for those of us wishing to fit into Bear as a category and into Bear/y communities and spaces. This involved both our own bodies, but also the bodies around us in UK Bear spaces, so that bodily similarities and differences could make us either fit in or feel like an outsider. I noted in particular how the material qualities of different bodies such as fat bodies and racialised bodies could impact on one's capacity to fit into Bear/y categories and spaces. My analysis of participants' discussions and my own auto/ethnographic reflections then revealed that a geographic approach to bodies based on Rachel Colls (2007) *'bodily topographies'* can help us to understand in greater detail the specific bodily characteristics important for fitting into Bear – essential for Bear/y spaces where many ostensibly similar bodies may be present. Using Colls' work I've identified the positioning of different bodily tissues on the body, and their material and sensuous qualities, as two key elements. Soft and saggy fat parts of bodies were seen to be undesirable, while firm and round fatness was more desired. Muscularity was also seen as desirable and its lack a detriment, and the intra-action of muscle with fat and skin could make fatness more firm to the touch. A third element was the movement – the 'performativity' – of bodies and clothes, which could enhance the perceived negative qualities of fatness. This chapter has thus demonstrated that bodies and bodily tissues can take on a variety of different meanings in different spaces, and through bodies' own 'intra-actions'. Thinking about these bodily topographies helps us to understand the specific kinds of experiences – of body-image anxiety, of fitting in or not – in UK Bear spaces, in which working with labels like 'fat', 'thin', and so on can't capture the distinct bodily features involved.

There are potentially far-reaching implications of these findings, beyond UK Bear spaces. My previous work has suggested the need for a *'critical reappraisal of "fat" as a discourse and as a category of analysis'* (McGlynn, 2022c) due to the ways in which bodies are *'differently fat'* (ibid.). In this chapter I've further developed the analysis that led to this suggestion. In particular, the more expansive bodily topographies approach I've used demonstrates the **many** material differences between bodies – not just fat bodies – and thus necessarily calls into question other bodily categories. We may (and should) rightly interrogate the ways in which bodies can be differently thin, differently muscular, and so on, as well as how such differences **within** such bodily categories results in different experiences, in different spaces, and at different times.

Notes

1 While 'inter-active' implies separate objects which affect each other, 'intra-active' suggests that such objects shouldn't be considered as separate but as part of a larger, holistic physical phenomenon. The action is happening **within**.
2 *'Circuit'* refers to circuit parties, these being large temporary club nights for GBQ men which travel from location to location (both intra- and inter-nationally). Circuit parties are often associated with trim and muscular physiques.
3 The theatrical production *Fat Blokes* by the artist Scottee (www.scottee.co.uk) offers an excellent visual commentary on this.

4 Bear venues

Researching Bear spaces

Having presented new ways of thinking about Bears, it's at last time – in this book about Bear spaces – to think about Bear spaces. The creation and maintenance of fixed and dedicated as well as more ephemeral sites where LGBTQ people can meet and be in the company of people like us has long been a central concern of both politicised LGBTQ movements and of LGBTQ communities in general (Binnie, 1995; Castells, 1983; Formby, 2017; Gieseking, 2020; Hartless, 2019; Higgs, 1999; Ingram et al., 1997; Knopp, 1995; Mattson, 2019; Valentine, 2002). Contemporary discourse about LGBTQ spaces often describes or idealises them as 'safe spaces' for those who experience abuse and marginalisation for their perceived sexual or gender deviance (Formby, 2017:69–72; Fox & Ore, 2010; Hanhardt, 2013; Hartal, 2018; Held, 2015; Pascar et al., 2018), and as important sites of belonging and community development (ibid; see also Johnston & Longhurst, 2010:61–77). They're also where sexual identities themselves, such 'gay' and 'lesbian' are constructed and developed (Aldrich, 2014; Bech, 1997; Brown-Saracino, 2018; Higgs, 1999; Houlbrook, 2005), as well as other modes of sexualised categorisation such as pups (Lawson & Langdridge, 2020) and radical faeries (Hennen, 2008; Morgensen, 2009).

The same can certainly be said with regard to spaces for Bears. Sites where Bears and those who want to associate with them can gather, socialise, relax, have fun, and have sex are universally desired and championed throughout the Bear literature (see for example Clark, 2001:126; Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; Gough & Flanders, 2009:242–243; Hennen, 2008; Manley et al., 2007; Rofes, 1997; Wright, 1997b; Yoakam, 2001:141; see also chapters throughout Suresha, 2009). Even when those identifying with and participating in Bear communities aren't going to those spaces themselves, it seems that they still feel it important that they exist and that the possibility of visiting them in the future remains (Wilkinson, 2001:108). Bear spaces like bars and clubs, particularly with regard to the Lone Star in San Francisco, have been crucial in the development of Bear communities (Fritscher, 2001; Hyslop,

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2001; Suresha, 1997b, 2009:106), and have contributed to the construction of Bear as a category of GBQ man, as a concept (Ganczaruk, 1997; Hennen, 2008:18; Floyd, 1997; Suresha, 1997b; Wright, 1997b), as well as other animal categories such as Otters (Hendricks, 2001:76).

Bear spaces are strongly linked with inclusion and belonging for those GBQ men who feel excluded from or marginalised in non-Bear LGBTQ+ spaces, particularly with regard to their larger, hairier and older bodies. They have at times been described as 'safe spaces' for such men (e.g. Ganczaruk, 1997:205; Hay, 1997:236; Kucera, 2001:170; Suresha, 2009:297), who have described their experiences in Bear spaces as *'mindblowing'* (Suresha, 2009:14) and as *'being set free'* (Suresha, 2009:144). They've been called sites of *'salvation', 'belonging'* and *'contentment'* (Gough & Flanders, 2009:242–243), and of crucial *'affirmation'* (Eric Rofes in Suresha, 2009:22; for other accounts see Clark, 2001:126; Manley et al., 2007; Yoakam, 2001:141; and interviews throughout Suresha, 2009). This undoubtedly mirrors non-Bear LGBTQ people's experiences in LGBTQ spaces, but for Bears such experiences and descriptions are usually counterposed **against** their experiences in non-Bear LGBTQ spaces which often involve marginalisation or feelings of being out of place, particularly for bigger, fatter, and older men (see Edmonds & Zieff, 2015:416; McGlynn, 2022a, 2022c; McGrady, 2016). Certainly, the reflective and historical Bear literature strongly suggests that much of this importance is in relation to GBQ men's bodies. Ron Suresha's interviewees described experiencing Bear spaces as places where *'people went to look for men who look like me'* (Suresha, 2009:14), as places where you wouldn't *'be the biggest guy at the bar for a change'* (Suresha, 2009:216), where you could be *'comfortable to be the man I am, without having to suck in my stomach or wear certain types of clothes'* (Suresha, 2009:144). And as these excerpts indicate, the existence of Bear spaces seems particularly important for bigger and fatter GBQ guys getting to feel comfortable and attractive, which as one Bear suggests *'you'd never get… anywhere else'* (Monaghan & Malson, 2013:309). In this regard Bear spaces have even been said to be potentially radical and subversive by offering times and places where conventional markers of gay male attractiveness, and the stigma attached to fatter and older GBQ men, are challenged and overthrown (Kelly & Kane, 2001; Monaghan & Malson, 2013:309; Suresha, 2009:21). There is reason to be sceptical of how successful these challenges are though – as I've shown in previous research, while Bear spaces are felt to be comfortable by fat GBQ men in particular this is linked to the experience of not being the fattest man present, so that bigger guys may feel especially good about themselves in Bear spaces because they are where they can feel slimmer in comparison to 'really' fat people (McGlynn, 2022; see also Gough & Flanders, 2009:243–244).

Despite their obvious significance, Bear spaces have almost never been the focus of Bear writing or research. Until now there has been no empirical, geographically informed research on them. In this chapter I want to present

findings about Bear spaces here in the UK, and particularly those venues created and used by Bears. I aim to explain what UK Bear spaces are like, how we might conceptualise them, and how they are produced. Pyle and Klein (2011:84) have suggested that Bear spaces have shifted from being mostly in private homes or clubs to becoming increasingly public (see also Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; Ganczaruk, 1997). So I begin by describing the kinds of public Bear spaces we now see here in the UK, and highlight a decline in the number of fixed and self-described Bear bars and clubs, and the trend towards temporary and ephemeral Bear spaces. I show how this trend was perceived with some consternation by UK Bear communities. I then present my analysis of participants' discussions regarding how we should understand and define 'Bear spaces'. Influenced by geographers of sexualities and relating to the temporariness and ephemerality of UK Bear spaces, I suggest that instead of trying to categorise a space as simply a Bear space or not, we consider the processes involved in the 'Bearing' of space. Developing my focus on Bear/y bodies across the previous two chapters, I argue that is the Bearing of space occurs through the achievement of a what I call a **critical mass** of proximate Bear/y bodies. This approach helps us to understand debates around what qualifies as a Bear space in the UK, and helps us to understand changing experiences in them. And, just as I've introduced the term Bear/y for people, we can also grapple with definitional debates around Bear spaces by contemplating 'Bear/y spaces'. I also discuss details of UK Bear spaces' physical environments aesthetics, showing that these were of limited relevance in ephemeral spaces, but used to characterise fixed Bear spaces as properly committed or not. Finally, I explore the felt atmospheres which men linked to UK Bear spaces. Here I note where areas of disagreement with other writing (including my own) regarding the supposed masculine atmosphere of a Bear space.

'We don't have a dedicated space anymore' – the ephemeral Bear spaces of the UK

Spaces as banal and as diverse as homes (Kampf, 2000:78–85; Webster, 1997:245), hotel rooms (Hay, 1997), and restaurants (Webster, 1997:245; Brown, 2001:44) are important for Bears (Papadopoulos, 2001) and numerous participants mentioned their significance for their experiences as and with Bears. But most of the spaces investigated through the Bearspace project and discussed by participants included club nights; social meetups held in LGBTQ or LGBTQ-friendly pubs; activity meetups such as bowling nights, cinema outings, and walking trips; sexual meetups such as sauna nights; and multi-day events which incorporate some or all of the above.

I'm aware that readers might not be familiar with these kinds of Bear spaces, or might have impressions of what happens in them based on word of mouth, social media discussion, and media/advertising imagery. So I want to quickly describe my own experiences in UK Bear spaces. The activities

taking place naturally varied depending on the type of space. Club nights of course involved dancing as well as *'fancy dress'*, dressing up for a particular theme or in fetishwear, and the inevitable dressing down when clothing came off and many of us danced nearly (or completely) naked. Mirroring my own observations of many of the Bear spaces visited, some participants warned against taking the 'masculine' appearance or dress of some attendees at face value: *'It's always butch drag… People never take it hugely seriously. There's a level of joy about it, there's gayness about it'* (Rex). The music itself was far from the stereotypically masculine, with a surprisingly large number of participants expressing real distaste for *'heavy rock and heavy metal'* (Brian), *'heavy, thumping bass – ghastly'* (Darren) and *'tracks that just go <bangs on table repeatedly>'* (Joe). Some stressed a strong preference for *'cheese'* (Ben), *'uber camp'* (Jeff), and *'pop music [that] big men can dance to'* (Chuck). My own notes from one club night described the music as *'Great to dance to, a mix of old stuff, camp classics with a bit of a dance remix to them, and more contemporary electronic stuff. Britney Spears, RuPaul's Drag Racers, Grimes, Rihanna, just a really good mix'*. Club nights also tended to be the most overtly sexualised spaces with plenty of flirting, kissing, affectionate touching and groping, and some with makeshift darkrooms for quick sex. Smaller social events tended to involve just drinking and socialising, with larger social events also featuring drag acts, cabaret shows, and 'Mr Bear' contests. And in pretty much all spaces drinking (usually alcohol) and eating took place – the latter being a distinctive feature of Bear spaces so that sandwiches, chocolates, doughnuts, chips, pastries and other sweet and savoury snacks were offered, laid out or passed around for free even at some Bear club nights. One can only hope the trend spreads – I'm sure many of us remember nights out when a 2am sandwich or sausage roll would have staved off alcohol-induced disaster. All of these took place on physical sites which were not aimed at Bears specifically, or in many cases even LGBTQ people. And none of them were particularly frequent, with the most frequent (some club nights and social meetups) being monthly, and many only a few times a year.

As should be expected given the Bear literature on the subject, Bear spaces were regarded as very important by UK participants. And given the widespread popularity of the concept and discourse of the 'safe space' with regard to LGBTQ venues, readers might expect that Bear spaces would be referred to as 'safe spaces' for fatter and older men in particular, who often otherwise felt marginalised in or excluded from mainstream LGBTQ spaces (McGlynn, 2022a). However, this was only very rarely the case. Instead, Bear spaces were overwhelmingly referred to not as 'safe' but as 'comfortable' instead (see McGlynn, 2022a, 2022c). Consequently participants agreed that even when travelling intra- or inter-nationally they would tend to visit spaces thought to be Bear spaces over other LGBTQ spaces, due to the sense of comfort and the sociability of expected in the former. Finding sexual partners

was also an element, but this was downplayed by participants who instead heavily stressed the social aspects:

Ben: Bear events used to be about sex because it was the only place these big guys could get laid, because they met people that were like them. I think now that's changed, the entire scene is changing… It gives these people a connection to people that they can grow a friendship with, or grow a relationship with.

Manchester interview 3

Online Bear communities have thrived since the early days of the internet (Dyer, 1997:176–177) and Bear social media groups and networks are both numerous and heavily used (Monaghan, 2005; Quidley-Rodriguez & De Santis, 2021:142; Suresha, 2009:385–390; Tan, 2019) and continue to be highly active online. This was also the case for these UK participants, but many emphasised the importance of **physical** spaces where they could meet others **in person**, often suggesting that the key benefit of digital spaces was actually their ability to facilitate in-person attendance at physical Bear spaces through easier communication. They also directly contrasted the socialising that takes place in physical spaces to that in digital spaces, valuing the former:

Ross: I prefer the likes of doing social evenings, whether it's bowling or cinema, going out and doing things…. We're all isolated, and it's the social things that make us a group… Online is still, I think, isolated…. You don't really become a part of a gay community, any gay community until you start socialising with other gay people. That's the cohesion that holds you together… There needs to be some physical element to the socialising, there needs to be a physical connection there, it's not just chatting to some person that I don't know online.

Belfast focus group

Just as a desire for fixed LGBTQ spaces is common amongst LGBTQ people (e.g. Formby, 2017; Knopp, 1998; Gieseking, 2022), so did Bearspace participants pointedly and repeatedly stress that having fixed, dedicated Bear spaces was important for them and for Bear communities. Yet they also pointed to the dearth of these in the UK. When compiling the original Bearspace Database to help identify case study sites, I found to my shock that here in the UK there almost no fixed, permanent and unambiguous Bear spaces (e.g. self-described Bear pubs or bars), with only one such site (the Bristol Bear Bar) existing as of the time of writing. UK Bear spaces are almost exclusively ephemeral and temporary events (e.g. club nights or social meetups). They take place in both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ venues for

short periods of time – usually a single afternoon or night, though with some longer events making repeated use of a space over a few days. This shift from fixed to ephemeral Bear spaces in the UK was a regular point of discussion throughout the project, both in the interviews and focus groups as well as in my auto/ethnographic notes recording my casual interactions with other Bear space attendees. Some linked this to the overall decline in gay and LGBTQ spaces in recent years (see Campkin & Marshall, 2018; Kheraj, 2021a, 2021b; Mattson, 2019; Nash, 2013; Renninger, 2019). As a minority within the LGBTQ minority, and one often which feels marginalised **from** that LGBTQ minority, Bear/y guys and fat GBQ men may feel this loss of space even more acutely. Bearspace participants were certainly very conscious of the temporariness and ephemerality of UK Bear spaces, and some put their desire for more fixed spaces in strong terms:

Dougie: It was a lot friendlier when we had a dedicated Bear space in Manchester… We have these spaces which accommodate us but we don't have a dedicated space anymore… Everyone's fractured… Our territory's so small, there's just no place for us… [The Bear bar] was a close space where everyone had no choice but to meet each other. It was the heart of the community, and ever since they went it's become harder to corral all the different Bears into one social circle. It's a sad thing.

Nick: Why's it a sad thing?

Dougie: The lack of these specific spaces forces us to break apart into these cliques… rather than doing what the [Bear] scene was intended to do, which was bring people that didn't fit into the status quo of gay culture together.

Manchester interview 1

Dougie's reflections were mirrored by other participants and particularly the organisers and volunteers at temporary Bear events or social groups, who similarly believed (as is suggested by literature on LGBTQ spaces, e.g. Formby, 2017) that a fixed *'hub'* would *'help build a community better'* and worried that its lack would reduce connection and community amongst Bears. This is understandable not just in terms of the spatialities but also the temporalities involved – as some participants were keen to point out, most Bear spaces appear at weekends so that attendance has to be planned and can't just be spur of the moment or spontaneous at any time of the week. So in the contemporary UK, Bear spaces are overwhelmingly temporary and ephemeral – but there remains a feeling that fixed spaces would benefit Bear communities. In Chapter 5 I suggest some reasons for lack of fixed Bear spaces in the UK. But having now described UK Bear spaces, for the rest of this chapter I want to enhance our understanding of what a 'Bear space' actually is.

'It becomes a Bear space when you get enough Bears in there' – Bearing space through a critical mass of proximate Bear/y bodies

In the Introduction to this book I explained that defining Bears is difficult, and in Chapters 2 and 3 I hope I've highlighted the value and indeed the empirical necessity of leaving the question 'What are Bears?' somewhat open. Given that this book is about Bear spaces, however, it falls on me once again to tackle these awkward definitions – in this case, 'What are Bear spaces?'.

This isn't a question which has been discussed much in the Bear literatures. Aside from myself, the only Geographer who has engaged with the Bear spaces is Alex Papadopoulos. In a single chapter in Les Wright's *Bear Book II*, Papadopoulos (2001) proposes the holistic concept of *'bearspace'* as a means of grappling with the many spaces and spatial qualities and relationships of Bears, so that it *'straddles the global-local nexus by the grace of information technologies, capital, and civil liberty'* and manifests as *'ephemeral fixing in localities through bear pride and social events… fleeting fixing in linear cruise spaces, and the permanent marking of the microspace of the body with bear tattoos and piercings'* (ibid., 148–149). To me Papadopoulos' work on bearspace seems to draw on (and to some degree perhaps even to pre-empt) poststructural geographic scholarship which stresses the multiple connections within and between spaces which make them both conceptually and materially entangled and open to ongoing change (Murdoch, 2006), and as such is an ambitious attempt to do much more than my simple grappling with definitions of Bear spaces. His scholarship is highly suggestive of the true complexity of Bear spatialities, and was and continues to be a formative influence on my own research. Future writers and scholars on Bears and our spaces will strongly benefit from returning to this virtually unknown chapter. But my discussion in this chapter is more rudimentary, as I simply explore what Bears (and those in Bear spaces) say makes a space a Bear space – and how I interpret this.

I say 'simply', but of course it is not. The challenge of doing this work was brought home to me early in the project, as interview and focus group participants regularly disagreed that some better-known UK spaces commonly associated with Bears or even viewed as quintessential Bear spaces (such as the former London nightclub XXL) should be described as Bear spaces at all. In the case of the Bearspace project, for the purposes of data collection an initial working definition was developed in order to identify potential case study sites. This working definition meant non-digital spaces which were created by Bears and were for Bears; which were actively used by Bears; and which mentioned Bears (including via the use of Bear imagery such as the Bear flag or paw print) in their official materials. This was, however, only a rough and cursory working definition to facilitate data collection. In interviews and focus groups, I invited participants to talk about what made a space a Bear space for them, and reflected on the question a lot in my own auto/ethnographic writing. So it's to the men of the Bearspace project that I now turn, as we try to figure out what Bear spaces are.

We should be wary of ignoring geography by aiming for a universally applicable definition of a Bear space. I've stressed above that almost all UK Bear spaces are ephemeral rather than fixed. This will undoubtedly impact on how those who go to them experience, conceptualise, and define Bear spaces here. I don't want to suggest that my findings in this chapter (or the rest of this book) are relevant **only** in the UK, but rather to point out that that there is a geography to what makes a space a Bear space. In US contexts, some have posited architectural and physical design elements that help make Bear spaces (McGlynn, 2021). But because UK Bear spaces were overwhelmingly temporary and ephemeral, when participants discussed what made a space a Bear space they tended not to focus, or even to actively downplay, the physical space itself:

Jonathan: [The bars associated with Bears] in London just look like any pub… It's the people that make it. Like you could have a Bear night and a Twink night [in them] and I think they'd be two totally different nights… You could leave the building looking exactly the same and where it is, it'd just be the people that make it.

