# BIG, BEAUTIFUL AFFECT: EXPLORING THE EMOTIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF BBW SOCIAL EVENTS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO FAT WOMEN'S EMBODIMENT

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# Abstract

This dissertation examines the way fat women's experiences in and relationships to their bodies are shaped by the affective environment of Big Beautiful Woman (BBW) social events. Data from the researcher's autoethnographic explorations of BBW bashes and 12 interviews with fat women who attend BBW social events is analyzed using a theoretical framework that engages with feminist understandings of how power produces and exerts control over marginalized bodies, how violence is justified and enacted against marginalized communities/individuals, societal forces that influence the various ways fat women experience embodiment, and affective structures that work at a bodily level to shape our understanding of our world.

In her work examining fat activism, Charlotte Cooper (2016) identifies BBW subcultures as one of several "major sites for fat activism in the West" (p. 53). Additionally, BBW subculture has yet to be examined academically in any depth for its contributions to fat activist and body liberation efforts. This dissertation addresses that gap in both activist-oriented and academic research. Furthermore, the stories held within this dissertation reflect voices of fat women about their experiences as fat women, furthering significant efforts within fat studies to prioritize the creation of knowledge about fat people by fat people.

Participants shared BBW community experiences ranging from objectification by fat admirers, navigating diet culture in size-acceptance spaces and unabashedly exploring fat sexuality; however, a key finding of this research illustrates the centrality of fat community in fat women's efforts to build resilience against the ongoing trauma of fatphobia.

# Dedication

This dissertation is, first and foremost, dedicated to the BBW community; in particular, my home communities in Toronto, Ontario and Toledo, Ohio. While this dissertation reveals that no space is perfect, I continue to be ever-grateful to BBW group organizers and administrative staff who make a conscious and intentional effort to create safer spaces for fat people to build fat community, challenge societal myths of fatness, explore sexuality, and simply have fun. Relatedly, I also dedicate this dissertation to my village, many of whom I met on dance floors at BBW parties and bashes. Unwavering support from these radical fat babes ensured that throughout this sometimes harrowing PhD process, I continued to believe in myself and in the importance of my work, thus illustrating the central finding of this dissertation—fat community is crucial in efforts toward building resilience against the ongoing trauma of fatphobia.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

When I moved to Toronto in 2010, I was a 26-year-old budding fat activist interested in slowly and intentionally building community with people whose politics aligned with mine. About a year later I found Club Attitude, a Toronto BBW (Big Beautiful Woman) group and decided to join the Facebook page. At that point in my life I was still an avid partier, so I was excited to learn that Club Attitude hosted parties every couple of months. My imagination ran wild with dreams of dressing up and meeting hot people who would be attracted to me and dancing all night without worrying about becoming the butt of someone's joke. Wild, isn't it? What I considered to be everyday experiences for non-fat people was the content of my dreams as a fat woman who had spent much of her early 20s socializing in clubs where she never felt comfortable in her skin.

In June 2011, I walked through the doors of a dive bar on Danforth Avenue in the east end of Toronto. This was it—my first BBW event. I wore a black dress covered in tiny, white polka dots and a red flower in my hair. It seems so long ago now, but I distinctly remember feeling at ease in a way I never had at any bar or dance club. I mingled, sipped drinks, and danced the night away. Little did I know that this was the start of a journey during which I would eventually meet and develop strong relationships with other fat women and allies whose hearts and minds hold magic the likes of which I had never experienced before.

In general, BBW community events are body positive social spaces where fat people and their admirers and allies can gather to relax, dance, mingle, drink, eat

comfortably, and enjoy themselves. In June 2016, five years after that first party, I attended a BBW bash. BBW bashes are different from BBW parties. Parties are one-night affairs held every once in awhile, and bashes last anywhere from two days to an entire week. Bashes are held all over the United States and, at the time of this writing, there is one Canadian bash held in Niagara Falls each summer. The activities offered at bashes depend on the organizer, but often include some or all of the following: community-building sessions, education and learning sessions, pool parties, vendor fairs, themed parties, and dances.