Brighton interview 3

The physical space appears an irrelevance here, so that *'totally different nights'* could take place in the same space. Instead, Jonathan suggests it was *'the people that make it'*. I identified this as **the** overarching theme regarding what made a space a Bear space:

Levi: Some of it is just down to numbers, because if you get enough Bears in any bar or any pub it becomes a Bear space to some degree.
Ryan: By majority, yeah. It kinda becomes more [of a Bear space].

Manchester focus group

Nick: What would make that a Bear bar for you?
Aaron: Lots of men hanging about with beards is probably what it is really.

London interview 3

Frank: It's kind of like self-selecting, it's the people that come. So it's advertised as an event, a Bear event, and the people that identify with that, when they turn up in numbers, it becomes a Bear space.

Edinburgh focus group

But we see in these quotes from Levi, Ryan, Aaron, and Frank that it's not just about **some** people. Lacking the qualities of fixed spaces, it's through the presence of *'enough'* particular people that spaces can, temporarily, become

and be experienced as Bear spaces in the UK. Geographers have for decades interrogated and theorised space as a phenomenon that is actively produced rather than pre-existing (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Murdoch, 2006), and with regard to spaces relating to sexualities Kath Browne and Leela Bakshi have argued that *'there is no sexual/gender essence to space prior to its enactments'* (2011:180). This in turn suggests that can be no fixed, static thing or quality that makes a space a Bear space. Instead, sites are created and constantly recreated as Bear spaces by what is experienced and done in and around them, what is done to them, and what is imagined about them. This means that, in theory, **any** site could be turned into a Bear space, either briefly or for the more long term.

Some Bear writers have indeed described this temporary transformation of spaces like hotels, cabins or non-Bear social venues into Bear spaces through signage and the often sexualised activities of Bears present (Hennen, 2008:39; Marks Ridinger, 2001; Papadopoulos, 2001; Suresha, 2009:218–219). The temporariness of this, the sense that a physical space is altered in some way, is reminiscent of what some Queer Theory/Studies scholars and Geographers of Sexualities have conceptualised as the 'queering' of space. Such queering is said to involve not simply the presence of LGBTQ people in a space nor even their territorialisation of it, but the place-making practices which temporarily contest, subvert or suspend norms of heterosexuality (or indeed homosexuality) (Browne, 2006; Halberstam, 2005; Nash, 2013; Oswin, 2008). So we might talk of the 'Bearing' of space as those place-making practices which, for example, challenge the norms of social relationships, bodies, and erotic desires in GBQ men's spaces (e.g. Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; McGrady, 2016; Monaghan & Malson, 2013; Pyle & Klein, 2011) **and** within supposedly more radical queer spaces, which despite lip-service to 'body positivity' and 'fat inclusion' can remain sites of marginalisation and exclusion for fat people (McGlynn, 2022a; Taylor, 2022). As with queered space, Beared space is unlikely to involve the complete and total eradication of such norms, as spaces such as these are not hermetically sealed (psychically, culturally, or physically) from the wider social world but permeated with the social and produced through relations with other sites (Massey, 2004, 2005). Given the ephemerality of UK Bear spaces, this challenge to certain norms is even more likely to be partial and temporary. But Bearing space nevertheless offers a useful conceptual tool alongside (not reducible to) queering space, to understand a wider variety of spaces relating to more specific sexualities. And, to consider 'Bearing space' alongside 'Bear spaces' encourages us to think about how the latter are produced (deliberately and otherwise), rather than assuming their pre-existence. Returning to Bearspace participants' discussions, it's clear that having enough people present in a space is the most crucial element in the temporary Bearing of space in the UK – that is, the temporary generation of a Bear space and the experiencing of a space as a Bear space. As Guy would succinctly put it in his interview, *'it becomes a Bear space when you get enough Bears in there'*. So there are two elements involved in Bearing space: *'Bears'*, and *'enough'*.

With regard to *'Bears'*, I showed in the previous chapters that when participants (myself included) used the term 'Bear' for ourselves or others we were rarely referring to a deeply held sense of personal identity, but more often to a loose category of GBQ man based initially on their bodies. So when the above participants suggest that the presence of Bears makes a space a Bear space, what I suggest we take them to mean is the presence of bodies that could be described as Bear/y. And this makes sense of course, unless we expect that folk are walking around asking each individual present 'Are you a Bear?' or 'Do you identify as a Bear?' (which I can assure you they are not!). Bodies, and the visual categorisation of them, are what people have to work with in the moment. For those who've heard of Bears but who don't visit Bear spaces in the UK, the bodies in UK Bear spaces might be imagined to be large, hard-bodied, and muscular, with their embodied gender expression and performance emphasising a kind of traditional working-class masculinity (McGlynn, 2021; see also Fritscher, 2001; Hennen, 2008:117; Hill, 1997; Lopez, 2001:119; Wright, 1997b, 2001b). But in fact such bodies appeared very much in the minority in the Bear spaces of the project. The importance of actually going to places and seeing who's there, and not just relying on how Bears and our spaces are imagined to be, is put well by activist Eric Rofes:

> *'I caution against a simplistic and singular reading of "Bear"… People read texts and magazines and stories and then judge communities based on those stories. They don't have data of real people and real bodies and what's really going on among gay men.'*
>
> Suresha (2009:17)

One of the advantages of having integrated an auto/ethnographic component into the Bearspace project is that by actually going to the spaces, spending time there, taking part in the activities, and taking copious notes about one's experiences, a researcher can begin to spot the differences between how Bear spaces are imagined to be from the outside, and what is actually happening in them. Participants across the dataset concurred and pointed out that, in the words of Jay in Edinburgh, there's a big difference between the *'very public face of Beardom'* (e.g. popular Bear media, merchandise and advertising) and who is actually in Bear spaces. My notes make it clear that the 'classic' Bear (see Chapter 1) appears to be mostly an imagined ideal or archetype – very, very few of the people I saw at case study sites even remotely matched this image, and in fact I found that the actual bodies present in Bear spaces varied considerably. Here's my account of a Bear night I attended in Brighton, recorded at around 2am when I returned home:

> *If you just looked at Bears on Instagram, you might walk in there tonight and not think it was a Bear event at all. You might think it was an event for older, and kind of bigger guys. Not all the guys there were*

> *bigger. Not all the guys there were older. But I think the age kind of skewed 40, 50, and upwards. There were some fat guys there, some REALLY fat guys there… [There was] a pair of older guys, bald or shaved heads, I think actually bald. Harnesses. Kind of fat, kind of slightly saggy bellies… They didn't have beards. There was very few guys there who I'd say had full beards, like I've got a full beard… A little bit of stubble… Little bit of facial hair, maybe… Not even a centimetre I think, for most guys. And certainly not all that kind of shaved head look either. Plenty of guys with hair. There was some young guys as well. I felt like, if you hadn't gone in knowing it was a Bear event, you might not know it was a Bear event at all.*

Brighton auto/ethnography

My observations of the other attendees at this Bear event were framed very much with regard to my expectations (and my belief in others' expectations) of what kinds of bodies would be at a Bear event. Therefore it notes differences and qualification with regard to body size (*'kind of bigger', 'some fat guys… some REALLY fat guys'*), age (*'some young guys as well'*), and hairiness (*'a little bit of stubble', 'plenty of guys with hair'*). In Chapter 2, I explained the looseness of the category of 'Bear', which is constructed primarily through reference to bodies albeit with particular 'attitudes' as a means of incorporating an even wider variety of embodied men into Bear. I further explored this variety through Chapter 3's 'bodily topographies', and posited the term 'Bear/y' for grappling with the definitional instability and bodily diversity of Bears. Here, then, we begin to see the utility of the term Bear/y for forcing us to engage with the empirical realities of what's happening in Bear spaces. In fact, to understand these bodies – the presence of which is Bearing space – as Bear/y necessarily suggests that term Bear/y must be equally applicable to spaces. The importance of the presence of bodies which could potentially be categorised as Bears (e.g. as Bear/y) was made particularly strongly in a discussion in the Brighton focus group, where the participants debated what a Bear(/y) space was:

Jonathan: [It's] the people that are in there.
Stephen: A lot of Bears, yeah. I haven't been to XXL for a while, but the pictures we've seen of it, you'd have to look to spot a Bear, you know? There's a complete lack of what I'd classify as a Bear.
Robin: I don't think XXL's a Beary space.
Stephen: It used to be.
Robin: Hence the "one size fits all" motto there. I think it was initially set up for the Bears but the "one size fits all" motto doesn't say that, does it?
Stephen: I think XXL used to be called Bulk before it switched to XXL and that was full of bigger, beefy, hairy guys.

Brighton focus group

These men were discussing XXL, a popular but now-closed London club with a long history of use by and marketing towards Bears. XXL was regularly the first site mentioned as a potential 'Bear space' by participants, and in my own experience, it has for over a decade been almost synonymous with 'Bear space' in the UK. As such it makes for an important example of how even the most well-recognised site's status as a Bear space is not fixed and that it can and does change. Because, despite this historical reputation as the UK's archetypical Bear space, discussions in the project inevitably revolved around the **bodies** currently present in XXL and the general belief that XXL was no longer a Bear space because of perceived changes regarding those bodies. Slogans like *'One size fits all'* were taken not as a marker of bodily diversity but as a lack of those bodies who might be *'classif[ied] as a Bear'*. Many participants further discussed changes to the clientèle of XXL in interviews, where they perceived a shift away from fatter bodies and towards leaner and more muscular bodies:

Jonathan: There's XXL, if you'd call it a Bear space…
Nick: Would you call it a Bear space?
Jonathan: I would've previously… I get the emails that come through, they look very Bear, there are always Bears advertising it. But when you go there, not really no… They're all ripped and Jocks so I wouldn't necessarily call [it that]… Seeing what I've seen this [Bear] weekend, if I was to compare it, probably not anymore.

Brighton interview 3

Jeff: A few times I've gone [to XXL]… and the crowd are not maybe what it was originally intended to be. I think overwhelmingly you get a more defined body type now, or definitely that's presented as the most attractive type… You know, maybe the more muscled alpha type that is… A lot of Twinky types are there as well there, and I'm not so sure they're there to admire people who are heavier or anything like that…

London interview 2

The distinction drawn by Jonathan and Jeff is between the bodies advertised by XXL and the actual bodies present, reminding us of Rofes' previous warning about imagining Bears and Bear spaces match their media representations. At the time of data collection the bodies present in XXL were described as *'ripped'* and *'Jocks'* indicating muscle and athleticism, gym-going bodies – and these were not considered Bear bodies. These bodies were compared with those *'seen this [Bear] weekend'* in Brighton, and consequently due to the changing bodies in XXL it was no longer seen as a Bear space by **any**

participant who discussed it. Bodily 'Bear/yness' is not infinitely elastic, and as I suggested in Chapter 3 muscularity is an area of real contention amongst Bears. So for space to be Beared, the first element in that there need to be enough **Bear/y bodies** there.

The second element is that there need to be **enough** Bear/y bodies there. The excerpts above reveal that **some** Bear/y bodies isn't sufficient to Bear a space. Levi stresses the need not just for Bears but for *'enough'* Bears, Ryan requires *'a majority'*, Aaron talks of *'lots of men'*, Frank notes that they need to *'turn up in numbers'* and Stephen compares the *'complete lack'* of Bears in XXL compared to previously being *'full of bigger, beefy, hairy guys'*. XXL was perceived to no longer be a Bear space as it was *'all ripped and Jocks'* (Jonathan), and *'overwhelmingly… a more defined body type'* (Jeff). So a numerical threshold has to be crossed, and what I describe as a 'critical mass' of Bear/y bodies has to be achieved. A couple of participants did actually posit the percentage of Bear/y bodies needed (said to be 60% or 70%), but this of course isn't a realistic judgement to make – not least because (per Chapters 2 and 3), the categorisation of Bear bodies is so loose. But it was clear that *'enough'* – the critical mass – wasn't just a majority but an overwhelming majority. This is emphasised by stories of times when the critical mass was disrupted, leading to a formerly Bear/y space being 'de-Beared'. We can see this with regard to XXL in the quotes from Jonathan and Jeff, above. Despite its historical association with Bears XXL's contemporary clientèle was usually described as *'jocks'* and *'big Muscle Bears'* and consequently no longer *'Beary'*. But thin and less muscular bodies could also be part of disrupting an explicitly labelled Bear space's critical mass in this way. Here Timothy and Levi discuss a pair of Bear events:

Timothy: We were talking about a [local fetishwear event]… And [Ryan] was saying about how [over Winter], the Bears go into hibernation for about three months and the [event] becomes a bit more Twinky, [so that] it's no longer a Bear space almost. Also, there's a Bear night at a local sauna in [my home city] and there's a conversation amongst people I know who are quite regular there that "Oh, a lot more Twinks showed up this time". I started to go each month as part of a routine, and I noticed less people going who were actually Bear-y to the Bear event… So I guess it is an 'in numbers' sort of thing actually.

Levi: But you go to the sauna not so much for a social scene but for a sexual scene. And if you've got Twinks going it's because they fancy big guys mostly, and big guys like them.

Timothy: But they overtook one of the rooms, and they were just playing with each other and no one else. It became a running joke of, "Oh, they're here to take over the play room again… They're taking over! There's more of them this time!"

Manchester focus group

In Timothy's story, a GBQ men's space which was temporarily 'Beared' once a month to become a Bear space could potentially be de-Beared again due to the bodies present. It's important to note Levi's suggestion that the offending 'Twinks' could be going to the sauna's Bear night because they were attracted to Bears and wanted to have sex with them. Levi could be right – there's no indication here of them having negative attitudes towards the bigger guys, though the suggestion that they were Chasers is put into question by them *'just playing with each other and no-one else'*. But the concern Timothy expresses is about their numbers in comparison to the lessening numbers of Bears attending, so that they were perceived to be *'taking over'*. The critical mass of Bear/y bodies in the space had changed, now *'a bit more Twinky'*, so that *'It's no longer a Bear space almost'*. This reveals that it's not simply a matter of having people who align themselves with Bear, who identify with Bear, who participate in Bear culture or who desire Bears. It's the combination of the critical mass and the Bear/y bodies that matters.

The shift from conceiving of unambiguous Bear spaces to thinking about Bear/y spaces as produced through the 'Bearing' of space (via a critical mass of Bear/y bodies) also helps us to understand the decline in fixed Bear spaces. It's not only because sites close down but also because (as with XXL) the clientèle may change even as the site remains. I re-emphasise that this is not to say that UK Bear spaces are populated by a homogeneous set of bodies. As I noted at every case study site, there was considerable diversity with regard to the height, size, shape, age, muscularity, and hairiness of the men present, and yet the majority of them (per Chapter 3) could indeed fit into the loose category of 'Bear'. And, there were significant minorities of those who were less likely to fit into this category including those who might be categorised as Twinks, Chasers, and at some sites also women (for more on this, see Chapter 6). So to say that a key factor in defining a space as a Bear space is the critical mass of Bear/y bodies present can still mean that there is a fairly wide variety of body types present. As Christian in Brighton said of Bear spaces, *'There are Bear spaces but they're probably quite loosely defined, and not very exclusive'*.

'There's no pictures of Bears' – labelling and signage in Bear/y spaces

Though I've stressed the great importance of a critical mass of Bear/y bodies in defining and producing a space as a Bear/y space, I do also want to touch on two other relevant elements which participants discussed at times. The first of these is the use of Bear-related labels and signage. Earlier in this chapter I suggested that due to the tendency for UK Bear space to be more temporary and ephemeral, the people present were more important than stylistic or aesthetic elements and the physical makeup of the space itself with regard to being a Bear/y space or not. Bearspace participants only very rarely suggested

the importance of labels, imagery, aesthetics, design and so on for Bear space, and when openly asked about this most dismissed idea that these could make a space a Bear space, particularly compared to the significance of the bodies present. It's notable that this is at odds with how Bear spaces have been described in the overwhelmingly US-based Bear literatures, as aligned with traditional (Western) masculinities (McGlynn, 2021) through industrial and rustic aesthetics (Kampf, 2000:97; Mauerman, 1997), and as more physically comfortable and accessible for larger guys (Hay, 1997; Whitesel, 2014; for more on Bear space design/aesthetics see Ganczaruk, 1997; Hay, 1997:229; Kampf, 2000:97; Suresha, 1997b:220; Whitesel, 2014:55). So I actually went into the project expecting that these elements would be significant and was prepared to document them in my notes and in photography. Instead I found them broadly absent or understated, as I captured repeatedly in my auto/ethnographic field notes:

> *Wasn't much to make it Beary, I noticed one sort of standing poster and one sort of banner, [but] nothing else seemed to have been done to it in particular, aside from a few of the [volunteers] walking about in their [Bear group's branded] t-shirts and vests.*

Brighton auto/ethnography

This description of the site indicates how the ephemeral nature of most UK Bear spaces relates to the signage which, too, is consequently ephemeral. Implementing forms of signage such as colour schemes, physical design elements, decorative objects, furniture, wall art, and so on would require more permanent use and ownership of the space. But because this is a space which is being only temporarily Beared (and by a small group of unpaid volunteers with little free time), moveable posters, hung banners, and items of clothing are the most that can feasibly be achieved. This was the case at the multi-day events hosted in Manchester and Brighton, and at the London social meetup. But at the Edinburgh and Belfast social meetups, I noted that there was *'no kind of Bear indications at all… except for the people who were there'*. So this aesthetic contrast between Bear spaces described in the literature and the Bear/y spaces of the project is understandable in the UK context due to the lack of fixed, permanent and self-described Bear spaces, and the consequent importance of the bodies present. But, in some of their more extended discussions about Bear spaces and communities, some participants did hint at how explicit labels, signs, and advertising **could** be important. First, the labelling and advertising of ephemeral Bear/y spaces **as** Bear/y spaces was part of how the critical mass of Bear/y bodies could be achieved:

Ryan: You can run an event in any space, just by saying it's now a Bear event, and Bears will come to it.

Timothy: It's gonna make the ears prick up… The advertising is quite forceful, not in a negative way, but very clear, "This is a Bear event." It's [in the names of the events], so it's very much "fur", "hairy",

> "bear"… I think all of the material this year has been Bears in the photos. So it's very much "This is a Bear event" in the way that it's been advertised.

Manchester focus group

These bodies don't just turn up in numbers for no reason but **because** organisers (such as Ryan) openly describe and label a space as a Bear space, including through photos used in the advertising. This in turn *'make[s] the ears prick up'* so that the critical mass of bodies can be temporarily generated. But this importance was also uniquely relevant for making a fixed and permanent space into a Bear space:

Christian: If I go to the Bear bar in Sitges, you know they'll have Bear videos on, there's lots of Bear flags, there's Bear teddy bears, there's posters on the wall. It's very clearly a space primarily aimed at Bears… They want to be part of Bear community.

Brighton interview 5

Jeff: [This bar] is becoming a Bear bar. I suppose that the way they advertise themselves, and more importantly if they've got pictures of Bears and they're advertising Bear evenings in the place, it's probably a Bear bar. That's probably the easiest way to identify it 'cause you go into [this bar] and there's advertising for Bear nights, whereas I think in [another LGBTQ bar] there's not… You can just tell it's not because there's no pictures of Bears, there's no advertisement for a Bear night'

London interview 3

Nick: You said that [these local GBQ men's bars] aren't Bear spaces, why is that?

Dougie: [Bar A] is a cruise bar… [Bar B] is a leather bar. They're just [sucking up] to the Bear community because there's a lot of Bears that are also into leather, but it's not dedicated, whereas the [now-closed bars] were Bear Bear. I've not seen the Bear flag up [at these bars] until this weekend. There's been a trans flag and a leather pride flag but we've not had a Bear flag there, not even over Pride weekend, there wasn't a Bear flag in front. That indicates it's not really a Bear bar.

Manchester interview 1, emphasis in original audio

Each of these discussions – among the only times in the dataset when signage and aesthetic markers were mentioned – is focused not on whether ephemeral

spaces are Bear spaces (e.g. via the temporary Bearing of space), but rather on whether or not more fixed and permanent spaces are really *'Bear bar[s]'*. Christian was comparing a local pub which had a reputation as a Bear bar but which he argued was not through comparison with the bar in Sitges. His point was made using these visual markers as evidence that the latter *'want to be part of the Bear community'*, and that the former, lacking these, did not. Both Jeff and Dougie make this move too – the **lack** of Bear/y signage, symbols, and imagery taken as an indication – even an accusation – that some fixed spaces were not **really** Bear bars. So while these kinds of markers are limited in ephemeral and temporarily Beared spaces, leading to the great significance of a critical mass of Bear/y bodies in these, it does seem that more significance is attached to them when it comes to a space attempting to become a Bear space more permanently. Earlier in this chapter and in this book I've already shown that Bear spaces are seen as valuable and important by participants and by Bear communities more widely. Perhaps as a consequence of this and the ephemerality of most UK Bear spaces, there seemed to be a desire for venues wishing to become fixed Bear spaces to demonstrate genuine commitment to *'the Bear community'* and not simply to use them for profit as Christian, Jeff, Dougie, and numerous other participants suggested was often the case (see also Hennen, 2008:103; McCormick, 2011:78; Suresha, 2009:218 on marketisation of and to Bears). Though it's unclear from the dataset precisely what such commitment would involve, aesthetics and design are seen as an important marker of it.

'Relaxed, casual camaraderie' – atmospheres of Bear/y spaces

Visual markers, labels, signage and advertising support the generation of a critical mass of Bear/y bodies in the UK's ephemeral Bear/y spaces, but this critical mass has its own role in producing what we might call these spaces' emotional and 'affective' atmospheres. In recent years Geographers and other scholars have engaged more and more with the significance of emotions and feelings linked with spaces and places (e.g. Bissell, 2010; Bondi et al., 2005; Pile, 2010; Thrift, 2004), as well as the emotional atmospheres that are produced in and by them (e.g. Edensor, 2015; Sumartojo, 2016). Geographers have also explored the 'affective' qualities and atmospheres of spaces – those inter-bodily relationships and experiences that operate below the level of conscious thought and which can't quite be expressed in language (Pile, 2010; Thrift, 2004). Throughout the dataset I found that many spaces were described – without initial prompting by me – in terms of their overall *'atmosphere'*. Based on Bear literatures and research on Bear communities it might be expected that a kind of 'traditional' or hegemonic masculinity, perhaps even with a certain rural or working class element, might be central to this atmosphere (see McGlynn, 2021 for examples). But this was not the case for the UK Bear spaces of the project, at least. In Chapter 2 I showed it was having a relaxed, open, and welcoming 'attitude' (rather than traditionally

masculine expression) that formed an important supplement to the prioritisation of bodies in determining who 'fit into' the Bear category. Based on participants' discussions of atmospheres it appears that similar qualities were also ascribed to Bear/y spaces:

Joe: When a group of Bears get together, they bring their atmosphere with them, we certainly do.
Nick: What kind of atmosphere is that?
Joe: It's that fun, it's drinking, having that chat, that friendliness, knowing that the space you're in… wherever it is, there's a relative amount of safety… You're with a group of likeminded people. You're not creating a tension with other groups, 'cause [a gay bar] is a Bear bar for that night…

Belfast interview 3

Jay: People are looking for that atmosphere, that kind of relaxed, casual camaraderie, I think. Then it becomes a Bear space rather than just being a gay male space. 'Cause you can have a gay male space, a gay man's bar. They're just pick-up joints. People go there for drinks, but they go there on their own really just to pick people up. You don't go there to have a conversation or just to hang out.

Edinburgh focus group

Rather than emphasising traditional hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 2005), the way the atmosphere of a UK Bear space was described focused primarily on the social aspects of the spaces, particularly talking, *'chat'* and *'conversation'*. This was closely connected to another, more emotional and felt aspect of the spaces – an atmosphere of *'fun'* and *'friendliness'*, a lack of *'tension'*, and a sense of a *'relaxed, casual camaraderie'*. These were the key ways in which the *'atmosphere'* in a Bear/y space was described and distinguished from that in other spaces – as these examples demonstrate participants consistently compared this atmosphere against that in their local LGBTQ pubs and bars. As I noted in Chapter 2, the idea of multiple, alternative masculinities (Buchbinder, 2013; Connell, 2005; Gorman-Murray & Hopkins, 2014) could be used to posit such atmospheres as an alternative form of masculinity. And certainly, the emotional and felt qualities here are once again very distinct from the almost reactionary masculinity suggested in the literature (e.g. Hennen, 2008) But as with Bear attitudes, I'm not convinced that this is simply yet another different form of masculinity. Let's look at a comparison between the atmospheres of Bear spaces and those of other LGBTQ spaces:

Ross: [Bear spaces are] less image-conscious if you know what I mean?
Joe: Absolutely, absolutely.

Ross: A lot of the gay scene is very image-conscious, everything has to look right. You see them out in the bars now with makeup and things on, whereas [Bear spaces are] much more "This is who I am," and it's a more real version…

Joe: You go to some other bars and it really is a case of, "Look at me, I'm absolutely gorgeous," with some folks. I think the Bears are a bit more relaxed in that respect.

Belfast focus group

Distinctions between Bear spaces and LGBTQ spaces or scenes were common across the dataset. Taken at face value this may indeed look like a comparison of 'masculine Bears' vs 'feminine Twinks'. But the points on which the comparison is made are more strongly grounded in being real vs artificial. The *'relaxed'* atmospheres of Bear spaces are here linked to the *'real version'* of those in Bear spaces, who are *'less image-conscious'* and comfortable being *'who I am'*. This is contrasted less with effeminacy than with the artifice of non-Bear LGBTQ spaces which are said to be *'very image-conscious'* and where people broadcast *'look at me'* and wear *'makeup and things'*. This was particularly the case with spaces linked with the figure of the Twink, who was presented across the dataset as *'fake'* and *'artificial'* (though also as a threatening and even frightening figure for fat participants in particular). I suggest that this is real/artificial atmospheric comparison is not simply reducible to an alternative masculinity, but rather longstanding associations between Bears and nature. I have previously suggested that the natural/artificial binary is related to Bears' integration of hegemonic masculinity (McGlynn, 2021; see also Hennen, 2008). But as I've noted at several points in this book so far, many participants actively resisted the interpretation of Bears and our behaviours as masculine, and it was clear from my auto/ethnographic data and participants' discussions that behaviour commonly termed as effeminate was gleefully common in UK Bear/y spaces. For example, in my notes I described how what might appear a superficially *'hyper-masc atmosphere'* was also threaded through with cheerfully camp behaviour, and exaggerated screams and shrieks of delight as men saw their friends and ran to hug them. Furthermore, Allan (2021) has pointedly argued against the instinctive reading of associations between men and nature through the lens of masculinity. Following his work, here I want to suggest that characterising atmospheres in UK Bear/y spaces as 'masculine' (even an 'alternative' masculinity) may lead to misunderstanding about what these spaces are like and the distinct affective features – fun, friendliness, being relaxed – of these atmospheres.

Conclusion to Bear venues

Perhaps the simplest but also most surprising finding outlined in this chapter is the real dearth of fixed, permanent Bear spaces in the UK – bars, pubs, clubs, etc. which openly describe themselves as by and/or for Bears, and

which are recognised as such by the kinds of men who go to Bear spaces. Instead virtually all spaces in the UK which could be categorised as Bear spaces appear to be ephemeral, cropping up only temporarily in both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ spaces and then disappearing shortly afterwards. By describing what happened in these spaces I've aimed to disrupt imaginings of what might be happening in UK Bear spaces. Contrary to assumptions and descriptions elsewhere (e.g. Hennen, 2008; Mauerman, 1997; Whitesel, 2014) of Bear spaces as sites of traditional masculinities, I suggest that the social aspect of Bear spaces is more central to those of the UK. The lack of some kind of hub for Bear communities was felt to fragment them and was seen as a problem – but the spaces that **did** exist were still seen as important despite their ephemerality. Participants **wanted** to have some kind of physical space, even if only a temporary one, where they could meet and socialise with Bear/y men, experience the particular atmospheres of Bear spaces, and be part of a community.

But as with the concept of 'Bear' itself (see Chapters 2 and 3) I've also sought to investigate, interrogate, and even destabilise the very idea of a 'Bear space', asking instead how space is 'Beared'. This is because (as with the concept of 'Bear'), Bear spaces are always definitionally unstable and are always being made and re-made. In the UK, the main way in which space is Beared is by achieving **a critical mass of proximate Bear/y bodies**. The critical mass means not just a majority, but a majority so visible that it feels both overwhelming and unchallengeable. And the Bear/y bodies emphatically does not mean classic Bear stereotypes of big, hairy, masculine men. As I've shown in Chapters 2 and 3 and developed in this chapter, the boundaries of what 'appearance' can count as a Bear body are fairly loose and permeable, and can additionally be expanded (or contracted) through reference to 'attitude'. The term Bear/y is intended to remind us of this. The concept of Bearing space, enacted through the achievement of the critical mass, helps us to understand what's happening in the UK's ephemeral and fixed Bear/y spaces – the disagreements over whether sites are 'really' Bear spaces or not, and different experiences within them. There's also a crucial ramification here for the Bearspace project. As I explained in Chapter 1, I developed a quite specific set of criteria for the Bearspace Database. Having analysed the dataset, developed the idea of 'Bear/y spaces' and demonstrated its utility for understanding the UK context, it's likely the project would have been enhanced by also investigating more ambiguously Bear/y case study sites which fell outside of the neat criteria. Future research will likely benefit from adopting this more expansive conceptualisation of 'Bear', which actively acknowledges and empirically addresses its fluidity and instability.

Finally, while I've stressed the significance of bodies for Bears, this chapter has also shown that other elements such as physical environments, aesthetics, and felt atmospheres are part of producing and re-producing Bear spaces. While I've previously suggested that both environments and atmospheres of Bear spaces are linked with masculinity (McGlynn, 2021), in this chapter I've

presented my revised and more cautious approach which resists this instinctive interpretation. Regarding environments, in the UK context of ephemeral spaces this was more focused on openly associating with Bear communities via using the label 'Bear' and using imagery such as Bear flags. Regarding atmospheres, these stressed fun, friendliness, relaxation and being 'real' rather than artificial. Together these revisions should urge caution in imagining what Bear/y spaces look or feel like, and may represent contemporary changes in Bear/y cultures and communities away from traditional masculinities.

5 Bear cities

Researching LGBTQ cities

There's a popular Twitter account, @JustSaysInMice, which quote-tweets media reports about apparently impressive or alarming scientific and medical findings – deadly diseases! miracle cures! – with the words *'IN MICE!'*. The account emphasises that these findings are, of course, based on tests on mice and thus reminds readers of the tentative comparability with and relevance for humans.

I've long thought that a similar account should quote media reports about UK LGBTQ spaces with the words *'IN LONDON!'*.

London's LGBTQ spaces tend to dominate related discussions in UK media and online spaces. Consequently, London and its LGBTQ spaces tend to be treated as the default – as **normal** – within discussions of LGBTQ spaces. And yet London isn't at all normal. There's no other city like London in the UK. The scale of its geographic boundaries, its hosting of national political and state institutions, its potent global geographic imaginaries and especially the size of its population vastly outstrip even the largest of the country's other cities. Far from being normal London is actually the outlier, the exception amongst UK cities. So there's every reason to be sceptical of the constant and uncritical primacy afforded to LGBTQ spaces and communities in London within related discussions, organising, and research (see Cook & Oram, 2022; for similar issues in the USA see Somashekhar & Negro, 2023). And certainly scholarship on LGBTQ communities, and GBQ men in particular, has been criticised not least by Geographers for its overwhelming historical focus on cities (Gray, 2009; Gray et al., 2016; Herring, 2007; Kennedy, 2010; McGlynn, 2018; Podmore & Bain, 2020; Weston, 1995), as well as for a 'metronormative' approach which treats large metropolitan cities as the norm while ignoring smaller cities (Brown, 2008; Halberstam, 2005). In the previous chapter I took on the topic of UK Bear venues, and now in this chapter I move us up the scale, to think about Bear venues as situated in different UK cities. Geographers of sexualities have repeatedly demonstrated the profound importance of spaces, places, environments, scales – of geography – for LGBTQ subjectivities and communities (Brown et al., 2010).

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This includes the latter's geographic variance, including with regard to the specific features of **particular** cities (e.g. Browne & Bakshi, 2013; Brown-Saracino, 2018; Higgs, 1999; Houlbrook, 2005). In this chapter, I apply such arguments to Bear spaces.

The vast majority of work on Bears focuses on the USA, but scholarship alludes to evidence for significant **inter**-national variation amongst Bears so that those of Lebanon (McCormick, 2011; Moussawi, 2020), China and Taiwan (Lin, 2014; Tan, 2019), the UK (Watson, 2001) and Türkiye (Sahin, 2001) are simply not the same as those of the USA (see McGlynn, 2021). Bearspace participants concurred, describing UK Bear communities, scenes, and spaces as less organised and with a greater mix of body shapes/sizes than those in, for example, the US and continental Europe (see also McGlynn, 2022c). But in this chapter I want to go further, and to suggest that we can and should productively explore **intra**-national geographic variation amongst Bear communities too and particularly via attention to the kinds of Bear/y spaces existing in different population centres of the UK.

So, following Geographers of sexualities and other scholars, and evidenced through the Bearspace research, in this chapter I'll aim to show that 'Bear' as a phenomenon, and the people and spaces associated with it, does not manifest the same in all spaces (nor, it goes without saying at all times) – not even in the same country. Bear is not universal, and we can see real differences in how Bear cultures, communities, lives, scenes, and spaces are perceived and experienced in different parts of the UK, let alone globally. First, I discuss the long shadow that London casts across the dataset and show that London should not be taken as exemplifying UK Bear/y communities and spaces but rather as an outlier, with smaller cities as the norm. I demonstrate that we have good reason to see London as an important factor and site for the growth of Bear across the rest of the UK. But London's Bear scenes and spaces were described significantly differently to those in other parts of the UK. By exploring how men from all case study sites discussed the capital and its Bear/y communities and spaces, I reveal particular characterisations and expectations of these (particularly regarding muscular bodies and a negative 'attitude') which suggest a degree of antipathy towards London and its Bear/y spaces. However, I also comment on London's own internal geographies to introduce some nuance into what might otherwise be overly totalising accounts. Second, and to some extent responding to charges of 'metronormativity' amidst GBQ men's scholarship, I highlight perceived shared features of the Bearspace project's smaller cities (Brighton, Edinburgh, Manchester, and Belfast), which were felt by participants to distinguish their Bear/y spaces from those of London. These features included being more mixed and accepting of different body types, and being more friendly and sociable. Finally, I detail discussions of Manchester as the largest of the project's smaller cities, showing that Manchester was at times aligned with smaller cities and at times aligned with London and thus destabilising any strict small vs big city binary.

Reflecting on participants' experiences of and comparisons between these cities, I speculate that population size is a particularly significant element which can lead to differences between Bear spaces and scenes in different cities. This is because a very large population of GBQ men seems to make it possible to have multiple Bear spaces, and to achieve a critical mass of more specific Bear/y bodies (e.g. muscled bodies) in one or more of them. With smaller populations this appears much more difficult – there just aren't enough guys to support multiple Bear spaces, and there aren't enough muscled guys to establish a critical mass. Thus, a variety of bodies mixed together becomes the norm. Consequently a shift to thinking about 'Bear/y' rather than 'Bear' spaces (see Chapter 4) might be particularly useful for exploring and understanding Bears in smaller cities, and thus in the UK in particular. This intra-national approach further challenges universal accounts of Bears, and demonstrates the significance of attending to Bear/y geographies.

I'm conscious that this chapter ignores rural and other areas outside of cities. This is a necessary reflection of Bear communities and spaces being predominantly centred in cities (Hennen, 2008; Mann, 2010; McGlynn, 2021; Suresha, 1997b:44; Rofes, 1997; Sahin, 2001:259; Suresha, 2001:295), and because **all** of the spaces categorised as Bear spaces in the project's Bearspace Database were in cities (see Chapter 1). Of course, this could be said to reflect an urban bias in my very conceptualisation of what counts and doesn't count as a Bear space – a critique which I'm not at all resistant to and would welcome further critical exploration of! Undoubtedly, future scholars will tackle my own continuing urban-centrism by exploring Bear in suburbs, towns, and rural areas.

'Image image image' – Bear/y scenes and spaces in the UK metropolis

Bear literatures consistently position Bears in urban space despite imagined associations with the rural (McGlynn, 2021), and the Bearspace database identified potential Bear spaces as existing only in UK cities. So it will likely be no surprise that participants described Bear spaces as almost necessarily being a feature of cities, but in particular of larger cities. In this excerpt, Jay was discussing the decline in Bear spaces throughout the UK, which I explored in the previous chapter:

Jay: I'm more likely – if I'm in a bigger city – to try and find the men's bar or see if there's a Bear night of some sort… There are obviously still a handful [of Bear spaces] in London'

Edinburgh interview 3

Jay suggests that Bear spaces might not be found in just any population centre or even any city, but in a 'bigger' city. And of the bigger cities of the UK, it is in London above all where Bear spaces are expected to *'obviously'* exist. This

corresponds with a wider theme in discussions across the Bearspace dataset, whereby London was posited as a unique category all of its own within the Bear/y geographies of the UK, both by those who primarily lived and worked in London **and** by those who did not. Of all the cities discussed by participants, none featured so prominently across the entire dataset as London did. Even those who didn't live in London had often visited it or were familiar with its LGBTQ and Bear/y spaces, scenes and communities. Men could and did reference a dizzying number of London's Bear/y venues, club nights, and social groups across two and a half decades – the Duke of Wellington, the Kings Arms, the City of Quebec, Beefmince, Tonker, Thicc, Megawoof, Brawn, DILF, Chunk, Come To Daddy, the Eagle, Brut, Bearhug, Hot Fuzz, Paunchy, Wüff, Bear Your Soul, and numerous others were all posited as potential Bear spaces, and often confused or overlapped with one another. Participants suggested that London could and did support a wide array of different Bear/y spaces – fixed and ephemeral – due to its size. No-where else in the UK was talked about quite like or as much as London was, suggesting that for UK Bear/y communities and spaces there is something particularly, even uniquely significant about it.

One element of this significance is that London was commonly and casually framed as a germinal location for the growth of 'Bear' (as a phenomenon, as a recognisable category, and as a community) in the UK. My auto/ethnographic notes comment multiple times on casual conversations in Bear spaces, off-mic, when men had described '*how Bear stuff happened in London and kind of spread out*'. Participants in interviews and focus groups made similar comments, especially older men like Rex and Jay who had a history of involvement in Bear communities and were now organisers of Bear groups and spaces. Both of them narratively centred London as part of their respective Bear histories. Rex described London's Bear spaces in the late 90s and early 00s as his *'first time seeing fat boys in rubber or fat boys in leather' and consequently as both 'very positive' and 'very aspirational'*, as something he wanted to reach for or achieve for his home city. For Jay *'the first Bears [he] met were London Bears'*, and after visiting several London Bear spaces in one weekend he found himself wanting to recreate the experiences of these spaces elsewhere. In the narratives of these organisers as well as amongst other project participants, London appears as an important originary point for Bear in the UK, whereby UK visitors to the capital would get a taste of Bear and then aspire towards these London Bear spaces after returning home. These positive and aspirational experiences must be borne in mind throughout the rest of this chapter, because though older participants deeply valued London's Bear/y spaces of the late 90s and early 00s, they and other participants felt less positively about London's more recent and contemporary Bear/y spaces:

Rex: I get the feeling that especially in bigger cities there's been a trend from alcohol towards drugs, from pubs towards clubs, and also there's been a bit of a trend towards narcissism and in-groups and exclusion. That didn't really use to exist on the Bear scene very much at all when I first came out.

Jay: Yeah the Muscle Bear thing is quite new.
Frank: That's changed, that view of what a classic Bear is. You wouldn't find a classic Bear on a nightclub poster anymore.
Rex: Yeah. And I think the thing is that these trends kind of started in big centres like London, and then spread out to places like Manchester, and then to smaller gay cities.

Edinburgh focus group

The trends discussed here – which participants perceived negatively – were not fixed in London. Just as London was framed as the starting point for the spread of Bear across the rest of the UK in the past, so too was it seen as where these trends also '*started*' and then '*spread out*' to the rest of the UK. So it's clear that participants continue to see London as exerting an influence on Bear/y spaces and communities across the country.

While trends like drug use and clubbing cultures were occasionally raised in the dataset, it's the issues participants linked with '*exclusion*' and '*the Muscle Bear thing*' which dominated discussions of London:

Jay: By the time I left London 10 years later, or have been back [recently], there are people there that have such bad attitudes that if you speak to them they literally just look down their nose at you like, I'm too pretty to talk to you..