Over the last nine years, there have been times when my relationship with the BBW community has been fraught with inner conflict. My feminist politics run counter to much of what I observed happening in BBW social spaces, both online and in person. Primarily, I was frustrated by these spaces that were overflowing with potential for fat liberation, but that ultimately put power over fat women's sexual subjectivity in the hands of men who admired and desired them. This particular feature of fat-specific social spaces has been critiqued by Samantha Murray (2005) who is skeptical of events that allow fat women to experience themselves as sexual subjects because the events are focused on beauty and attractiveness of female bodies as defined by men. I have never been able to keep my politics to myself—this was especially true when I was in my 20s and had the energy to argue—so I made a reputation for myself as a "difficult" woman. In fact, that's probably putting it lightly. In spite of all of this, I am happier to be a member of the BBW community now than I have ever been. Certain things haven't changed. BBW social spaces are simultaneously predicated on the values of acceptance while also being spaces in which there remains a strong undercurrent of

societal issues like misogyny, fatphobia,[1] racism, ableism and homophobia that loosely shape the atmosphere similarly to the way they significantly shape ideologies that organize broader society. But certain other things remain the draw, including a sense of fat community and the ability to feel "normal," as well as the education and community-building events offered at some bashes. I also still really like to let loose and party in a safer-for-me space every now and then.

Questions about the usefulness or necessity of these niche social spaces abound on social media. In 2017, a fat-accepting and fat-accommodating vacation destination in the Bahamas called "The Resort" was featured in the online version of People magazine. The owner of "The Resort," Jim King, decided to create this safe haven vacation spot for fat people after he witnessed the way fat vacationers were sometimes treated at regular resorts. In the discussion section of the People magazine post on Facebook, comments ranged from accolades for King and for fat people having the chance to vacation without worry, to people lamenting the fact that fat people exist at all. But most interesting were comments that either queried why such a space is needed (suggesting commenters were ignorant to the trauma fat people often experience in social settings), or expressed disappointment in a culture of fat hatred that makes fat-specific spaces necessary at all. Much like "The Resort," BBW parties and bashes offer options for fat people interested in addressing their experiences of social ostracism, shame, and isolation—experiences that often shape the lives of fat people in

[1] I have chosen to use the word fatphobia in this dissertation to communicate a hatred of fatness and fat people even though the root of the word—phobia—suggests a fear of fatness. I am using this term specifically because, at this time, it is widely recognized in discussions of anti-fat discrimination and attitudes. It is important to note that another term—fatmisia—is starting to appear more regularly in fat studies and fat activist work. Fatmisia refers to the hatred of fatness and fat people—the root word "misia" is "derived from the Greek misos, meaning hatred, dislike, or contempt" (Rinaldi et al., 2020, p. 37).

a society that pressures people to either remain thin or to continuously work to achieve thinness.

While they are promoted as spaces of size acceptance where people can feel comfortable in their skin, I eventually learned that some people left bashes feeling worse about themselves and I was curious about what contributed to these feelings. From that curiosity this dissertation was born. Around the time I started attending bashes, I was also engaging academically with affect theory and ideas around fat embodiment. My position in the BBW community has played a significant role in the development of my own fat embodiment and I wanted to use this dissertation to explore my and other fat women's body stories in relation to the BBW community with a specific focus on our experiences at bashes. Ultimately, the research presented in the following chapters aims to illustrate the impact of the affective environment of BBW bashes on fat women's experiences of embodiment.

I want to draw attention to use of the word "woman" throughout this dissertation. It's a loaded, complicated term that has, historically, been used to enact violence. It has also been used to organize through solidarity and reclamation. "Woman" is not a monolithic category, but feminism has a history of collapsing women under an umbrella that includes a wide range of experiences and intersections, including the experiences of trans men, trans women, non-binary, and gender non-conforming folks who (may) all have access to the category "woman" in different ways. It is my intention here to acknowledge that "woman" is a porous description and an unstable and open category containing many diversities and gender identifications. I do not use this language lightly, understanding this term can be contested. I examine various feminist texts in the

following chapters that gloss over a wide range of experiences and intersections by using the term “woman”; however, my use of the word both in recruiting participants and in the analysis presented in this dissertation intends to capture all and any experiences of and orientation toward a womanhood that is inclusive of anyone who navigates (or has navigated) this world as a woman. My use of the term woman as a gender category is inspired by queer and transgender theorists whose work rejects gender essentialism and the heteronormative gender binary (Butler, 1999; Feinberg, 1993; Halberstam, 2012; Mock, 2014; Serano, 2007).