Edinburgh focus group

Nick: Is that the only Beary place that you've been to in London?
Arthur: No, I've been to <name of pub popular with Bears> which would have had a Bear scene, especially on the Sunday night with the karaoke. Not as good as a night as it used to be, it was a small bar. A little bit of attitude, 'cause you're in London…
Nick: When you say attitude, what are you talking about there specifically?
Arthur: Attitude to me is, they look down on people who walk in on their own. They're in their little cliques, and they don't make an effort to speak.

Belfast interview 6

Throughout the dataset contemporary-era London was heavily associated with this negative 'attitude'. This was not the supplementary use of 'attitude' to include a wider variety of bodies into the Bear category (per Chapter 2), nor its use to exclude undesirable individuals with appropriate Bear/y bodies from the category either. Instead the 'attitude' which was so strongly discursively linked with London was more aligned with the atmospheres described in Chapter 4. In this case they were said to manifest as a form of standoffish

elitism and superiority, so that those present in a London Bear space might *'look down their nose at you'* or *'look down on people'*, but as Jay has alluded to with men who are *'too pretty to talk to you'* it seems that physical appearance is a significant element entwined with this *'attitude'*. Other participants consistently made this connection between London, negative attitudes, and bodily appearance:

Nick: What is it about it that makes you feel uncomfortable there?
Robin: The people and the way they look, so like <name of popular gay club>. Very young, very slim, very London.

Brighton focus group

Jonathan: London was a very judgemental space. They're all ripped to pieces with their bodies… When you look outside and you see it, you feel like it's very Beary. But I think once you're in there, it's your Jocks, your big Muscle Bears and stuff like that… I probably wouldn't feel as comfortable in there as I would somewhere like [Brighton Bear Weekend]… because, being London, there's a whole image thing that goes with it as well. Ripped, muscles, that type of stuff… The gay guys in London are very image image image.

Brighton interview 3

These excerpts reveal a prevalent and potent geographic imaginary amongst Bearspace participants, of London's GBQ men as focused on *'image image image'* – and this *'image'* is that of a trim, muscular, and attractive body. This was both the case for London's non-Bear LGBTQ spaces (per Robin) and for Bear/y spaces (per Jonathan) – but we can see spatial distinctions between the bodies. London GBQ men's bodies in non-Bear LGBTQ spaces were discursively linked with youth and slimness. But regarding London GBQ men's bodies in Bear/y spaces, these were described as more aligned with the Muscle Bear category (see Chapter 3) or as simply *'Jocks'*, so that rather than being *'very young, very slim'* as in non-Bear LGBTQ spaces (alluding to the history of GBQ men's valorisation of and representation as ephebic Twink bodies – see Hutson, 2010; Locke, 1997:106–107; Pyle & Klein, 2011; Toothman, 2001; Santoro, 2013; Joy & Numer, 2018; Nölke, 2018), in Bear/y spaces the 'image' is more about being *'ripped, [with] muscles'*. This was not simply a matter of uninformed outsiders' negative stereotypes of the capital (see Brown, 2021 on the widespread nature of anti-London sentiment in the UK). Jonathan had lived in London for 4 years and only recently moved away, while Robin visited fairly regularly. And even the participants from the London case study site – all of whom lived in London – commented repeatedly and pointedly on precisely these features of the capital's LGBTQ and Bear

scenes. Aaron, for example, described fatter GBQ men in the past leaving London for the USA because of the *'idealised, thin skinny image'* and *'muscley clone image'* which they felt dominated the city. Therefore – following an overarching theme of this book which I hope is not becoming too predictable or tedious – the 'attitude' associated with London was very heavily linked to particular bodies. As I alluded to in my discussion of muscle in Chapter 3, this is a longstanding issue in Bear communities, with a history of Bear media focusing on and lionising muscled and attractive *'superbears'* (Locke, 1997:13; McGrady, 2016:1716), who are perceived to be at the top of a hierarchy of Bear/y bodies (McGlynn, 2022a), leading to others feeling *'doubly wounded'* (McGrady, 2016:1716) by their marginalisation and exclusion first from mainstream GBQ male representations, and now also from the community in which they had sought acceptance and desirability. Bear/y club nights and circuit parties are seen by some to be more 'beauty'-focused and more excluding towards fatter bodies than other Bear spaces such as pubs and social groups, as suggested by Larry Flick who argues that *'there's just as much segregation at IBR [International Bear Rendezvous] as there is at The White Party'* (Suresha, 2009:145).

I didn't explicitly ask participants why they linked London with these trends, or why they thought London's GBQ men's and Bear/y spaces might be more populated by and focused on trimmer, more muscular bodies. However some participants – particularly those from the London case study site – suggested the latter at least was an corollary of London's *'megacity'* status:

Jeff: If you go off the beaten track, [like] other parts of the UK, they are not as obsessed about physicality… [being] physically striking… Maybe it's the urban thing, or the megacity thing, if you're in New York or you're in London, if you're in Manchester.

London interview 2

It's not immediately clear why some of London's *'urban'* or *'megacity'* geographic features – its area, its infrastructures, etc. – would result in being *'obsessed about physicality'*. But in discussion with other London-based men, Jeff and others explained what it was like for him to go to Bear spaces in a very large city with a lot of GBQ men:

Jeff: Bear spaces, there's a lot of push factors, or that pull you there and keep you there… [Men can] select for their own interest rather than meeting a cross-section of people…Like, "This is what I want, tick tick tick tick" and if that's not there-

Malcolm: You don't even get a chance to-

Jeff: It evaporates.

Chuck: Is that a function of London, because we live in London or around London, where there are a lot more gay people? Is it

> different if you go to the provinces where there might be less openly gay people? Where the pool is smaller? 'Cause I always think that if you're in London, you always think, "Well, there's some other people. There's always gonna be more people".

London focus group

A significant feature of London as a *'megacity'* is its population size, which results in a large number of GBQ men not just living in but present in the city (as visitors, travellers, tourists) and going to Bear/y and LGBTQ spaces. The London focus group then suggest that when you're in London you know there are *'always'* going to be more GBQ men to meet, and therefore you can afford to *'select for [your] own interest'*. In such an environment GBQ men may even feel compelled to meet and maintain the restricted criteria of the *'image image image'* more rigorously, amidst heavy competition for attractive sexual partners and in the knowledge that these partners may reject you at a glance thinking, as Chuck says, *'There's always gonna be more people'*. Consequently, *'you don't even get a chance'*. Jeff expanded on this during his interview, when he compared London to his smaller home city:

Jeff: There are two distinct groups in [my home city], very distinct groups. It's the Daddy Bears and more Muscle Bear, Cub Bear types which is more like 'Let's all take G[1] on a night out and get hammered'. [And then] the heavier fat Bears, the older types that are looking for warm cosy chats.

Nick: Do you see a similar kind of thing in London?

Jeff: I think there's a lot more cross-pollination between us actually, in London, than people like to think, because we inhabit those same Bear spaces… You get the Chasers, you get the followers, you get the younger Bear scene, you get the Baby Bears, you get the Otter types, you get the hipster Bear types, the older huskier Bears, the Muscle Bears, all that. [But] you might get at most two Muscle Bears [at home] so their attitude is so much more watered down. Whereas here it's very amped up.

London interview 2

Jeff's home city was somewhat large by UK standards, with a population of over 500,000 people. But he suggests that due to its population his home city couldn't support more than two distinct Bear groups, or a critical mass of Muscle Bears (*'you might get at most two'*). Jeff explained elsewhere that there was only one conceivable Bear space in his home city, whereas in London there were many potential *'Bear spaces'* – which did result in some *'cross-pollination'* (as I explore a little in the following section). But as with other participants, Jeff framed Bear spaces in London as more able to achieve

a critical mass of *'Muscle Bears'* than smaller cities, and thus to have an *'amped up' 'attitude'*. Lest I be accused of using Muscle Bears as a punching bag (as if I could – note my skinny arms in earlier Figure 3.1!), I want to be clear that I know some perfectly lovely muscled guys and Muscle Bears! And while some participants did relate experiences of body-related mockery from them (McGlynn, 2022a, 2022c) Muscle Bears were by no means unique in this regard. Nevertheless this relationship between London, negative and exclusionary attitudes, and trim-muscled guys and Muscle Bears, was a key way through which the Bear/y geographies of the UK were described.

'I don't know where everything is now!' – London's dispersed Bear/y scenes

The above probably presents quite a homogenous vision of the UK's largest metropolis. And often that is how it was framed by participants. But I want to add a quick reminder about the size and diversity of the capital. Despite the number of potentially Bear/y spaces in London, participants regularly commented on what they perceived to be the heavily fragmented, decentralised and dispersed nature of London's scenes. To do this they again often distinguished between cities like London – so large that their LGBTQ scenes and consequently people can become spatially dispersed – and smaller cities like Manchester or Brighton with people concentrated in a smaller area. It's of course not the case that London doesn't have dense clusterings of LGBTQ venues (see Campkin & Marshall, 2018; Kheraj, 2021b) but as a metropolis it has **numerous** clusterings rather than just one or two as might be found in other, smaller cities, as well as many isolated or ephemeral spaces outside of these. Consequently, as Alex points out, the issue is the numbers of specific **people** one might meet or not, so that in smaller cities with fewer and more dense clusterings you could be more sure of *'bumping into a load of gay people'* whereas in London this might be just *'the odd person'*. This dispersion and fragmentation also complicates the geographic imaginary of London as able to cater to every type of niche Bear:

Jeff: There's a shoe for every old sock as they say, but [though] there are places, maybe they're not as publicised as much. The problem is, in a city like London you shouldn't have to look that hard, but you actually do have to look that hard…

London focus group

Here Jeff indicates that there is popular image of London (even for those living there) as offering a buffet of Bear/y spaces, so that there is *'a shoe for every old sock'* which in London *'you shouldn't have to look that hard'* for. But he also points out the reality – these niche 'shoes' (in this case alluding to Bear spaces in London which cater to a variety of specific Bear/y categories, bodies

and desires) could actually be quite difficult to find. So the potent geographic imaginaries of London and its Bear spaces and bodies outlined above – as a metropolis with a population large enough to offer a choice of many Bear/y spaces and bodies but consequently dominated by image-obsession and a negative 'attitude' – could be argued to present an overly-totalising image of the city. After all if London's size and population are crucial factors here, then assuredly this must make for some geographic variation **within** the city. And certainly some discussions in the dataset do point to internal geographic variation of London's Bear spaces and scenes:

Chuck: I live in East London, there's a few places Bethnal Green direction like the Queen Adelaide, the Glory, places like that tend to be much more of a melting pot than the central London venues.

Malcolm: Central London is very Twinky, it's not very Bear it's actually more to the periphery.

Jeff: I find particularly with the East London side of things it's a mix of people in different spaces, you find everybody.

Malcolm: Everything used to be… It was in Vauxhall, and then that disintegrated, you had Megawoof in Vauxhall, Action, that's quite mixed, that's quite Bear. Bar Code and all those. And then that disintegrated and then things started to move further to the East and I don't know where everything is now!

London focus group

It's worth noting that these participants explicitly framed their discussion around Bear spaces and the discussion here highlights the fragmentation of London's LGBTQ as well as Bear/y spaces. This inherently emphasises the scope for a very large population to support a variety of Bear/y spaces – in no other UK city were more than two or three potential Bear spaces listed, whereas in discussions about London the kinds of casual listing of such spaces seen above were common. But this excerpt also reminds us that London has its own internal geographies. London-based participants like these men regularly described *'East London'* as an area of the capital that was *'more of a melting pot'* for both LGBTQ and Bear/y spaces, and in interviews suggested East London Bear/y spaces were *'more open and friendly'*, challenging the framing of the city as a singular homogeneous site.

'We are a subgroup within a minority in a small city, and we're glad to have you with us' – Bear/y spaces in the UK's 'ordinary cities'

Bear/y spaces in the smaller non-metropolitan cities of the project – Belfast, Brighton, Edinburgh, and Manchester – were exclusively ephemeral spaces. This was not the case regarding London where participants were able to posit

a variety of fixed permanent spaces such as bars, pubs, and clubs as at least *'Beary'* if not unquestionably a Bear space (as I've noted in Chapter 4, only one self-identified non-ephemeral Bear space – the Bristol Bear Bar – exists in the UK). Pubs like the Duke of Wellington and the Kings Arms, and clubs like the former XXL, were regularly cited by participants from across the UK as popular with Bears and with a legacy of Bear identification or affiliation. But in the project's smaller cities Bear/y spaces were exclusively temporary nights or events taking place in non-Bear LGBTQ spaces or even non-LGBTQ spaces. This was evident from the Bearspace database developed at the start of the project and also repeatedly noted by participants:

Jonathan: If I just talk about Liverpool, I actually wouldn't even say there's anything up there that I would class as a Bear space. Or if you were to say, "I'm going to Liverpool this weekend, where would you go as a Bear?", I couldn't even pick one place because I wouldn't actually know. I think in Liverpool [the LGBTQ scene is] very blended. In London it would've been like XXL… Vauxhall Tavern, The Eagle, and then in Soho it would have been Duke of Wellington, Admiral Duncan and Compton's, Kings Arms.

Brighton interview 3

Outside of the cities of the Bearspace project and a few others, participants felt that Bear/y spaces as they conceived them could scarcely be said to exist at all:

Justin: You think of Bear culture as London, Brighton – kind of – Bristol… Belfast, Dublin, Edinburgh, a bit in Glasgow maybe, a bit in Manchester, and that's it. So it's just major cities, and even in major cities, if you go to Newcastle there's no Bear culture really there, there's no Bear scene. There's one Eagle bar, you'll get a couple of people with beards who you might say are Bears, but there's no actual Bear community there. I think it's the same if you go to Cardiff, I don't think there's much there really.

Brighton interview 4

With regard to other geographic variations amongst UK Bear spaces, scenes, and communities, the most significant and prevalent of these was a distinction drawn between London and smaller cities- analogous to what Gavin Brown (2008) calls (not at all in a disparaging way) *'ordinary cities'*. These latter included other cities visited as part of the Bearspace project (e.g. Edinburgh, Brighton, and Belfast), as well as UK cities which were not visited such as Bristol, Glasgow, and Newcastle, plus some non-UK but geographically proximate cities such as Dublin which numerous participants had visited.

Manchester was either discursively positioned within this category too or as occupying a middle ground between these two poles. This is of course not to say that there are not geographic distinctions to be made **within** the smaller 'ordinary city' category, nor that this category is a strict and coherent one with wider resonance beyond Bears. But it was a consistent thematic element across the Bearspace dataset, and within the context of the UK the magnitude of the differences between London and the project's other cities does, I feel, make this a compelling comparison. As I outlined above, participants associated the Bear spaces and scenes of London – by far the UK's largest city in terms of both population and geographic area – with the origins of 'Bear' in the UK, with a wide variety of different Bear/y spaces, with a trim and muscular 'image', and a negative exclusionary 'attitude'. The other cities of the project were much smaller in population and more compact in area. They and their Bear/y spaces were constantly and directly compared to London:

Jay: I think it's maybe characteristics of those cities that makes the Beary spaces different. Brighton is a bit like Edinburgh, it's a smaller city, everyone seems to know everybody else. That just makes me feel a wee bit cosier, 'cause London was much more… You could be much more anonymous in London I suppose. You could go out, you could have a pint with your friends in the Kings Arms or the Duke Of Wellington or wherever, and then you can just disappear into one of the bigger clubs, XXL or whatever… You might see the odd face that you recognise, but you could actually spend the entire evening, the entire night, not knowing anybody.

Edinburgh interview 4

Here we see Jay frame London as more isolating, so that *'you could actually spend the entire evening, the entire night, not knowing anybody'*. He contrasts smaller cities as more close-knit and sociable – *'everyone seems to know everybody else'* and it's *'a wee bit cosier'*. Bear/y spaces of smaller cities (including outside of the UK) were generally felt to be more friendly and more welcoming:

Jeff: I've been out in Cardiff, that's a Bear space that was good fun, that was a bit more melting pot, a bit more attitude free… [In Dublin] it's kind of, "Let's all get into a room and have a bit of craic" and there's a lot less going on there in terms of the subgroups within the subgroup if you know what I mean? You don't have a defined Bear space in Dublin, you don't, it's too small.

London interview 2

While Jeff himself previously linked London's Bear/y spaces with dominance by trim muscular men and an exclusionary attitude, here he frames smaller

cities as the opposite in terms of both bodies and attitudes – more of a *'melting pot'* and more *'attitude free'*. And, just as the sheer number of GBQ men in London was a key rationale presented to explain the capital's Bear/y scenes and spaces, so too do Jay and Jeff here suggest that it's the numbers of people in smaller cities that matter. The differences are notable. The population of the Greater London metropolitan area is around 8,797,000 (GLA, 2023). This vastly outstrips the population sizes of the project's other case study cities, with Brighton & Hove's population around 244,920 (ONS, 2023a), Belfast's around 345,000 (NISRA, 2022), Edinburgh's at 526,470 (NRS, 2023) and even the Greater Manchester metropolitan area at 'only' 2,868,400 (ONSb, 2023). Thus the framework for participants' perception of Bear/y spaces in London involves a very large population meaning that (a) a consequently large number of Bear/y spaces could be created, (b) a sense that there are always more people could be maintained, and (c) a critical mass of trim muscular bodies could be achieved. These elements were believed to support a negative 'attitude' and a perceived focus on 'image'. But in contrast, in smaller cities with smaller populations there were much fewer (if any) Bear/y spaces – and men described them not just as more mixed but as **necessarily** so:

Jay: Bears have to make their own space a lot of the time, particularly outside of the larger cities. Like we've been talking about London and Manchester and things, they have a much bigger club scene and bigger variety of bars and things. So they've all loads of places where all the Bears hang out. In Edinburgh for example, we no longer have a Bear bar of our own.

Rex: There's not even a man's bar anymore.

Jay: So as a result we now have to make our own space. As much as we love this space, and they're very welcoming every month, it's not our space all the time. We have a bit of space put aside for us… It's a bit of Bear space, but we have to make it.

Rex: Unless you're in a huge city where the Bears can dominate the space… it has to be shared, you have to live with sharing.

Edinburgh focus group, emphasis in audio recording

Writers on Bear spaces and communities have pointed to overlaps between these and those of other LGBTQ communities including Chubs, Gainers, Leathermen, and more (Brown, 2001; Marks Ridinger, 2001; Mass, 2001:15; Morris, 2009; Pyle & Klein, 2011; Suresha, 2009:57–77; Whitesel, 2014). Some have alluded to geographic differences in such overlaps in ways resonant with the Bearspace data, so that Brown suggests that Bear, Leathermen, and Chub scenes may overlap more in Europe than the USA (Brown, 2001:53), and Gan that the Bear scene of smaller cities may be spread out amongst other 'non-Bear' spaces and social outlets (Gan, 2001:130–131).

This latter point resonates strongly in the UK context. Geographer of sexualities Gavin Brown has heavily critiqued the metronormative framings of GBQ men's lives in the UK, pointing out that *'the pressures and pleasures of gay life are not the same in Leicester as they are in London; not the same in Madison (WI) as in Manhattan'* (Brown, 2012:1070). He argues in favour of more research and theorisation based on non-metropolitan *'ordinary'* cities, and on local variation amongst LGBTQ identities, cultures, communities, and practices (Brown, 2008). Examining intra-national variation amongst Bear/y spaces would seem to justify Brown's stance. As Jay, Rex, and Jeff indicate, just as London spaces were linked with a negative attitude due to the large population – the ever-present potential to go to another (better) space and find other (better) men – so too were smaller cities' spaces linked with friendliness, welcoming, and community due to their smaller population. Because there were no other Bear/y spaces available and few other Bear/y men to meet, participants described a pressing need for a wide variety of GBQ men to share and get along in the same space. So we may be seeing particular manifestations of Bear/y spaces which, while not necessarily specific to the UK, are certainly prevalent within the country, in its smaller non-metropolitan cities. We can return to the Edinburgh site to continue exploring how non-metropolitan Bear spaces could manifest, as volunteer Jay described how their temporary social space operated:

Jay: We usually have someone at the door of the venue to say hello to everybody that comes in, and to dish out sweeties. It's just that silly wee thing, just gets people talking to you. Having that face welcome people, it's quite a big thing… We know we are a subgroup within a minority in a small city, and we're glad to have you with us… It's such a small scene here in Edinburgh – and also in Glasgow – it's much more mixed, it's much less segregated. All the muscle boys and the fat boys and the leather boys and S&M boys all just hang out in the same places – 'cause there are no other places. In the bigger cities, particularly London or Berlin or wherever, there are specific clubs that are maybe aimed more at the different subgroups. Well we don't have that here, so therefore needs must.

Edinburgh interview 4, emphasis in audio recording

Based on these discussions across the Bearspace dataset, I suggest that Bear/y spaces here in the UK tend to be relatively mixed in terms of the bodies and identities (see Chapters 2–4) and that geography – specifically with regard to the cities in which these spaces exist – is a significant element of this. Because of the relatively small populations of most UK cities aside from London, within which GBQ men are a very small proportion, their Bear spaces and those visiting them necessarily deviate from 'classic' Bear archetypes because there simply aren't enough men who could or would want to fit into this.

Bear spaces are convenient for and shared by a wider number of men with an array of bodies and identifications – *'the muscle boys and the fat boys and the leather boys and S&M boys'* – because *'there* **are** *no other places'*. And as a consequence of this, those organising and visiting such spaces in small cities are believed to become more comfortable with sharing, indeed more friendly, and with less of an *'image image image'* attitude than Bear spaces in London. This wasn't just a function of the GBQ men coming to the space, but also of the necessity for Bear/y spaces in 'ordinary cities' to be ephemeral and produced temporarily within either non-Bear LGBTQ spaces or non-LGBTQ spaces.

We shouldn't, however, interpret this as meaning that Bear/y spaces in smaller cities are simply 'better' than those in larger cities. First, as noted earlier in this chapter, many men first connected with Bear communities in London and saw the capital's Bear spaces as something to aspire to. So we have to assume that many had good experiences there! And second, plenty of men discussed the difficulties and frustrations of living in a smaller city – again usually linked with population size with regard to GBQ men and Bears, so that for fat guys in particular, unlike in larger cities it's vanishingly unlikely that you'll find spaces by/for fat GBQ guys (aside from ephemeral Bear/y spaces), and consequently might yourself forced into sharing spaces in which you become uncomfortable, e.g. non-Bear LGBTQ spaces (see McGlynn, 2022a, 2022c). Bear/y spaces thus served an important function for bigger GBQ men in particular in smaller, 'ordinary' cities.

As with all of the case study sites visited as part of the Bearspace project the Edinburgh site being discussed by Jay and Rex was a temporary space, in this case a large section on a non-LGBTQ pub (albeit certainly an explicitly LGBTQ-friendly one). The section wasn't zoned off from other patrons in any way, and of course we shared the use of the rest of the pub with other customers. On returning home I reflected on how this impacted on the people I interacted with as I moved through the Edinburgh space during the evening:

> *Went into the toilet, wasn't kinda Beary in there, it was – gasp! – non-Bear guys! And around the bar there was certainly plenty of guys who weren't Bears there. But plenty of guys who were as well, but I think they were just getting drinks at the bar.*

Edinburgh auto/ethnography, emphasis in audio recording

So in smaller cities Bear spaces appear to be more mixed in terms of the bodies and identifications of those present, due to the lower number of people who might want to visit them combined with the ephemeral nature of the Bear space as temporarily located/produced in non-Bear space. This doesn't seem to be a function of any essential feature of local Bear cultures but rather of the lower overall population of these cities. Most writing and research on Bears has focused on cities in the USA where there is a larger number of cities

with large populations – of metropolitan cities. But here in the UK smaller cities are the norm, and thus in most UK cities there simply is not the population to sustain distinct spaces for niche groups (e.g. Bears) within other niche groups (e.g. GBQ men). And, as I intimate in these auto/ethnographic notes, this means that thinking about ambiguously 'Bear/y' rather than distinct 'Bear' spaces offers a useful and more appropriate term. This is of course not to say that spaces we might more easily describe as Bear (not Bear/y) spaces are occupied solely by those who have unquestionable Bear identities and Bear bodies – I hope that in my previous chapters I've sufficiently explained why that won't be the case. My suggestion of adding Bear/y to our conceptual vocabulary is instead aimed at encouraging scholars, writers, and others interested in Bears to bear in mind the conceptual looseness of 'Bear' and the empirical realities of who is in Bear spaces and what is happening in them – particularly significant when we move outside of a metronormative framing of Bear and consider Brown's 'ordinary cities' where so much (perhaps even most!) of Bear life exists.

'Definitely in London and to some extent in Manchester' – slipping between the metropolitan and the ordinary

Since I've speculated that a city's population size is a particularly important factor for understanding Bear spaces in the UK, Manchester's status as the largest of the 'ordinary cities' – and the only other aside from London to have an officially recognised metropolitan area – means that it could potentially have features distinct from its smaller cousins of Brighton, Belfast, and Edinburgh. This means that examining how Manchester was discussed in the dataset offers an opportunity to 'test' my contention that a city's population size impacts on its Bear spaces, scenes and communities. Does Manchester, then, sit between London and the project's smaller cities, exhibiting some aspects of both poles?

First, it's worth noting that aside from London, Manchester was the most commonly discussed UK city with regard to Bears. Just as with London, when it came to discussing experiences of Bear spaces and communities in the UK even those who didn't live in Manchester had often visited it or had something to say about it. This is understandable, as Manchester's LGBTQ scenes are large, long-standing and well-known in the UK (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Held, 2015; Skeggs et al., 2004). Participants suggested a number of potential Bear/y spaces in Manchester – the Eagle, the Rem Bar, Big Scrum, Brawn, DILF, Dandy, and others – far fewer than London, but more than other case study sites. Amongst Bearspace participants, Manchester was at times aligned with London as another large city and distinguished from smaller cities like Belfast, Brighton, and Edinburgh:

Gerald: I don't think that [negative] attitude's really here, you don't get that on the Bear scene in Edinburgh or Glasgow, not really. But

definitely in London and to some extent in Manchester. To some extent it's a function of the size of the city or event, like at big Bear events.

Edinburgh focus group

Arthur: [There was] a need for something as an alternative to the few bars that were in Belfast, 'cause all the bars in Belfast were either very mixed or full of Twinks or full of lesbians and mature men didn't feel comfortable in the space.

Nick: You said that the [Belfast] bars back then were mixed, what do you mean by mixed?

Arthur: Mixed both gay and straight. Gay men, gay women, bisexuals and a few straight people as well. There wasn't a men-only bar, there wasn't the usual buzz you'd have got in a bar in Manchester or London or something.

Belfast interview 6

In discursive pairings with London Manchester usually (but, as we see in Arthur's comment, not always) came after London, establishing London as the exemplar of the 'big city' and Manchester as a **potential** candidate for inclusion or as exhibiting **some** similar features as Gerald alludes to in his framing – *'definitely in London and to some extent in Manchester'*. Manchester was described as having a larger scene than the other 'ordinary cities' and as having enough spaces and events for there to be some degree of specialisation beyond general LGBTQ spaces, so that Manchester-based participants commonly referred *'men-only bar[s]'* and to 'mainstream' and 'alternative' LGBTQ spaces in the city, and unlike other smaller cities Manchester did have unambiguous and dedicated Bear spaces in the past (see Chapter 4). Manchester was also at times linked with London's 'negative attitude' through the similar perception of a proliferation of trim, muscular, and attractive men in Manchester's Bear/y spaces:

Rex: If you go to London or Manchester there are identifiable groups of people who think they're too muscular and pretty to talk to other people, and everyone knows who they are, and they're like a little clique unto themselves. I feel if you go out on the scene [nowadays], if you're in a big city… I think it sort of becomes strata-ed into "These are the A-Bears", and the A-Bears are barely Bears, they're all judging how much body fat you have.

Edinburgh focus group

Aaron: I used to live in Manchester, and in Manchester I used to go to <bar popular with Bears>. It was okay there, but… in the last six months

> I was there I started seeing more clones, getting "You don't belong here"… This is a Bear club, this is a Bear thing, but I was not like them, because they were fit, they were slim.

London focus group

As I've indicated in my discussion of London, big cities were seen by participants as the place where there's an 'attitude problem', where there is 'attitude' (in the negative sense), specifically due to the size and population of these cities and what that meant for proximate bodies in GBQ men's spaces. But we can see that while London was the pre-eminent UK city described in this way, the occasional roping in of Manchester (much smaller than London but considerably larger than the project's other cities as well as most other UK cities) to these conversations reveals to some degree the limitations of such a binary approach of London vs 'ordinary cities'. Yet it nevertheless suggests that there may at least be a spectrum here, and that population size really is a significant factor in how Bear/y spaces in UK cities manifest and are experienced.

However Manchester was not simply seen as the **same** as London, as an **identically** big city. First, it was never talked about as its own entity, as unique in the UK, in the same way that London was. And second, while I've shown how it could also be actively aligned with London and distinguished from smaller cities, there were also times when it was distinguished from London and aligned with smaller cities instead. Here Alex discusses first his frequent visits to a Bear event in Manchester, and then a trip to London during which he visited a number of Bear spaces:

> *Alex:* I used to go to the Manchester Bear Bash quite often. Quite enjoyed it, I think the first time I was there was very much an eye opener 'cause there was just so many people there, it was ridiculous! You know, Belfast there's a group of maybe thirty, forty people, at our biggest events we maybe had a hundred people if they were coming home for Christmas. I was going to Manchester and there was thousands, you were just like 'What the hell!' walking down the street… After going to that for a few years, you found that it was just exactly the same [as Belfast] but on a bigger scale…
>
> In London during the day, it wasn't as the likes of Manchester where you have that centralised thing… You can't go too far in Manchester without bumping into a load of gay people, but because London was London… You were actively having to go to where the events were, it wasn't that you were just falling into it the same way you would be in the likes of Manchester, Brighton, wherever.

Belfast interview 1

In the first half of his discussion, Alex compares Manchester and its Bear/y spaces against his home city of Belfast. The salient distinguishing feature is

the greater number of people and the *'bigger scale'* – Manchester is a bigger city. In the second half Alex offers another comparison, this time between Manchester and London. This time Manchester appears smaller and more concentrated. While London's LGBTQ and Bear/y spaces are, as I've indicated earlier in this chapter, dispersed across the metropolis so that *'you were actively having to go to where the events were'*, those of Manchester are comparatively *'centralised'* so that you could more easily be *'bumping into a load of gay people'* and just *'falling into it'*. And in both comparisons Manchester is eventually discursively aligned with smaller cities – it's *'exactly the same but on a bigger scale'* regarding Belfast, and aligned with *'Brighton, wherever'* as opposed to London. In fact some Manchester-based participants emphasised the perceived smaller size of Manchester and its Bear/y scenes and spaces:

> *The core Bear events in Manchester, they're run by a very small group of people with typically the same people at the events. Manchester, for as big a city as it is… Well, it's a small world.*
>
> ***Manchester interview 5***

The way Manchester is often positioned between the two supports my suggestion that population may be a really significant factor, as it is the largest of the 'ordinary' cities and this is very much how it's discussed. It's not about different scenes, communities or culture being inherent to particular urban areas so much as the number of people there. In some of my earliest geographic research I discussed how imagined geographic binaries (such as 'rural' and 'urban') could be produced through reference to LGBTQ communities, and how some areas which don't fit easily into either could variously 'slip' in and out of both categories through their comparison with another area (e.g. so that the town of Hastings could be described as 'rural' when compared with Brighton but 'urban' when compared with Sussex villages – see McGlynn, 2018). A similar process seems to occur with Manchester, so that it can be variously aligned with the metropolis and with the ordinary city through reference to Bear scenes and spaces – with population as the key element.

Conclusion to Bear cities

Writing and research on Bears has only rarely (and then partially) addressed **inter**-national variation amongst Bear scenes, spaces, communities, and bodies, and has never engaged with the idea of **intra**-national variation. By beginning to do this in this chapter, I hope to build on previous chapters in advancing critiques of accounts of Bears and our communities that seek to establish universal 'truths' about them, even at the national level. First, it's clear that particular geographic imaginaries – such as those of 'London' and of 'small cities' – are important elements in the perceptions and experiences

relating to UK Bear spaces. Furthermore, even within mid-sized countries such as the UK we can see evidence of variation in terms of the number and types of spaces available, the affective atmospheres of such spaces, and the kinds of bodies present. I've suggested that one of the most important factors in this variation, as indicated by discussions in the Bearspace project and from my own auto/ethnographic observations, is the population size of an urban area. With larger populations (e.g. in London) it may be that a larger variety of different Bear spaces becomes feasible, as does the achievement of a critical mass of valorised (amongst GBQ men) trim and muscular bodies. Participants commonly linked this with what they felt to be a negative 'atmosphere' associated with the contemporary capital – distinct from earlier positive and aspirational experiences there – which were said to be a result of there being so many people that one could afford to be exclusionary. With smaller populations (e.g. in Belfast, Brighton, and Edinburgh) there are fewer if any fixed Bear spaces – the population to sustain them (socially or financially) does not exist – and their ephemeral Bear spaces tend to be mixed in terms of those present and with a perceived friendly atmosphere which organisers felt that they had to work to create. An examination of Manchester specifically has shown that this is not a clear-cut binary as it was seen to be variously aligned with both London and with smaller cities – yet this still alludes to the significance of population size.

To be clear, in my discussion of different UK cities with regard to Bears I'm **not** arguing that there exists a clear rule or framework according to which Bear communities, cultures, lives and spaces can be systematically sorted. But as I've shown in this chapter, **geography matters** when it comes to Bears. This intra-national geographic variation amongst Bear spaces also exemplifies the utility of a conceptual pivot towards or inclusion of 'Bear/y' spaces. Freed from the distraction of the impossible task of categorising sites as either unambiguously Bear spaces or not, and embracing the ambivalence and ambiguity of their 'Beariness', we can better understand and grapple with the empirical realities of what's actually happening in different cities.

Note

1 Short for GHB, a popular party drug.

6 Bear boundaries

Researching Bear exclusions

Reading through decades of Bear writing, I've come to suspect a certain romanticisation of an imagined, inclusive 'Golden Age' of early Bears. In fact, some writers actually suggest that Bears have become **more** inclusive since the 80s and 90s, and that it's the post-00s Bear communities that are more aligned with that idealised 'original' Bear ethos (e.g. Kearns, 2001:57–60; Suresha, 2009:263–272). Bear historian Les Wright has discussed the *'hypocrisy [of] preaching "inclusivity" while practicing exclusionary behaviour'* in Bear communities (Wright, 2001b:3), and limiting definitions and representations of Bear bodies can ignore (or actively reduce) the diversity of Bear communities (Locke, 1997:127; see also Hendricks, 2001:68). As I indicated through my discussion of 'negative attitudes' in the previous chapter, Bear spaces can be experienced as sites of exclusion, so that some who attend or who wish to attend can find themselves marginalised and distanced while in the space, or subtly or overtly encouraged not to attend the space at all. It's this element of Bear spaces, and the usually implicit boundaries of Bear spaces, that I want to discuss in this final and difficult chapter.

Boundaries and boundary-making practices in and around LGBTQ spaces are far less rigid or clear-cut than can often be discussed, so that they might not manifest as active exclusions or bans from accessing the space (Formby, 2017). There are certainly numerous implicit boundaries and barriers relating to Bear spaces. For instance, many writers note that the vast majority of Bears and those in Bear spaces are White (Hennen, 2008:114; Wright, 1997b:12, 2001b:4–5; Ingraham, 2015:127; Suresha, 2009:243–245, 251–262; Brown, 2001:53; Papadopoulos, 2001:153; Manley et al., 2007; Kelly & Kane, 2001:344; Siriprakorn, 2019). This is not to say that all Bears are White (see for example Clarke, 2001; Gan, 2001; Lopez, 2001; Suresha, 2009:251–262), nor that there are no Bear communities of and for people of colour (Lin, 2014; Moussawi, 2020; Sahin, 2001; Suresha, 2009:310–318; Tan, 2019). But at the very least Bear communities of the global West mirror the racist divisions and attitudes of similarly situated mainstream LGBTQ spaces (Clark, 2001; McGlynn, 2021; Moskowitz et al., 2013). Bears have

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also been described as mostly middle-class men (Hennen, 2008:113; Papadopoulos, 2001:152; Suresha, 1997b:45; Wright, 1997b:5) who at times deliberately perform (Brown, 2001; De Mey, 1997:266; Mann, 2010; McCann, 1997:252; Sullivan, 2003; Whitesel, 2014:51; Wright, 1997b:11–12, 2001b:3–4) or even cynically appropriate (Rofes, 1997; Suresha, 2001:299–204, 2009:19) aesthetics linked with working class men while denying the economic privilege involved. And with regard to age, Bear communities are said to be an inclusive *'welcome respite'* (Slevin & Linneman, 2010) for older men (Brown, 2001:47; Riley, 2016; Suresha, 2009:223–237; Wright, 1997a), offering them sexual inclusion and liberation amidst youth-centric GBQ men's cultures (Greig, 2001; Manley et al., 2007:101). Yet there are some indications that younger men may experience a degree of marginalisation (Fritscher, 2001:xlvii; Kucera, 1997; Wright, 2001b), sexual stereotyping (Hennen, 2008:129), or exclusion from the Bear category (Kucera, 1997; Suresha, 2009:269)

The exclusions I'd say are the most commonly discussed in the literature are with regard to body size. Smaller and thinner men, while they are certainly not necessarily or always excluded from Bear spaces (see Chapters 3 and 4), nor even from Bear as a category (see Chapters 2 and 3), can at times be seen as transgressing a boundary by entering into Bear spaces and may experience exclusion and marginalisation (Adams & Berry, 2013; Brown, 2001:54; Edmonds & Zieff, 2015:429; Suresha, 1997b:48, 2009:315), hostility (Suresha, 2009:18), and sexual rejection (Hendricks, 2001:66; Suresha, 2009:239–249). Conversely, Wright has suggested that Twinks and *'A-list gays'* complaining of exclusion by Bears may at times be disingenuous wielders of power (*'the rich, the beautiful and the power-wielding'*), using the language of *'political correctness'* to punch downwards (Wright, 2001b:9). An extended interview (Suresha, 2009:239–249) with Manny Lim and Kirk Read, two smaller men attracted to large hairy men and Bears (sometimes called Chasers), highlights some of the complexities of this kind of exclusion. While Lim and Read do express feelings of marginalisation and experiences of exclusionary behaviours from bigger and older guys in Bear spaces, they are perhaps surprisingly accepting of this. *'There are more than enough spaces where young, pretty gay boys are valued'*, points out Read (ibid., 243), and he goes on to suggest that it might in fact be *'healthy'* for *'culturally overserved'* gay men like him – younger, thinner, conventionally attractive – to experience being in a minority. Lim and Read remind us that the socio-cultural and erotic power dynamics between bigger, fatter, and older GBQ and between smaller, thinner, and younger GBQ men are not equal, but are often weighted quite heavily in favour of the latter. When Bear spaces are understood to be by and for bigger, hairier, and older men, these men can *'feel upstaged at their own party'* (Suresha, 2009:220) when young, thin, hairless Chasers get a lot of attention in these same spaces, finding this a painful reminder of their experiences in mainstream gay spaces. So in this regard, it is understandable why bigger guys might want to see fewer thinner

guys in Bear spaces and why excluding and boundary-making practices might emerge. It's also worth noting that, contra suggestions of the radical body inclusivity of early Bear communities, some early figures have expressed notable anti-fat sentiment (see Fritscher, 2001; Hill, 1997; Jack Radcliffe in Suresha, 2009:180). Indeed, despite assertions (and undoubted experiences) of Bear inclusivity for bigger and fatter men, Bear spaces and communities are still permeated with fat stigma (McGlynn, 2022a, 2022c). Monaghan for example notes the extensive policing and at times exclusion of particular fat male bodies by Bears (Monaghan, 2005; see also Larry Flick in Suresha, 2009:145; Lopez, 2001:122; Suresha, 2009:57–77; Whitesel, 2014), while Hennen notes some of his respondents' fears of being laughed at for their fatness even in a Bear space (Hennen, 2008:124). Other writers follow popular anti-fat arguments and discourses by criticising fat Bears on the grounds that they're damaging their health (Brown, 2001; Fritscher, 2001:xxix–xxx; Hollywood, 2016; Mass, 2001; Suresha, 2009:245), even criticising fat inclusivity and acceptance amongst Bears as excusing (Suresha, 1997b:48) or even promoting ill-health (Mass in Suresha, 2009:183–194).