## Contextualizing the Research

Charlotte Cooper (2016) refers to BBW culture as a “major site of fat activism in the West” (p. 53)—an assertion I consider in more depth in chapter five. But for now I will say that I suppose she is right insofar as the existence of spaces where fat people are given agency over their bodies, are allowed to feel free in their bodies, and to have experiences that are coded as “normal” by the broader culture is truly radical under the current anti-fat regime. This research builds on the ever-growing academic literature produced in fat studies by fat academics. Thus far, there has been no in-depth academic study of BBW community like what I have undertaken; however, in 2012, Rachel Colls published her study of LargeLife, a UK-based BBW group that held parties at a club in London. Colls (2012) attended four club nights, observed and interpreted social interaction, interviewed the owner of the group, and conducted informal interviews with attendees at each club night in the interest of exploring “what is accepted or acceptable in such a space, who or what is ‘doing’ the accepting and what the risks are for fat, female bodies and a re-framing of fatness more generally when

designating acceptance according to a particular space and to ‘an’ admiring audience” (Colls, 2012, p. 19). She reported that while BBW social events do offer people in the BBW community the “opportunity to be and admire fat away from discrimination, denigration and derision and in so doing experience their fatness and desire in new and previously impossible ways” (Colls, 2012, p. 33), they do not pose a significant challenge to fat discrimination, simply temporary respite from it. Noteworthy among her conclusions is that LargeLife is dominated by heterosexual and gendered dynamics that position fat women’s sexual subjectivity as reliant on the admiration and approval of men. Additionally, she found that some LargeLife members—the group’s owner included—were growing increasingly disenchanted by the proliferation of weight loss surgery as it was becoming more popular at the time, leading the group’s owner to suggest that she felt the purpose of LargeLife had shifted from a space where fat people could meet and celebrate their bodies to a space where pre- and post-op weight loss surgery patients came together for strength. I explore similar themes in this dissertation, but I do so through 12 in-depth interviews and autoethnography. Additionally, the lens through which I focus my research is more concerned with exploration of bash dynamics that either reinforce or liberate fat women from the trauma of fatphobia, a concept I use to capture the impact of repeated anti-fat cultural messaging—a hallmark of diet culture—on the mental, emotional, and physical health of fat people. This concept is explored in depth throughout the dissertation.

Primarily, this research is important because it allows fat people to tell their own stories. Both Charlotte Cooper (2016) and Cat Pausé (2012) have demonstrated that fat people are rarely at the helm of producing knowledge about fat embodiment—about

themselves and their lived realities. And as Pausé (2020) notes, “fat epistemology [is] the key to fat liberation” (p. 179). But let’s explore this further. Within the last decade, “obesity”[2] was very nearly added to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Marcus & Wildes, 2012). This is where we’re at, folks. Rich et al. (2010) cite the assemblage of “obesity” as constitutive of the emotional atmosphere that defines fatphobic discourse. A few examples of parts contributing to this assemblage include:

- medical pathologizing of fat bodies, from fatness being (incorrectly) labeled as the cause of various diseases and disorders to, as I mention above, fatness being considered for inclusion in a manual that is the principle authority for psychiatric diagnoses in the United States, the DSM-5
- medical professionals admitting they spend less time with fat patients and see them as lazy, undisciplined, and weak-willed (Phelan et al., 2015)
- airline policies that require fat people who need two seats on a plane to pay for both seats up front
- the myriad reality television shows that depict fat bodies as failed bodies in need of “curing” or “fixing” at all costs
- diet culture and its promotion of what amounts to disordered eating as a method to “improve health” via weight loss
- built environments that do not accommodate fat people

[2] I use scare quotes around terms like “obesity” and “obese” to denote the inherent pathologization of fat bodies these terms encompass.