In chapters until now I have described and discussed those people who are in UK Bear spaces and noted some of these associated marginalisations and boundaries. I've highlighted the variation in identifications (Chapter 2) and bodies (Chapter 3) of those present, and variations within (Chapter 4) and between (Chapter 5) the spaces themselves. What I've **not** described or discussed at any length is those who don't tend to be present in UK Bear spaces – in particular, women. Canny readers will already have noted my indelicate skirting around the topic of Bear spaces as men's spaces through virtue of their attendees (they are overwhelmingly populated **by** men) and their production (they are overwhelmingly created **for** men). This is so naturalised as to escape much comment from Bear writers. Bear spaces are both implicitly and explicitly by and for men and not for women. This doesn't mean there are never women or people with other gender identities in Bear spaces (Morris, 2009), or that there are no women describing themselves or being described as Bears or Bear/y (for brief examples see Hill, 1997:7; Kampf, 2000:122–123; Riley, 2016; Suresha, 2001:300–302, 2009:37–39, 276, 316; Webster, 1997:248). But the gendering of Bears as men and Bear spaces as men's spaces is so ingrained and pervasive that the absence of women is almost never considered – until that boundary is crossed or the question is explicitly raised.

Geography is crucial for understanding the oppression of women, not only because this oppression manifests differently at different spaces and scales, but also because the barrier to accessing particular spaces is a central feature of it. From its expansion from the late 1970s Feminist Geography has been critically concerned with these barriers, in particular women's restriction to the home and the barriers to accessing and exclusion from wider public space (Bowlby et al., 1981; Domosh & Seager, 2001; England, 1991; McDowell, 1999; Monk & Hanson, 2007a, 2007b; Nelson & Seager, 2008; Women &

Geography Study Group, 1984, 1987). Feminist Geographers have consequently argued that supposedly 'neutral' spaces are in fact suffused with gendered norms and patriarchal power dynamics (Bondi & Davidson, 2008; Domosh & Seager, 2001; McDowell, 1999), with Geographers of men and masculinities – heavily influenced by feminist scholarship – concurring (Gorman-Murray & Hopkins, 2014; Van Hoven & Hörschelmann, 2005). These Geographers have noted that men-only spaces have been part of how women's exclusion from wider public life is reproduced, and while there is a growing body of work on potentially positive impacts of certain specific kinds of men-only or men's spaces (see for example Golding, 2015 on the Men's Sheds movement, or Moisio & Beruchashvili, 2016 on the 'man cave'), others suggest such spaces still maintain hegemonic masculinities (Mackenzie et al., 2017) and oppressive heteropatriarchies (Rodino-Colocino et al., 2018; see also Salter & Blodgett, 2017 on digital spaces). GBQ men do not simply stand outside of these norms and dynamics, and certainly overt misogyny has been noted in GBQ men's spaces (Hale & Ojeda, 2018; Johnson & Samdahl, 2005; Maddison, 2000; Richardson, 2009). Bear/y guys are no exception. Despite occasional championing of Bears as blending both traditionally masculine and feminine traits (Brown, 2001; Hill, 1997; Suresha, 2009:273–283; Wright, 1997b), and the welcoming of effeminacy, camp and gayness in UK Bear/y spaces noted in Chapters 2 and 4, some Bear writers and promoters have expressed highly exclusionary ideals towards women (Gough & Flanders, 2009; Hennen, 2008; Rain, 1997:194–195; Suresha, 2009:57; for examples see De Mey, 1997; Sullivan, 2003). Effeminacy amongst GBQ men has also been rebuked by some Bears (Blotcher, 1998:364; Hennen, 2008; Manley et al., 2007:100; Mann, 2010; Santoro, 2013:163; for examples see Fritscher, 2001; Greig, 2001; Hill, 1997:71–72). This isn't simply external to the UK context – in fact while I was conducting the research, UK LGBTQ media reported on the removal of a man from a popular London Bear/y club for wearing high heels, with the man being told '*We don't allow femininity*' (Dunne, 2018; Kelleher, 2018).

Because the idea of women in Bear spaces has had so little extended discussion or consideration in Bear literatures, because it is clearly and in my own experience an assumption so obvious and ingrained that it is almost never actually thought about, and because it is an issue so linked with women's oppression by men, I want to devote this final thematic chapter to the gendered boundaries of Bear spaces. My aim is to try to explain and enhance our understanding of the spatial politics of women's presence in Bear/y spaces of the UK.

For the avoidance of doubt, what I'm going to be talking about is **not** trans men in Bear spaces. Mainstream so-called 'debates' around trans people in the Anglosphere very often revolve around the idea that trans women are men invading women's spaces (Browne, 2004; Doan, 2010; McGuire et al., 2022). This is particularly the case in the increasingly transphobic UK (Faye, 2021; Lawrence & Taylor, 2020; Todd, 2021; see also essentially any mainstream

British media outlet from 2020 onwards). So it's perhaps significant just how **unproblematic** trans men in UK Bear spaces appeared to be for Bearspace participants, and that while Bear/y spaces were felt to be men's spaces at no point were trans men in Bear spaces framed as invading women. Women in Bear spaces (at times explicitly including trans women) were clearly felt to be an issue but trans men were not – and in fact the project's two trans participants both stressed that they, too, felt uncomfortable with women in Bear spaces. There are indeed trans Bears and trans men in Bear spaces (Cooper, 2016:151; Soper, 2016; Wright, 1997b:14) and far more, as several organisers told me, than most cis attendees are aware of. The tiny literature discussing trans, non-binary, and genderqueer Bears describes some positive inclusion but also examples of marginalisation and open transphobia (Soper, 2016; Suresha, 2009:273–283). And there are undoubtedly some transphobic people in UK Bear spaces/communities, as well as subtle and unrecognised transphobia amongst those of us who understand ourselves to be trans-supportive. But at no point in the entire Bearspace project – not in the interviews, not in the focus groups, not in my auto/ethnographic observations while participating in the spaces – did trans men in Bear spaces appear to be problematic. No one seemed concerned about the idea. Methodologically speaking, the lack of overt transphobia could be down to participants feeling unwilling to express anti-trans sentiment in front of a researcher or amongst others who they believed to be trans-supportive (though I did not state my own perspective before or during data collection). But the absolute worst that a (cis) participant said of trans men was that some *'are very good at it'*, a statement which might imply that trans men are essentially just pretending to be men. Both of the project's two trans male participants described very positive experiences in UK Bear spaces regarding their transness, and I met several other openly trans men at case study sites (and have met many more since) who seemed to be having a very good time indeed! Organisers and volunteers at all five of the case study sites were vocally and actively supportive of trans men in Bear spaces and communities, both in the dataset and in their online materials and social media posts. Non-binary and genderfluid people were described as more of a concern for organisers, so that one said that they had *'been really struggling with gender fluidity – where do all the "theys" sit in a men-only environment?'*. I've encountered quite of a few people who I know to be or who have described themselves to me as non-binary, genderfluid, or genderqueer in Bear/y spaces. A few of these I know to be AFAB (Assigned Female At Birth) while the majority I know to be AMAB. Again most seemed to be very much enjoying themselves in the spaces, but there is too little in the dataset for me to draw any real conclusions. There is plenty of scope here for future research, ideally to be led by trans, non-binary and genderqueer researchers.

In the rest of this chapter I'll describe how GBQ men – especially bigger and fatter guys – can become uncomfortable when they see women in Bear/y spaces, and I'll draw on my discussion of marginalised bodies and a

'critical mass' from previous chapters to explain what I think the nature of this discomfort is. I'll also take a geographically sensitive approach by distinguishing certain types of the project's Bear spaces from others in this regard. Then, I'm going to detail why I've come to think there is a case to be made for maintaining some Bear/y spaces as men's spaces – though I emphasise that this does **not** mean barring women from them.

"I'd get very uncomfortable if a woman was in that space" – gendered boundaries of Bear/y spaces

I'm a bit dubious of men – including myself – airily identifying themselves as feminists. I've too often observed sexist and misogynistic behaviour from men who call themselves feminists. And I've been one of those men! But while I'm not sure I deserve the appellation, I absolutely want to do the work (as bell hooks [2000:31–33] says) of supporting feminists and advocating feminism. And if feminist women want to strategically claim me as a fellow feminist then I'm happy to be claimed! I say this so readers will understand that I went into the Bearspace project viewing the idea of Bear spaces as men-only spaces as sexism and misogyny, something that I intellectually recognised as an expression and reproduction of male domination and entitlement – and yet which, as I reflected on with some disquiet during the project, I also took for granted and which I knew made me feel comfortable in Bear spaces. I did encounter some out-and-out misogyny and anti-woman sentiment from two of the older participants, and some other participants openly described some Bear space visitors – particularly older men – as misogynistic. But some of the stories told to me by Bearspace participants genuinely challenged me, as I found men describing what I interpreted as strongly positive impacts and implications of Bear spaces, specifically due to these men's legitimate assumption and experience of them as populated almost exclusively by and created for men (McGlynn, 2022a). Now there are women in Bear spaces. Across the project's case study sites and beyond I've seen women in Bear/y spaces as attendees (both with and without Bear/y male friends) and as workers, serving drinks and on the door. So the idea that all Bear/y spaces are always men-only spaces is demonstrably and empirically false, in the UK at least. I've also never seen a statement that any of the project's Bear spaces are men-only, nor have I seen non-males flat-out refused entry to a Bear space – though I don't doubt that it's happened. But at the same time Bear spaces are invariably imagined to be created by GBQ men and for GBQ men. Men are always in the overwhelming majority and in my experience there are usually no women to be seen. So I think we could fairly describe UK Bear/y spaces as GBQ men's spaces. When re-reading and reflectively analysing my auto/ethnographic notes from Bearspace case study sites, I saw that while women in Bear spaces wasn't something the project was investigating I did seem to consistently take note of when women were present in Bear/y spaces, if only briefly:

> *There were some women in the [bar staff], they were all wearing the Brighton Bear Weekend shirts…. There was quite a few women in the crowd definitely, sitting with Beary friends, some older women just by themselves, and there were some older women sat next to us under the tree having a good time, smoking, drinking.*

Brighton auto/ethnography

> *The bar staff was one guy and two girls. And a girl on the coat check, [and a] girl directing people to the exit. Felt a bit odd… Just… Hmm… Don't think it really impacted me, just like "Oh. A woman". Don't know how I feel about it in retrospect.*

Edinburgh auto/ethnography

Of these spaces the Brighton one was an open-air event, and though the Edinburgh one wasn't at the case study site per se but rather a club night running immediately after the Bear social, which was described to me as 'Beary' and which many from the social went to. In this case, you can see that my reaction wasn't one of horror, outrage or disgust but it was certainly one of mild surprise – *'Oh. A woman'*. Women in Bear spaces were notable by their very presence, then, not due to anything they were doing or any way they were behaving. This alludes to a default assumption that the people in Bear spaces will be men, and that the presence of women is an anomaly. I felt this to be just a neutral observation in the Brighton case and at worse *'a bit odd'* in the Edinburgh case, while leaving open a degree of emotional uncertainly about *'how I feel about it in retrospect'* (e.g. on returning to my hotel room). But some of the Bearspace participants described feeling active discomfort over the presence of women in Bear spaces. In some case this was rooted in objectifying behaviour from straight women, so that Arthur in Belfast described an *'animal-in-the-zoo mentality of people looking at you, a lot of straight women coming in to look at the gay men'*, while Ben in Manchester discussed an *'incident'* when a large group of women *'invaded'* a Bear space he'd been at and began *'laughing and talking about the guys'* so that he felt it was *'not safe for bigger guys'*. Aaron identified *'hen parties'* as a particular problem and described with some disgust being at a London Bear/y bar and treated *'like some monkey act'* by women who *'wanted the Bears to pose with them'*. Examining a longer extract from the Manchester focus group helps to identify some of the complexities involved here:

Ryan: At some of the clubs [we hire], unless you can guarantee money for event staff and a bouncer and the like, non-event members, women, can go. We've had events before where people have mentioned that they have started to feel uncomfortable. Sometimes I think it's just a perceived, "Oh they're not part of this, they'll

be judging me". [But] actually there've been times where they **have** judged and they're like, "Oh my God, all these big hairy guys with all their shirts off!" and they're **pointing** and **laughing**. So I think some people feel quite uncomfortable with non-event members or with women coming to the space.

Timothy: It's our time to perform our sexual side. There's the idealised gay man and I fall outside of that. So I think that spaces like this, I'm like, "This is my opportunity to go into a space that I am part of and that I can feel completely myself". Last night I took off my shirt and I danced – I would never do that in a straight club. I'd never do that in a gay club that wasn't a Bear night… The more I think about it, I'd get very uncomfortable if a woman was in that space 'cause that's my time to perform.

Manchester focus group, emphasis in audio

In all of these cases we can see that there are real examples of the behaviour of women in Bear spaces explicitly and understandably making men uncomfortable. Even if the women in question were not actively abusive, due to the pervasive and internalised nature of fat stigma (Andreyeva et al., 2008; Cooper, 2010; Cooper et al., 2014; Edmonds & Zieff, 2015; Gough & Flanders, 2009:243–244; Hopkins, 2012; Longhurst, 2005; Pausé, 2017; Wann, 2009) it can be very emotionally damaging for fat GBQ men like Ryan and superchubs like Timothy to experience this kind of behaviour, emphasising their feeling of abjection. This might be particularly heightened in the space where you expected to feel safe and comfortable in this regard (McGlynn, 2022c).

Not long after I'd completed the Bearspace data collection, I shared these stories and others with a (female) feminist friend.[1] I commented on how difficult it might be, for those who hadn't heard these stories, to believe that these often very physically large and (superficially at least) masculine men, such as Ryan and Timothy, might actually be **afraid** of women in LGBTQ spaces. My friend was thoughtful, but replied with the contemporary aphorism based on an older quote from writer Margaret Atwood – *'Men are afraid women will laugh at them; women are afraid men will kill them'*. There's more than a nugget of truth in this, and it rightly highlights that there are qualitative differences between forms of gendered violence. But at the same time, I just don't think it's good enough to suggest that it's not a problem if women come and laugh at bigger and fatter GBQ men. As I've shown in my previous work (McGlynn, 2022c) and as is demonstrated across a swath of scholarship and writing (Berry, 2007; Blotcher, 1998; Foster-Gimbel, 2016; Gough & Flanders, 2009; Mosher, 2001; Whitesel, 2014), mainstream LGBTQ spaces and GBQ men's scenes are sites of intense fat stigma and serious bodily anxieties for bigger men in particular. These are real problems with real impacts on both physical and mental health (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015;

Krems & Neuberg, 2022; MacLean et al., 2009; Mijas, 2022; Pausé, 2017; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Sutin et al., 2015; Tomiyama et al., 2018). So I think there is value in Bear/y spaces, most especially as rare sites and times where these men finally get to feel comfortable in their bodies.

But why focus on women here? After all, both the Bearspace dataset and the wider Bear literature shows that at times men also cause discomfort for bigger guys in Bear spaces, even openly mocking them (Hennen, 2008:12; McGlynn, 2022a, 2022c; Monaghan, 2005; Suresha, 2009:57–77; Whitesel, 2014). So why this rarely articulated boundary for women specifically? Is it, then, just a matter of misogyny? And there **is** some misogyny in UK Bear/y spaces.

I don't discount the idea that antipathy towards women is part of why women are often unwelcome in (even if not actively excluded from) Bear spaces. But when analysing the Bearspace dataset, because there was so little actively misogynistic sentiment expressed I began looking more closely at the data relating to women, gender, and Bear spaces as 'men's spaces'. I wanted to know why, even in the absence of the kind of behaviour often associated with hen parties, men in Bear/y spaces felt so uncomfortable with the idea of women being present. To explain my interpretation, I want to go back to the excerpt from the Manchester focus group above. In particular, I focus on Ryan's suggestion that *'Sometimes I think it's just a perceived, "Oh they're not part of this, they'll be judging me"* and Timothy's comment that *'I'd get very uncomfortable if a woman was in that space'* – not due to what the woman is doing, but simply the fact that she is there. Geographers and others have already explored the impacts of increasing numbers of straight cisgender people visiting LGBTQ spaces on LGBTQ people's sense of comfort, safety, and community (see for example Baldor, 2019; Moran et al., 2003; Hartless, 2019; Held, 2015; Matejskova, 2007; Mattson, 2022). But crucially, these scholars have shown that straight cisgender people don't actually have to **behave** badly in LGBTQ spaces to be perceived as causing a problem. Instead their mere **presence** can be felt to disrupt the atmosphere, the sense of spatial ownership, or the comfort or safety of LGBTQ people. With regard to Bear spaces, fat stigma and hatred are so pervasive in mainstream society and GBQ men's spaces in particular that I think it's worth taking seriously the anxiety of guys like Timothy which may be, as Ryan indicates, rooted in what is *'perceived'*. Because Bear spaces are seen as men's spaces (if not men-only spaces) and are overwhelmingly populated by men, women in Bear spaces can often be hyper-visible and automatically *'perceived [as] not part of this'* (e.g. a community of similar bodies sharing an ethos of bodily inclusion – see McGlynn, 2022a). And because they are read as *'not part of this'* women in Bear spaces are therefore instinctively flagged as potential (even likely) sources of mockery and judgement of these men's marginalised and stigmatised bodies – even if they're not doing anything wrong.

This is not the case for others who may also be *'not part of this'*. GBQ men harbouring anti-fat sentiment are certainly present in Bear/y spaces, but

my analysis of the Bearspace data has shown that in UK Bear spaces there is a general assumption that the GBQ men in them share an ethos of body inclusion and non-judgement (McGlynn, 2022a). Straight men would be far less visible or identifiable in a space filled with Bear/y men, and participants uniformly believed that straight men would not want to go to Bear spaces and would leave if they realised that all the men there were GBQ. Young thin men and Twinks might be somewhat visible in differentiation from larger Beary bodies, and both participants and the wider Bear literature (Gough & Flanders, 2009:244; Pyle & Klein, 2011:84; Suresha, 1997b:48, 2001:302, 2009:18, 44–45) describe Twinks as sources of fat stigma. But as I've described in Chapters 3 and 4 there is always a variety of (men's) bodies in Bear spaces, including younger thinner less hairy guys, and many Bear/y men are well-aware that plenty of such guys come to Bear spaces because they're attracted to bigger hairier bodies (Brown, 2001; Hennen, 2008; Mass, 2001; Pyle & Klein, 2011). So Twink/y guys in Bear/y spaces are not automatically or as intensely flagged as potential sources of abuse as women are. More than anyone else then it's women in Bear spaces whose simple presence, absent of the kind of objectifying or stigmatising behaviour described above and despite their intent, can most make men feel anxious about their bodies.

The concept of the 'critical mass' – which I've previously argued to be crucial for understanding UK Bear/y spaces – can help us to make sense of this discomfort produced by mere presence. Across the examples listed above and throughout the other discussions of women in Bear spaces in the dataset, it's **groups** of women that are viewed as especially discomforting. As with other participants, Aaron identified *'hen parties'* as exhibiting particularly objectifying and stigmatising behaviour that can make men feel unsafe – not at all limited to Bears and a common complaint amongst LGBTQ people in the UK and elsewhere (Baldor, 2019; see for example Buchanan, 2014; Hensher, 2002; Jones, 2018; Jones & Essig, 2022; Kelleher, 2022). This kind of behaviour will naturally contribute to men feeling more alarmed and uncomfortable when they see groups of women in particular in Bear spaces in the future. Is that a hen party? Will they act like that hen party did? But aside from the issue of behaviour, groups of women inherently challenge the critical mass of Bear/y bodies which in Chapters 3 and 4 I argued must be achieved to make Bear spaces feel safe and comfortable (see also McGlynn, 2022c). Some participants themselves articulated precisely this dynamic:

Rex: I don't like bringing **groups** of straight women into Bear spaces, I think it's inappropriate. I have brought **singular** women with me, the odd time… You've been out for a night out with a mix of people and you've ended up in Bear spaces and there's been **a** woman in the group, gay or straight. [But] it just doesn't feel right I think, you and a **gang** of your straight or gay female friends descending on a Bear space, it doesn't sit right with me.

Edinburgh interview 3, my emphasis

Rex's explanation shows that there are women in UK Bear spaces at some times, in a way that is not framed as problematic – he has brought some *'singular women', 'a woman'*, to them himself. Other Bearspace participants also described bringing female friends to Bear spaces, and I've done so myself too. But more importantly, Rex openly distinguishes between *'singular women'* (*'the odd time'*, anyway), and a *'gang'* of women *'descending'* on the space. It's the numbers that matter, because the critical mass of Bear/y bodies that makes a space a Bear/y space – a space that is comfortable by bigger and fatter guys – can be quite easily disrupted:

Robin: I think if you identify as a woman then I don't understand why you'd want to be involved with a group of men who want to hang out with other men, it just doesn't make sense to me at all. Not because I wish to exclude someone, but because I don't understand why you'd want to go to a space for people that aren't you… There only needs to be half a dozen women or straight people in the bar before the entire dynamic of the space begins to change… You just think, well…

Jonathan: Not really sure why you're here!