- the deluge of ads, media products, and social media posts[3] that denigrate fatness implicitly and explicitly

The list is endless. The messages fat people receive on a constant basis about the devaluation of their bodies can be conceived as prolonged, repeated trauma, which is the sort of trauma that can lead to the development of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD). In fact, various studies have shown that stigma in general, and for the purposes of this study weight stigma in particular, poses serious physical and mental health consequences for its targets (Calogero et al, 2019; Chrisler & Barney, 2017; Harrison, 2019; Lind et al., 2018; Lindly et al., 2014; Meadows & Bombak, 2019; Muennig, 2008; Puhl & Brownell, 2006; Schafer & Ferraro, 2011; Van der Kolk, 2014). Fatphobia shapes societal attitudes toward fatness, fueling the assemblage of "obesity" that works to ensure that fat people are inundated with traumatic interactions with their world on a daily basis.

This dissertation takes a deep dive into BBW bashes and BBW community not only to determine the elements of bashes that might reinforce the trauma fat people experience because of fatphobia, but to also illustrate how bashes can be spaces of respite and healing from the trauma of fatphobia—and it does so through stories shared by actual fat, superfat, and infinifat women (definitions below). As this dissertation outlines, attitudes toward fatness shaped by the broader culture and the assemblage of "obesity" infiltrate bash spaces simply because that is how discourse works. Fat people who go to bashes carry entire histories of suffering under the pressure of fatphobia and

[3] For an analysis of how anti-fat attitudes have been mobilized in unique ways on social media and in news media during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus contributing to the assemblage of obesity, see my article here https://covidchroniclers.com/guest-post-mobilization-of-anti-fat-attitudes-during-quarantine/

diet culture—both of which constitute trauma (Harrison, 2019). That history and trauma doesn't melt away when they check in at a bash hotel. And as I explore in the following chapters, that history is one of many components that shape the affective environment of bashes.

## Researcher Positionality

In her study, Colls (2012) notes that she is one of the smallest people at the LargeLife club nights and she does not seem to suggest that she is part of the LargeLife group beyond her role as researcher for that particular project. As I discuss in chapter three, researcher positionality, which includes privilege, beliefs, biases and power, has a significant impact on how research is conducted, analyzed, and reported (Harding, 2004). In committing to the tenets of feminist standpoint epistemology, I want to make my positionality clear from the outset to illuminate not only how I am intimately connected to my participants and their stories, but also how it influenced everything from the initial research plan, to data collection, to analysis and then reporting.

To begin, I am a white, queer, disabled, mentally ill, working class, superfat, cisgender woman. Who I am and how the world takes me up is shaped by this complex matrix of interlocking privileged and oppressed identities—in other words, the ways that privilege and oppression have worked in and around my body are varied. I do not come to this project as a traditional scholar and in claiming researcher positionality, I aim to illustrate that there are definitely aspects of my participants' experiences I will not and cannot fully understand; however, there are also aspects of their experiences which will resonate deeply because I've been moving through the world in this body for 36 years. Existing at the intersection of these various identities allowed me to not only connect

more strongly with many of my participants over shared experiences, but to also grapple with my interview data in a significantly more dynamic way.

I am committed to learning and developing an appreciation for people and their experiences of marginalization. There are two elements of my positionality that I wish to discuss for the ways that they offer me privilege and also increase the potential for overlooking or misunderstanding the lived experiences of people marginalized in ways I am not. First, I am a white settler living on the traditional territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, which includes the Ojibwa, the Odawa, and the Potawatomie. This area is now commonly known as Windsor, Ontario. I am writing this dissertation as a doctoral student at York University in Tkaronto (commonly known as Toronto, Ontario), which is the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. No part of my life is possible without the systemic denial of Indigenous land rights, especially my education. I acknowledge that by producing research in and for the academy, I contribute to a history of research being used as a weapon of colonization. Moreover, I acknowledge that I am yet another white voice added to fat studies, an academic area that is known for its proliferation of white researchers (Pausé, 2020). As a white settler I have never and will never experience racism. As a result of this element of my identity, I am committed to consistently challenging the taken-for-granted beliefs and biases I hold that have been shaped by colonization and white supremacy, in my everyday life and in the research I plan and produce.