Robin: Yeah! Why are you here? You're changing the dynamic of the space to one where I don't feel safe!

Brighton focus group

In this excerpt from Brighton Robin suggests that the critical mass that makes and maintains a Bear space can be disrupted by even a relatively small number of people, just *'half a dozen women or straight people in the bar'*. The consequence of this is that the *'entire dynamic of the space'* and its safety for men with bigger bodies changes quite quickly *'to one where I don't feel safe'*. Robin does rope in *'straight people'* more widely here – he's not just talking about women – but as I've argued previously straight men are less immediately visible in Bear/y spaces and are assumed to not want to be present, while women (straight or not) are hyper-visible in most Bear/y spaces. Consequently, and often through absolutely no fault of their own, the mere **presence** of groups of women in Bear/y spaces can make men feel uncomfortable as that feeling that the space is a Bear/y space – a space where bigger and fatter guys can at last feel OK about their bodies – has been disrupted.

In Hartless' research which I used in Chapter 4 to conceptualise Bear/y spaces, straight people in LGBTQ spaces appear *'fine in theory, but often problematic in practice'* (Hartless, 2019:1045). The LGBTQ patrons featured in Hartless' and others' research describe anxiety and discomfort around straight cisgender people in queer spaces despite their not doing anything 'wrong' – instead their mere presence is felt to disrupt what I would describe as both a critical mass of queer people and associated affective atmospheres.

Research on UK LGBT communities has similarly noted the importance of majorities of LGBT people in LGBT spaces to create 'safety in numbers', and discussed how the *'invasion'* of LGBT spaces by cisgender heterosexual people can make the former feel uncomfortable – even when the latter are, again, not actually doing anything wrong (Formby, 2017:70–72, 128–132). This is not to say that there is a hard line which should (or even can) be drawn. As the Bear literature and my data show, Bear spaces are already populated by a variety of bodies. But it seems important to me to consider how disruption of a critical mass of Bear/y bodies occurs, and what effects this might have on one of the rare spaces in which fat GBQ men get to feel safe, comfortable, and desirable (McGlynn, 2022a).

"That's different, that's just socialising" – women in different kinds of Bear spaces

Throughout this book I've tried to stress the importance of taking a geographic approach that challenges universal claims about Bears and that acknowledges and examines how 'Bear' manifests differently in different spaces. So I do want to conclude this chapter on the gendered boundaries of UK Bear spaces by offering some qualification and complication with regard to what I've discussed already. Through my own experiences and discussions from the Bearspace dataset I've noted that there **are** women in UK Bear spaces and that this is not always seen as a problem by the GBQ men using them. This can be about numbers of women small enough that the critical mass of Bear/y bodies needed to achieve and maintain an atmosphere of comfort regarding marginalised bigger and fatter bodies is not disrupted. But it can also be about the kind of Bear space women are in. In Chapter 4, 'Bear Venues', I outlined some of the different kinds of Bear spaces and the kinds of activities that happen in them, highlighting the ephemerality of these in the UK and the lack of fixed Bear spaces. These differences between Bear spaces have relevance when we're talking about the boundaries to women's presence. In the previous section I drew on Timothy's reflections as a self-described 'superchub', and his feelings of being uncomfortable at the thought of women being in the Bear space where he might be taking his top off and dancing. But later in the focus group he qualified this:

Timothy: I think it depends on the space or the event that's happening.
Levi: Yeah that's a good point.
Timothy: If it's a club night where guys are getting drunk, they're dancing, they're shirtless, they're making out with each other and things like that, I think that's where it should be a night where people feel comfortable. [But] there's some bars where you just have a drink… [If] a woman comes into that, or someone brings a [female] friend into that, then… That's different, that's just socialising. When it becomes more that this is a Bear event and people are shirtless or having a dance etcetera, that's when I think…

Manchester focus group

The main kinds of Bear spaces that Timothy was concerned about regarding women's presence were spaces like *'a club night'* at which *'guys are getting drunk, they're dancing, they're shirtless, they're making out with each other'*. Spaces where bodies – through movement, exposure, activity, and the desire to feel desirable – are more visible and thus, for men with stigmatised bodies, vulnerable. It's naturally in such spaces that the need to maintain the sense that this is a Bear space – and thus safer and more comfortable for bigger and fatter guys like Timothy – is felt with greater urgency. The sexuality that Timothy foregrounds here is also an important factor in these clubbing spaces. Many (not all) men in are in these spaces to feel attractive, perhaps to find sexual partners, and even to engage in sexualised activities in the spaces themselves too. When so much of the stigmatisation of fatness revolves around the idea of fat people as sexually repulsive (Hester & Walters, 2016), particularly for GBQ men (Berry, 2007; Blotcher, 1998; Gough & Flanders, 2009; Holden, 2019; Joy & Numer, 2018; McGrady, 2016; Mosher, 2001; Robinson, 2016; Whitesel, 2014), I don't think we should overlook the liberatory potential of big lads getting to feel sexy in Bear spaces.

But there are other kinds of Bear spaces (e.g. *'bars'*) where bodies are not so exposed, and *'that's different, that's just socialising'*. Timothy and Levi appeared much more amenable to women's presence in these kinds of spaces. In this excerpt Timothy does follow Rex's line of thinking in talking about just a singular female *'friend'* rather than a group – but in other kinds of Bear spaces with more of a social element and less exposure or visibility of the fatness of bodies, groups of women were not only accepted but even welcomed and celebrated. I've been in several Bear bars – both in the UK – where myself and the other guys present had a lot of fun with the significant numbers of women present. Though the Bearspace project didn't itself capture data from any such non-ephemeral Bear spaces there were still sites where women's presence was seen as a positive:

Jonathan: When we were at the Bear picnic there was Twinks there, there was women there, it felt very inclusive. It felt like everyone was welcome… I think anybody could have just walked in, which they did. So it was good.

Brighton interview 3

Jonathan is discussing the Brighton Bear Weekend's 'Garden Party' – the site I was discussing in my very first quote in this chapter. This was at the open-air event in the middle of the day, held in in a small public park and featuring food tents, merchandise stalls, and a cabaret stage, with tables and chairs laid out. Though there were volunteers with branded t-shirts collecting donations at the park entrance there was no attempt to keep anyone out. And, as

I initially noted and as Jonathan has further detailed here, there were indeed plenty of women at the event. Jonathan was one of the participants who said he'd have felt *'uncomfortable'* if there were women at one of the Brighton Bear Weekend's club nights – but in this different social and spatial context he specifically described women's presence as a positive element of inclusion. At the Garden Party, some guys were topless and flirting, but it was not the same kind of space or atmosphere as at, say, a Bear clubbing space. This latter is probably the kind of Bear space where men feel most vulnerable in terms of exposing the most stigmatised parts of their bodies (especially for fatter men) and of their ability to feel desirable (again, especially for fatter men). So it's in these particular Bear spaces that women can most disrupt this justifiably valued atmosphere of comfort for marginalised and stigmatised bigger, fatter, and older GBQ men simply through their perceptible presence. This distinction between the different kinds of Bear spaces and their atmospheres was explicitly drawn by the organisers of Brighton Bear Weekend:

Christian: With the Garden Party this year, we went out of the way to advertise it to the local community as well. We want it to be a place where Bears mix with other people… That's not to say we would have welcomed women at the [venue hosting a Bear club night that evening] or something.

Brighton interview 5

Neither Christian nor the other Brighton Bear Weekend organisers wanted to exclude people who weren't Bears from any of their spaces – in fact these organisers were highly conscious of the difficulties that would inevitably ensue if they tried to strictly define 'Bear' as a category (see Chapters 2 and 3). With regard to the Garden Party specifically, Christian stressed that he and the others *'went out of the way'* to invite the *'local community'* to the Garden Party – and in the rest of his discussion he made it clear that what he was referring to here wasn't just Brighton's wider LGBTQ community but people who lived in the vicinity of the park, and indeed Brighton & Hove in general. As Jonathan had intuited, the aim was to create a Brighton Bear Weekend space which was inclusive regardless of LGBTQ status or gender. Here we see an example of a UK Bear/y space without gendered boundaries and in which women's presence isn't just tolerated but actively solicited and welcomed. But this wasn't the case for all Brighton Bear Weekend spaces. As Christian went on to explain, women would not have been *'welcomed'* at the club night later that evening. Unlike the open-air Garden Party, this club night featured many topless men (myself included) drinking and dancing, some men in fetishwear, and an impromptu darkroom created via some camo netting that suggested at least the possibility of casual sexual activity going on behind it. I'm not sure what would have happened if women had tried to attend this space. Perhaps – as I've seen occur at other Bear/y club nights – they might have

been warned by door staff about what kind of night it was and who it was for, in the hope that they might be dissuaded from attending. Regardless of what might have happened, Christian's discussion shows that UK Bear space organisers do envisage and produce distinctions between the Bear spaces they create, and that these distinctions relate to who they feel should and should not be present. Gendered boundaries are less present or desired in Bear/y spaces which are felt to be more social and with less bodily vulnerability – open-air events and bars for instance – while they are more present and more desired in those Bear/y spaces which may be more sexualised and with more bodily performance and exposure.

"Why are you here?" – Bear spaces as non-exclusive men's spaces

The politics of all of this seems fraught, to put it mildly. It's one thing to say that women who actively objectify and mock bigger and fatter GBQ guys aren't welcome in Bear spaces. But to say that women and especially groups of women aren't welcome in Bears' clubbing spaces because their very presence – no matter how well-intentioned and well-behaved they are – makes these guys uncomfortable should make us all, well, uncomfortable. It certainly makes me uncomfortable. And it certainly made some participants uncomfortable too. Guys like Timothy, Ben, Rex, Kevin, Jonathan, and others questioned themselves about the politics of excluding women during their individual interviews asking '*Why is my back getting up?*' (Ben) and '*Is [it] OK? I don't know to be honest*' (Jonathan). Other participants flat-out stated that maintaining Bear spaces as men's spaces was wrong and emblematic of GBQ men's misogyny – such as Scott who insisted that *'these spaces that are just male are breeding grounds for toxic masculine behaviour'* and declared his preference for *'spaces that are mixed in gender'* – while others tried to consider both sides:

> *Guy:* A friend recently made a post on Facebook [about] how they wanted to start a Bear night that would be more inclusive, so it could be femme Bears or whoever, women, anyone, who could go. I started to think, "Is a Bear-only night a good thing?". I'm undecided to be honest with you… A men-only space [can] 'cause behaviours that perhaps I don't like or I don't think are right. But perhaps they still play an important role, [so] there's an option there for people to go where there are people that they feel comfortable with, and they feel they're attracted to.

Manchester interview 6

Guy had been discussing how he was somewhat on the outskirts of Manchester's Bear/y scene, and here he explained that his feelings regarding their gendered boundaries was part of the reason for this. Guy questioned the politics

of men-only spaces while also considering that *'perhaps they still play an important role'* in supporting bigger GBQ men's feelings of comfort and desire.

To explain my own (uncomfortable) thoughts about all of this, I want to take a second look at the earlier excerpt between Robin and Jonathan. In addition to discussing the changed dynamic of the space, Robin says: *'I don't understand why you'd want to be involved with a group of men who want to hang out with other men, it just doesn't make sense to me at all. Not because I wish to exclude someone, but because I don't understand why you'd want to go to a space for people that aren't you… Why are you here?'*. I felt at the time and still feel now that there was a genuine sense of confusion there, a lack of comprehension about why women would want to come to a Bear space – *'a space for people that aren't you'*. The lack of comprehension may be tinged with suspicion of course – Robin was one of those who'd identified mockery from hen parties and a feeling of being objectified by straight women in LGBTQ spaces as one reason for preferring Bear spaces. So rather than reading his final question – *'Why are you here?'* – as an **accusation**, I think it might be worth reading it seriously **as a real question** that would be worth answering.

A digression. Where I live, in Brighton, there's a popular club night which, though they don't exclude anyone from attending, is explicitly created by and for queer women. A few years ago, a female friend told me that she and other queer women were frustrated that so many queer men had started to turn up at the night. It wasn't that men couldn't come, she explained, but that when they turned up in numbers it inevitably didn't feel like a women's space anymore – and, she reminded me, there are already so few queer women's spaces not just in the city but throughout the West (Gieseking, 2020; Lindsay, 2022; Mattson, 2022). I admit that I was annoyed by this at the time. Brighton, despite the large number of LGBTQ people here[2] and the city's reputation as the 'gay capital' of the UK (Browne & Bakshi, 2013), was and is not exactly overflowing with places for queer people to go and dance. But, after venting with a couple of gay male friends who also enjoyed this club night, we had to agree that we needed to get more comfortable with the idea that not every space we could go to was for us. And that even if we enjoyed it, if it was making those queer women who the space **was** for less comfortable, then it wasn't really a huge imposition for to us to just **not go**. After all what were we really missing out on? A few drinks and a dance? Not the end of the world.

This isn't an identical analogy – given the ongoing history of women's spatial exclusion, encouraging men to exclude themselves from a women's social space surely reads somewhat differently to encouraging women to exclude themselves from a men's space. But in the latter case I think we could consider specifically what kind of men's space we are talking about, and which men specifically we are talking about. Queer studies scholars, geographers of sexualities and others have noted and empathised with LGBTQ+ people's concerns over the presence of straight cisgender people in ostensibly LGBTQ+ spaces, which can result in more marginalised and less homonormatively

acceptable LGBTQ+ people feeling alienated and LGBTQ+ people in general feeling threatened or pushed out (Hartless, 2019; Matejskova, 2007). Now Bears have been characterised as a particularly homonormative group (Hennen, 2008:131) who easily assimilate into mainstream society (Fritcher, 2001; Hill, 1997; Manley et al., 2007; Sullivan, 2003; Wright, 1997b:5–8). Bears are almost exclusively men. Bears are predominantly cis, and predominantly white. With such privileges at play it may seem ludicrous to posit that GBQ men in Bear spaces may similarly feel threatened and alienated by women's presence in Bear spaces.

But there are other common features of Bears which are highly marginalised in everyday life and in LGBTQ communities and cultures. When we are talking (as we so often are in the UK) of big guys, fat guys, many with significant experiences of anti-fat abuse, who feel alienated and uncomfortable in mainstream LGBTQ spaces (Gough & Flanders, 2009; McGlynn, 2022a, 2022c; McGrady, 2016), often older (Kucera, 2001; Riley, 2016; Slevin & Linneman, 2010), often with mental health issues (Blotcher, 1998; Mass, 2001), and seeking somewhere to feel comfortable and desirable (McGlynn, 2022a, 2022c; McGrady, 2016), then surely the need to maintain these spaces in a way that supports such men becomes more understandable through an intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989; see also Cho et al., 2013) and feminist geographic (Rose, 1997; Valentine, 2007) lens. Such a lens would take into account the specificity of the empirical situations and lived experiences at hand, and the unique disadvantages that can be faced by those at the intersection of multiple marginalisations – even when multiple privileges are also in play. And so if, as I think I've demonstrated in this book and elsewhere, Bear spaces offer valuable sites of comfort and inclusion for these marginalised bigger, fatter, and older GBQ men, so often excluded from mainstream LGBTQ spaces and scenes, then I can see a case not for exclusion, but rather for inviting those who could disrupt this more comfortable and inclusive atmosphere to consider what it might mean for them to attend. This, I hope, need not be an argument or a fight but a genuine and mutually supportive reflective questioning. Such a questioning might have us consider the following:

- Why do I want to go to this Bear space?
- What would I lose by not going to this space?
- Do I think the idea of Bear spaces as safe, comfortable and inclusive spaces for bigger, fatter, hairier GBQ men has any merit?
- If so, do I think my entering this might space compromise that feeling of safety, comfort and inclusion?
- If so, what's my response to this? Do I still want to go to the space?
- If so, can I signal that I'm supportive of bigger, fatter and hairier GBQ men's body inclusivity and sexuality?

GBQ men would also benefit from questioning ourselves along similar lines when we want to go to women's spaces, lesbian spaces and so on! And there's

a corollary for men in Bear/y spaces too, to ask ourselves some genuine questions when women attend or want to attend, such as:

- Do I agree that women experience sexist exclusion and marginalisation?
- If so, might my desire to have a men's space be grounded in sexism?
- Are the women actively doing anything to discomfort me or others, and are they present in such numbers as to challenge the atmosphere of the space as comfortable for bigger, fatter, hairier GBQ men?
- If not, is it really a big problem for them to be here?

These questions aren't a programme for action – I don't expect door staff to be handing out questionnaires to would-be attendees! – but they are real suggestions for how we might maintain Bear spaces as non-exclusive men's spaces. This is an approach to a difficult spatial politics that acknowledges the complexity of socio-spatial power relationships involved (e.g. in this case, that it is not as simple as 'men vs women'), and that isn't grounded in patriarchal territoriality or sexist exclusion but a shared desire to maintain spaces that are comfortable for different marginalised groups (e.g. in this case, for GBQ men with stigmatised bodies).

Conclusion to Bear boundaries

Out of all the boundaries of Bear/y spaces it's the gendered boundaries that I've avoided throughout the rest of this book, and thus chosen to devote this penultimate chapter to. Women in UK Bear spaces – and there are women in these spaces – were regularly felt to be a problem by the GBQ men (both cis and trans) in them. The root of this problem, as expressed by participants, did not appear to be only or even primarily a matter of misogyny. In some instances it could be due to past experiences of mockery and objectification from women in Bear/y or LGBTQ spaces, leading to a degree of suspicion and fear of encountering similar behaviour again. But more troublingly, women's mere presence could also be seen as a problem. Women are usually hyper-visible in Bear spaces and not automatically assumed to share body-inclusive attitudes. Their presence can also disrupt the critical mass of Bear/y bodies needed to achieve a Bear space (e.g. one that feels comfortable and safe for bigger, fatter and hairier GBQ men). But different types of Bear spaces could be seen as less problematic (e.g. purely social spaces) or more problematic (e.g. clubbing spaces which could be more sexualised and with more exposure of bodies).

This has been a difficult chapter to write. As I said at the beginning of it, I wouldn't have guessed that I'd end up arguing in favour of Bear spaces as men's spaces when I first started the project! My suggestion – that we can and should maintain Bear spaces as men's spaces without actually barring women, through inviting women wishing to attend to consider the impact of their presence (and men present to consider the impact of excluding women) – will no

doubt be viewed by some as sexist exclusion by the back door. Ask women to exclude themselves instead – genius! Well yes, it is **asking**. There are and will continue to be women present in many Bear spaces. But when there's no compelling reason (and getting pissed and dancing aren't the most compelling), at times it may be worth **choosing not to go** to a space which, while technically open to us, is nevertheless created by and for a specific marginalised group of which we are not a part. If we can accept that (in the UK at least) many Bear spaces are valuable in that they create a space of comfort and inclusion for those experiencing the *'double marginality'* (Hennen, 2008:131) of being GBQ men with bigger, fatter, hairier, and also older bodies, then it seems fair to encourage those who don't experience this specific form of marginalisation to think seriously about how their presence might disrupt such a space. I emphatically don't think that my argument or suggestion in this chapter can or should be applied identically to simply **any** men's space, nor an entirely different socio-spatial dynamic (e.g. non-disabled people wishing to attend specific disabled people's spaces, or white people wishing to attend specific East Asian people's spaces) – the **specificity** of the groups, the space, and the socio-spatial dynamic matters. There are also multiple other power relationships within men's spaces which necessarily complicate further. But I do think this chapter shows that men's spaces need not be always, entirely reactionary, and points to a way in which we might grapple with the politics of spatial inclusions and exclusions for different marginalised groups without simply establishing hard boundaries.

Notes

1 My friend has kindly given me permission to share this anecdote and my reflections on it.
2 The 2021 UK census indicates that more than 1 in 10 people in Brighton & Hove describe themselves as LGBTQ+, rising to more than 1 in 5 in some parts of the city (ONS, 2023c, 2023d).

7 Bear spatialities (Conclusion)

'Spatialities' is an awkward word, popular amongst many (by no means all!) academic Human Geographers while admittedly a bit jarring outside of that context. But at the end of the day this is a book heavily grounded in Geography as a discipline, and so it's to spatialities that I want to return here at the end. When I say something is 'spatial' I mean that it's about space – where things are, what the relationships between them are, why these arrangements matter, and how these arrangements are created. 'Spatiality' we could then understand as the 'spatial-ness' of a phenomenon, the aspect of it that relates to space (see Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Soja, 1996:53–82). And 'spatialities', in turn, suggests the **multiple** ways in which a phenomenon can be spatial, can relate to where things are and how sites are made.