Next, I am a feminine-presenting cisgender woman who is read as such. This means that I have never had to grapple with understanding my gender and I have never

faced discrimination based on my gender presentation. As a result, I am committed to consistently challenging the taken-for-granted beliefs and biases I hold that have been shaped by cissexism, a form of discrimination against transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary people. With that said, while I have not struggled with gender identity and may misunderstand the experiences of those who have, I have 36 years of experience as a feminine-presenting woman surviving in a patriarchal society that is toxic toward women. Patriarchy's contempt for women and femininity is significantly present in the experiences documented throughout this dissertation. It must be acknowledged as a force shaping my and other women's experiences navigating our worlds.

Finally, one of the reasons I chose to study the BBW community is because I've been a member since 2011. I am intimately aware of the harmful impact of "objective" research conducted on communities by researchers who are not connected to them in any way. We see this play out in the proliferation of stigmatizing "obesity" research conducted on fat people by researchers who are not and have never been fat. In the last nine years, I have built strong connections within the community and with almost all of the people who volunteered to participate in my study, substantially altering the possibilities and potential held by this research project. I am committed to a research ethic of care and responsibility. This means that I worked to create a safer atmosphere for my participants to share their experiences and to trust that their stories would be held, analyzed, and reported with integrity, ultimately honouring my commitment not only to my research participants, but to the BBW community as a whole.

## Terms and Definitions

The following is a list of definitions for terms used throughout the dissertation that are, for the most part, specific to fat community.

- **BBW**: acronym for Big Beautiful Woman; coined in the late '70s in relation to a plus-size women's magazine but became more commonly used in dating ads and as a category of pornography. SSBBW is a play on the acronym and stands for Super Size(d) Big Beautiful Woman.
- **Small fat**: a term that describes fat people at the smallest end of the fatness spectrum (women's clothing sizes 1X-2X; no issue finding clothes in plus-size clothing stores).
- **Mid fat**: a term that describes fat people along the middle of the fatness spectrum (women's clothing sizes 2X-3X; still no significant issue finding clothing in plus-size clothing stores).
- **Superfat**: a term that describes fat people at the larger end of the fatness spectrum (women's clothing sizes 4X-5X; can fit the largest sizes offered by some plus-size retailers, but it is important to note that the vast majority of plus-size retailers stop at size 3X).
- **Infinifat**[4]: a term that describes fat people at the largest end of the fatness spectrum (women's clothing sizes 6X and up; infinifat people rarely find clothes

[4] Infinifat was coined by Ash of *The Fat Lip* podcast. She is a fat activist, podcast host, and Instagrammer who proposed the term "infinifat" to describe fat bodies beyond "superfat," which is a term intended to capture bodies at the farthest end of the spectrum of fatness. She writes: "But what should we fats on the very very very fat end of the fat spectrum be called? I humbly propose 'infinifat.' Because what size am I? I really have no fucking idea. A size greater than any assignable size number. Infinity?" See Ash's blog post for more on the topic http://thefatlip.com/2016/12/20/beyond-superfat-rethinking-the-farthest-end-of-the-fat-spectrum/.

to fit them in plus-size clothing stores, whether brick and mortar or online, and often require clothing that can be customized to their body size).

- **Fatphobia**: a term used to describe fear of fatness and dislike of fat people that often creates and maintains stigmatization of people who are fat. This term is used throughout the dissertation and is sometimes interchanged with the term "anti-fat."

## Structure of Dissertation

Drawing on feminist theories of the body, fat studies, disability studies, critical race theory, and affect theory, I engage thematic analysis to analyze autoethnographic and interview data to: 1) explore bash experiences that reinforce the trauma of fatphobia carried by fat women, and 2) explore bash experiences that offer fat women the opportunity to heal by challenging the narratives created by the trauma of fatphobia.

In chapter two, I explore a variety of feminist texts that set the foundation for the data analysis presented in chapters four and five. I draw from feminist theories of the body that look closely at how concepts like docile bodies, self-surveillance and disciplinary femininity are created and maintained by normalizing gazes.[5] Additionally, I examine work by disability and critical race theorists who contextualize fatness as an "othered" identity that is intimately intertwined with and inseparable from ableism and racism. I also explore literature that reveals the myriad ways marginalized bodies are dehumanized and objectified in order to justify violence against them, focusing on how these dynamics impact Black and Indigenous women, women of colour, disabled

[5] The normalizing gazes I am primarily concerned with in this dissertation include the male gaze, heteronormative gaze, white supremacist gaze, and fatphobic gaze.

people, and fat people in particular. Furthermore, I map out how violence against fat bodies shapes fat embodiment. And lastly, I end the chapter with an overview of key theories and arguments made within the realm of affect theory. In doing so, I determine how they can be mobilized in the analysis of the affective atmosphere of bashes and offer for consideration critical analysis of the intersections of affect, trauma, and fatphobia.