In this book I've aimed to show how we can use geographic thinking to grapple with the spatialities of 'Bear' as a phenomenon. My organisation of chapters has consequently taken a roughly scalar approach moving from internal identities to the space of the body, then to Bear spaces themselves and up to the national level of different cities. The final thematic chapter took on the more general and permeating gendered boundaries of Bears and Bear spaces.

And so in Chapter 2, 'Bear Identifications', I argued against the conceptualisation of 'Bear' as an individual identity. Using data from the Bearspace dataset I showed that Bear identifications – in the UK at least – appear highly ambivalent and men's connections with Bear cultures, communities, scenes and spaces both contextual and nebulous. 'Bear' appeared to be a convenient and comfortable label which men would often decide to simply 'go with', rather than an actively chosen or strongly internalised identity – and was seen as positive and useful for its convenience. This has clear implications for how we understand those who are in Bear spaces, so that it's just not the case that everyone in them 'identifies as a Bear' or is particularly ideologically aligned with some larger Bear culture. Working with the idea of the body as *'the geography closest in'* (Longhurst, 1994), I showed that bodily appearance is the instinctual primary means through which people are categorised as Bears or not, with 'attitude' as a supplementary element to widen (or restrict)

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the category when desired. Arguing that we could define Bear as a loose conceptual category based primarily but not exclusively on Bodies, I showed how attending to bodies helps explain why men were ambivalent about 'being a Bear', but felt it important that they 'fit in' to Bear as a category and amongst others in Bear spaces.

In Chapter 3, 'Bear Bodies', I further explored the significance of a body-focused approach to Bears and Bear spaces. Using bodies to define Bears could be seen as highly restrictive, but I began the chapter by showing just how much ambiguity and flexibility is incorporated within the idea of Bear bodies. I then introduced and began to think seriously about less clear-cut and more deliberately ambiguous terms used to grapple with this looseness ('Bear-ish', 'Bear-esque', 'Bear-y', etc.), which the sheer looseness of the Bear category makes particularly compelling as an analytic concept. I also posited my own new term 'Bear/y' as a conceptual tool for emphasising this inherent looseness and ambiguity.

I argued that bodies are central to both fitting into Bear as a category, and also to fitting into Bear communities and spaces. This was not a matter of individual bodies, but rather similarities and differences between the other bodies in a space. This in turn meant that certain bodies – such as bodies racialised as non-White – could be more marginalised in Bear spaces. I also used geographic scholarship which treats the body as a space or a set of spaces, to explore in more minute detail just what kinds of bodies most easily fall into the 'Bear' category. Concentrating on particular locations like bellies, the interplay or 'intra-action' of different body tissues, and the action or 'performativity' of flesh, I showed that the differences between Bear bodies (and others) are more than just a matter of 'fat vs thin'.

In Chapter 4, 'Bear Venues', I moved 'up' the scale to describe and explain UK Bear bars, pubs, clubs, events, and social groups – the spaces created by and for Bears. One of the clearest findings was the lack of fixed and self-identified Bear spaces of any variety in the UK, with temporary and ephemeral spaces as the norm and yet a desire for more fixed spaces and the social opportunities they provided did exist. But I also explored common assumptions of Bear spaces as structured around masculinity, suggesting that this appeared less prevalent in UK Bear venues than one might assume from the Bear literature. Finally, I at last attempted to answer the question which I had asked Bearspace participants – 'What makes a space a Bear space'? Explicit signs, symbols and labels were significant, as well as the expectation of a relaxed 'atmosphere', and the presence of a sufficient number – a 'critical mass' – of bodies which could fall into the Bear category. Because the category of 'Bear' is (per Chapters 2 and 3) primarily a bodily one and yet also notably loose and unstable, I suggested applying the term 'Bear/y' to spaces as well as bodies to address their consequent conceptual instability.

Moving on to Chapter 5, 'Bear Cities', I moved up the scale again to highlight not just inter- but intra-national geographic variation amongst UK Bear scenes and spaces. I noted in particular the long shadow that London cast

over the dataset, but against a wider context in which London's LGBTQ+ spaces become normalised as the default in the UK, I instead argued that London's Bear/y spaces and scenes should be understood as the exception, the outlier, with those of smaller cities more the norm. The former, I showed, were linked with the perception of negative attitudes and with trim and muscular bodies; the latter were almost entirely ephemeral spaces and were instead linked with atmospheres of friendly socialising and with a wide variety of different body types and identifications. Developing the idea of the 'critical mass' from the previous chapter, here I suggested that a city's population size is a key factor in how its Bear spaces manifest.

Finally in Chapter 6, 'Bear Boundaries', I finally engaged with the gendered boundaries and exclusions of Bear spaces. Against my initial expectation that this was a matter of sexist antipathy and patriarchal territoriality, my analysis of the Bearspace dataset revealed that many participants had experienced stigmatising and objectifying behaviour from women in both LGBTQ and Bear/y spaces. But in addition to this, I've argued that even when women in Bear/y spaces were not doing anything 'wrong' they could still be perceived as a problem – this was due to their perceived disruption of the critical mass of Bear/y bodies that would make a space feel safe and comfortable for the men present. Consequently I suggested that both women wishing to visit Bear/y spaces **and** the men in them would benefit from reflecting on what it would mean for women to attend, in a spirit of genuine and mutual generosity.

Aside from my contributions to our knowledge of UK Bear spaces in each chapter, across the book as a whole I've also introduced and utilised what I see as three more general interventions relating to the study of Bears and Bear cultures, communities, scenes, and their spatialities. These are intended to serve as potentially useful new conceptual tools or approaches for future Bear scholars.

The first of these is my use of the deliberately ambiguous term '**Bear/y**'. In the book's previous chapters I've highlighted the need to grapple with the inescapable ambiguities of 'Bear', these ambiguities emerging throughout the entire dataset. I introduced some of the casual terms – 'Bear-y', 'Bear-ish', 'Bear-adjacent', etc. – used by participants and also myself, in my own everyday unfiltered language as recorded in discussions with participants and in my auto/ethnographic notes. I don't think we can take such terms to simply express a diluted, partial version of pure and complete 'Bear' status – my analysis of the Bearspace dataset as well as the wider Bear literature makes it clear that there is no purity, no completion to the Bear category. These terms don't simply refer to the outskirts or edges of the Bear category, but to the category as a whole. 'Bear' is always, already, diluted and partial. While within the contemporary context of UK Bear spaces there is an appearance (primary) + attitude (supplementary) dynamic at work in the conceptualisation of people and places as 'Bear' (see Chapter 2), both of these elements are underdetermined, as is the category itself. All three vary very considerably

(albeit not infinitely). Those in Bear/y spaces are thus using a variety of terms to grapple with and express the inherent ambiguity and lack of specificity that they understand to exist regarding 'Bear'. Some might see this as a kind of undesirable dilution or even corruption of Bear spaces and of Bear as a phenomenon. And as I've shown in my other writings on Bears and Bear spaces (McGlynn, 2021, 2022a) and in this book I think there is genuine value to Bear, so I'm not unsympathetic. But in areas like the UK 'Bear/yness' also part of how Bear as a phenomenon is (per Butler's [1990, 2012] work on performativity) constantly reproduced and in fact sustained – albeit with little tweaks, changes, failures, adaptations, and innovations over time (see Morris, 2009).

Some readers will have clocked, through my use of phrases (perhaps trigger words!) like 'always already', that my approach to the 'Bear' category and my movement towards Bear/y is one grounded in poststructural philosophy and social theory. Such scholarship critically interrogates systems of meaning based on pure binary categories, reveals these categories' instability and impurity, and studies their impacts on the world (Howarth, 2013; Murdoch, 2006; Whatmore, 2002; see also Peter Salmon's [2020] biography of Jacques Derrida for an excellent introduction to the origins of poststructuralist thought). Certainly one way of understanding this conceptual shift from simply 'Bear spaces' to 'Beary', 'Bearish' 'Bear-adjacent' and 'Bear/y' spaces is through a return to poststructural queer scholarship that has shown the inadequacy of imagining sexual categories like 'straight', 'lesbian', 'gay', 'bisexual', and 'trans' to be fixed and stable (Butler, 2012; Hostetler & Herdt, 1998; Jackson, 2009; Muñoz, 1999; Valocchi, 2005). Similarly with regard to Bear/y spaces, geographic scholarship on 'queering space' has questioned the simple conceptualisation of particular sites as 'straight', as 'gay', as 'LGBTQ', etc. (e.g. Browne, 2004; Browne & Bakshi, 2011; Browne & Nash, 2010; Nash, 2013). Hartless' (2019) recent work on *'questionably queer'* spaces, for example, investigates this and the contemporary tendency for LGBTQ spaces to be 'mixed' or 'LGBTQ-friendly', and aims to conceptualise queer space beyond simplistic and inaccurate queer/straight or queer/homonormative binaries. Hartless' careful work demonstrates the non-viability of describing a space as either LGBTQ or straight, and could be used to provide a better conceptualisation of Bear spaces which in truth are never and can never be fully and totally 'Bear', or 'non-Bear' (as some of my work has presented them in the past, e.g. McGlynn, 2021, 2022a). As Hartless and other geographers of sexualities have argued, spaces *'cannot easily be classified as queer or heteronormative'* (Hartless, 2019:1036), and similarly I hope I've shown the great difficulties and complexities involved in trying to classify spaces as Bear spaces due to the inherent uncertainty of Bear as a category.

'Bear/y' is my attempt to mark this uncertainty. This term isn't intended to replace 'Bear', and to be honest I'm not fussy about the terms others might choose to use to express the inherent instability, contingency, partiality, and

impurity of 'Bear'. In fact per my poststructural interrogation of the term and category (particularly in Chapters 2 and 3) I suggest that Bear and Bear/y are already conceptually close – that is, 'Bear' is always already deconstructing as it's thought, as it's articulated, as it's performed, so that there is never an essential stability or certainty to it. Why not stick with 'Bear' or the simpler 'Beary', then? Well, I use 'Bear/y' not for the sake of a bit of 'academese' jargon, nor as a sop for Critical Theorists or Queer Theorists. I feel that using the specific configuration of 'Bear/y' really brings this instability and ambiguity – always present – to the forefront of our minds. It's a configuration conceptual to the deconstruction of Bear – that is, *'to mark it, to note its undecidability and explore its complex interplay'* (Salmon, 2020:81). It's a reminder for us to always hold in question what we think 'Bear' is, who 'Bear' is referring to, what functions 'Bear' performs, and consequently it demands that we address the empirical ambiguity and nebulosity of UK Bear scenes. So my conceptualisation of what 'Bear' means is emphatically not about shutting down meanings or suggesting that my approach (not definition) is the only relevant one. And it is certainly not to say that it is universal – I suggest that it emerges from and has particular force and utility in its geographic (UK, with temporary and ephemeral Bear spaces and smaller populations) and historical (distance from limited Bear media and originators, challenges to masculinities, postmodern social fragmentation) moment. So Bear/y instead aims to open up and critically explore more meanings.

The second overarching intervention is a pivot in focus from conceiving of Bear as pertaining to individual identities, towards the production of Bear via **a critical mass of bodies**. This is a significant departure from how both sexuality and gender are most often discussed in the UK context as well as that of the wider Anglosphere, within which the question of how one 'identifies' or what one's 'identity' can appear as the hallmark of progressive and inclusive LGBTQ-supporting politics, activism, and personal expression (D'Emilio, 2002; Lehring, 1997:118; Rahman & Jackson, 1997:119). Even 'queer' itself, originally articulated as an anti-identitarian approach to sexualities (Beasley, 2005:164–168; Browne et al., 2007; Browne & Nash, 2010; Butler, 1997; Gamson, 1995), can at times become leashed into a kind of contemporary identity politics, as just another letter on the abbreviation or even as an identity itself (for example see Miller et al., 2016; Worthen, 2023). To focus on bodies instead of identities is often linked to anti-LGBTQ politics, e.g. those articulating reproductive heterosexuality as normal and biologically intended (with non-heterosexuality thus a rebellion against nature) (Baker, 2004; Browne et al., 2018; Rubin, 1993), and binary 'biological sexes' as clearly bounded, simple and innocent facts (with trans lives as a conceptual impossibility) (Hines, 2010:6; Pearce et al., 2020; Serrano, 2007). My approach to Bears stands in opposition both to mainstream LGBTQ-supportive articulations of sexuality (and gender) as primarily matters of identity, **and** to anti-LGBTQ articulations of bodies as biological destiny. Instead, it's heavily aligned with anti-identitarian queer politics and scholarship in that it

repudiates the supposed significance of Bear-as-identity and the self-evident nonsense that one could be 'biologically' a Bear (*Ursidae* notwithstanding), and focuses rather on practices (e.g. what are people doing, what are the bodies present, what is actually happening). Per this approach, the question I've been asked so much over the past 5 years – 'What is a "Bear"?' – probably isn't a particularly useful one. But questions like 'What does "Bear" **do**?' and 'Who is **in** "Bear" spaces?' might be. For many Bear is merely a convenient slot to fit themselves or others into, a label to describe yourself or others as in order to organise (mentally and practically) GBQ men's lives and to facilitate certain experiences in certain spaces. I say 'merely', as though implying it's not important. And on the one hand, yes, I think it's right to say that neither the category itself nor wider Bear culture is particularly important to many, even most, of the guys in UK Bear spaces. But on the other hand there's nothing 'mere' about getting to feel comfortable and accepted, attractive, about socialising and making friends, particularly for GBQ guys who don't often get to feel any of this. In all of these discussions it's bodies that are the most consistently significant element for understanding Bear communities, scenes and spaces – 'identities' pale in comparison.

Central to understanding this significance is the idea of the 'critical mass'. When enough bodies perceived to be of a particular type (e.g. sufficiently Bear/y) are together in a space, so that this type appears to be in the overwhelming majority, an undetermined threshold is crossed and a critical mass of those bodies is achieved. I briefly used this term in Chapter 3 (Bear Bodies) to help show why distinctions between bigger, fatter and hairier bodies become more relevant in Bear spaces than mainstream LGBTQ spaces (see also McGlynn, 2022c). In Chapter 4 (Bear Venues) I took up the term to explain how Bear spaces can be produced or created, 'Bearing' space by getting enough Bear/y bodies there together that they constitute an undeniable and thus empowered majority. In Chapter 5 I noted that this critical mass can be disrupted by (in this case) large numbers of trim muscular bodies, challenging bigger men's comfort and the perception of the site as a Bear space. Recognising the importance of achieving a critical mass of Bear/y bodies helps understand differences amongst Bear spaces across the UK, and the spatial politics of inclusion/exclusion in and around them. Finally, I developed the idea of disruption to the critical mass in Chapter 6 (Bear Boundaries). Here the disruptive bodies were those of women, and the spatial politics an intensely gendered one. I argued that it was this disruption of the comfort and safety afforded by the critical mass (an overwhelming majority) of bodies, in addition to at times plain old misogyny, that results in the desire to maintain Bear spaces as men's spaces. This distinguishes my pivot to bodies from individualising accounts that can treat bodies in isolation from environments, critiqued by feminist and queer Geographers (De Craene, 2017; Longhurst & Johnston, 2014; Nast & Pile, 1998). The centrality of the critical mass for Bears reveals that it's not simply one's own individual body that's important, but the various relations between and amongst the multiple different

proximate bodies (e.g. those present together in a space). Thinking about this critical mass and what happens when it's perceived to be disrupted them helps us think about the spatial politics of inclusion and exclusion, comfort and discomfort, in and around Bear/y spaces.

This leads into the third and final overarching intervention, threaded through all of the above – my **critique of universalising approaches** to Bears. While of course I hope that this book serves to augment existing scholarship on Bears at large, I also hope that it serves as a challenge to overly-simplistic generalisations of those described as Bears and those who go to Bear(/y) spaces, as well as generalisations of GBQ men and LGBTQ communities more widely. This anti-universalist stance stems from my focus on Geography throughout the research and the writing. For instance, the value of considering the spatialities of Bears is that this forces a serious consideration of whether what's happening at one site is the same as what's happening at another site (and at, potentially, another time). Throughout this book I've stressed that the answer is often no – what's happening at, say, a big London club associated with Bears is emphatically not the same as what's happening at a pub-based Bear meetup in Edinburgh. This might seem obvious, but these spatial distinctions are too rarely acknowledged or addressed in generalising accounts of 'the Bear community' or 'the Bear scene' in Bear literatures as well as in popular discussion. As such this intervention points to the need for future research investigating not just global or international variation in 'Bear' as a phenomenon, but intra-national variation too.

Another influence of Geography on my research has been my undertaking of fieldwork – that is, actually going to the spaces I'm talking about. A fieldwork approach has meant experiencing Bear/y spaces for myself and conducting the interview, focus group and auto/ethnographic data collection in situ, than relying solely on media representation or second-hand accounts. This isn't to say that the latter aren't important or reliable (as readers can see I make heavy use of this rich Bear literature throughout my work). And I'm of course not the first to conduct Bear-based fieldwork (see for example Hennen, 2008; McGrady, 2016). But by visiting a variety of sites located across the UK and doing the work of simply describing and recording what is actually happening in and around them, the differences between Bear/y spaces and amongst Bear/y guys are brought into relief, and the illusion of 'Bear' as a stable and coherent phenomenon melts away. I know that there are times when I fall into the trap of generalisation myself in this book and elsewhere, but I have tried to consistently highlight the UK-specific context of the research and to flag geographic variation at multiple scales – from bodies to venues and from venues to cities – all the way through. Consequently, speaking to areas of study including Fat Studies, Feminist Studies, Geographies of Sexualities, Men/Masculinity Studies, Queer Studies, Psychology, and Sociology, I've advocated for a greater theoretical and empirical engagement with the diverse but also specific spaces in and through which the lives of GBQ men life occur. I hope that the result is a growth in more, and more nuanced,

research on Bears – our lives, our spaces, and our communities – which resists generalising impulses and speaks instead to empirical complexity.

When I first pitched a Bearspace book, I remember thinking 'Ah, now I can finally set down **all** of my thoughts about Bears!'. I'm sure anyone who's written a non-fiction book is cracking a wry smile, knowing (as I now do) that even with tens of thousands of words at my disposal I've barely been able to scratch the surface! I hope that Bears, Bear/y guys, and those who go to UK Bear/y spaces will feel that this has been a worthwhile endeavour, that my representations and discussions resonate with their experiences, and that the book has helped us know our communities and our issues better. But I know many readers will justifiably be wondering why other crucial issues or elements relating to 'Bear', perhaps those closest to their hearts or which simply seem blatantly overlooked, haven't been covered in this book. Where, for example, are the experiences of older men? How do income and socio-economic class challenge access to and belonging in Bear/y spaces? What about mental health, alcohol abuse, and sexual health amongst Bears? My response is that, well, this was always a niche endeavour! I feel reasonably confident in describing Bearspace as the UK's largest study of Bear communities, and participants gifted me with a far richer and more wide-ranging dataset than I could have expected. As a result I've been able to explore 'Bear' from many angles in this book, in other research publications, and at academic conferences. So at times I've suspected that people imagine the project to have been bigger and more ambitious than it really was, and I've perhaps given that impression myself. But *Bearspace* was both designed and funded as a small pilot project, with a highly specific focus (e.g. the experiences of big and fat GBQ men in UK Bear spaces). I was the sole worker on the project, funded just enough to pay for my travel and accommodation at the different case study sites (plus snacks for participants – it wouldn't be a Bear project without the snacks!). Bearspace was never intended to be an all-encompassing survey of Bear life in the UK, let alone more widely. So I know myself that there are glaring gaps, and I'm more eager than anyone to see them filled. What we need moving into the future is more research on Bears from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, across different geographic areas and scales, and addressing under-explored issues relating to Bear/y lives, communities, cultures, scenes and spaces. In particular, while I've briefly discussed the specific experiences of GBQ men of colour and of trans GBQ men there's a real need for more detailed explorations of these.

I did say at the start that this book is neither a love letter to nor an indictment of Bears. But as I bring this book to the end, I want to say how much I **do** love Bears. As a big gay man in his early 40s, living in the UK outside of London, it really matters to me that these kinds of spaces exist and that they continue to exist. So bear-hugs to all the big (and big-hearted) beautiful men who took part in this research, and to those who didn't but who're reading this now. I'll see you on the dance floor – save me a sandwich!

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