In chapter three, I present the methods employed in my exploration of fat women's embodiment in relation to the affective environment of BBW bashes, as well as my methodological framework, which is rooted in a feminist approach to knowledge creation. I describe feminist methodological approaches to autoethnography and in-depth interviewing, and outline the planning and execution of each method. Thematic analysis is explored as the analytical framework used to make sense of my data, and I end with a discussion of potential ethical issues that shaped my approach to this research.

I begin my analysis in chapter four with a focus on affective elements of bashes that stifled participants' ability to be present in their bodies and to feel free to explore and understand their environment. The chapter presents two major themes, each containing various sub-themes. The first major theme explored is the impact of normalizing gazes and men's objectifying advances at bashes. Under this theme, I examine the following sub-themes: participants' descriptions of bashes as spaces where fat women are presented for men's consumption; participants' direct experiences with objectification and its influence over their ability to feel safe in their bodies; and the impact of the "hierarchy of attractiveness," identified by participants as a system that

organizes who is considered most attractive in bash spaces. The second major theme presented in chapter four examines participants' stories of encountering diet culture in bash spaces. Under this theme, the following sub-themes are analyzed: participants' exposure to diet talk and diet behaviours; and participants' exposure to and engagement with people who have had weight loss surgery. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of how white supremacy shows up in and shapes BBW bashes and elements of the BBW community in general by exploring its connection to the negative affects and experiences reported by participants.

In chapter five, I continue my analysis by turning attention to the affective elements of bashes that allowed participants to feel like embodied subjects, connected to their bodies, perceiving themselves as subjects and relieving them from the oppressive weight of normalizing gazes. In this chapter, I demonstrate how particular affective elements of the bash environment allowed participants to work on healing their relationship with their fat bodies by offering them the opportunity to challenge narratives created and maintained by fatphobia that contribute to "everyday trauma" (Cvetkovich, 2003). This chapter also presents two major themes that are then divided into sub-themes. The first major theme explored is participants' access to pleasure and desirability. Under this theme, the following sub-themes are examined: participant accounts of receiving affirming and empowering attraction-based attention from other bash attendees; and participants' accounts of having sex at bashes and providing fat sex education at bashes. The second major theme presented explores participants' stories of bashes as spaces of fat community-building. Under this theme, I examine the following sub-themes: participants experiencing heightened self-esteem in bash spaces;

fat fashion (fatshion) at bashes; bashes as spaces of normalizing the fat body; and participants' stories of how they carry lessons learned at bashes into their day-to-day lives. I conclude this chapter with a discussion section that explores the idea that BBW community is a form of fat activism. To do this, I consider how these particularly positive accounts of BBW bash experiences align with four categories of fat activism outlined by Charlotte Cooper (2016): fat activism as community-building, fat activism as cultural work, micro fat activism, and ambiguous fat activism.

In the concluding chapter, I summarize the findings of the dissertation and present a series of recommendations to bash organizers. Additionally, I identify opportunities for further research in the area of fat embodiment and BBW culture.

# Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

This chapter explores a variety of feminist texts that I will use to analyze the affective environment of BBW bashes and its influence on fat women's relationships with their bodies. Assumptions guiding this theoretical exploration are as follows: in a society that privileges beauty standards set by the white supremacist, capitalist, imperialist, dominating gaze, fat bodies are marginalized bodies primarily because they do not meet ideals such thinness and they are perceived and constructed as unhealthy; marginalized bodies are at greater risk of being dehumanized, making them more susceptible to various forms of violence; and finally, fat women's feelings about their bodies are influenced by fatphobic discourses of fatness and these feelings shape their embodiment. The chapter is organized in four major sections covering the following themes (sub-themes presented here where applicable):

1. Circulation of power and its production of women's bodies
    a. How power produces weight stigma and has defined fat as pathology, shaping cultural beliefs about and stereotypes of fatness
2. Histories of violence against marginalized bodies
    a. Violence against fat bodies via diet and beauty culture
3. The impact of fat hatred on fat embodiment/fat people's experiences of and in their bodies
4. Theories of affect and affect's impact in shaping our understanding of the world
    a. Trauma culture, crisis ordinariness, and how fatphobia constitutes trauma

## Beauty, Desire, Disgust: Power and the production of women's bodies

To begin, I turn to questions of power that shapes societal ideological forces which, in turn, construct the limits, standards, and definitions applied to women's bodies. Historically, standards and ideas about women's bodies that position them as requiring control have been socially constructed via power. Foucault (1979) conceives of power as a "strategic force that permeates the whole of social life" (Vintges, 2012). Power over women's bodies shows up in codes of femininity that guide body management. These codes become stricter when women gain access to power (Faludi, 2006; Wolf, 1997). Women internalize these codes and end up policing their own bodies and actions. This is a form of self-government rooted in Foucault's (1991) conceptualization of governmentality, which he describes as a system of managing people, goods, and wealth. This form of self-government uses up women's valuable resources like time, energy, and money. Bartky (2010) conceptualizes women's bodies as "docile bodies," a term coined by Foucault (1979) who asserted that docile bodies are produced when we accept socially constructed expectations of bodies and apply them to ourselves in an effort to live as if we might be punished at any moment if we defy these expectations. This results in a population of people who feel as though they are under surveillance and therefore work to discipline themselves. Foucault's (1979) ideas about normalization (i.e. the normalizing gaze) shape his conceptualization of "docile bodies." Normalizing gazes, such as the male gaze, fatphobic gaze, heteronormative gaze, and white supremacist gaze, offer idealized norms of conduct that fuel disciplinary power, a form of social control that requires minimum effort on part of those in power (Foucault, 1979). In chapters four and five, I present data that makes

it clear these gazes are mobilized to various extents in bash spaces, shaping the affective environment of the events and, thus, influencing my participants' experiences in and of their bodies.

For Bartky (2010), docile bodies are constructed through the standards set by the white supremacist, capitalist, imperialist, dominating gaze (hooks, 1992). These standards value, above all, whiteness, conformity to gender binaries (particularly by cis men), heterosexuality, and able-bodied-ness; therefore, proximity to these "pillars of humanity" is imperative and the further we are from meeting the standard, the more intensely disciplinary practices seem to shape our lives. Bartky (2010) writes that women engage in disciplinary practices as a result of internalized social expectations set by men, stating that "...a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women" (p. 411). The panopticon is a concept used by Foucault (1979) as a metaphor for how disciplinary power works. It describes a system of control designed by Jeremy Bentham in which every prisoner in an institution can be observed by only one guard. Moreover, the prisoners themselves are never aware of whether they are being watched, the consequence of which is that prisoners must act as though they are always being watched. In this sense, they engage in self-surveillance. Bartky's work hinges on Berger's (1972) discussion of women's self-surveillance as it relates to the male gaze specifically. Berger (1972) writes:

> "To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men…A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself…From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to

> others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another." (p. 271)

Bartky (2010) describes these disciplinary practices fueled by the male gaze as "disciplinary femininity," arguing that they serve to keep women smaller, weaker, shamed, and less powerful. Wolf (1997) echoes these sentiments with a particular focus on the political impact of the "thin ideal" forced upon women, writing that this ideal has nothing to do with aesthetic beauty, and is instead politically motivated. She asserts that creating the conditions for women to remain preoccupied with body management decreases any threat women might pose if they were free from oppressive beauty standards.

Disciplinary femininity is mobilized differently for racialized women. The effects of the spread of white supremacist ideals of bodies and beauty via colonialism and Western globalization ensure that the bodies of Black women and women of colour are under increased scrutiny. As Bartky (2010) explains, since disciplinary practices require racialized women to meet standards of femininity prescribed under white supremacy, whiteness is positioned as the ultimate standard structuring these practices. The consequences are shattering. For example, Bryant's (2013) review of research revealed that the impact of white beauty standards on Black women—especially darker-skinned Black women—manifests as internalized self-hatred and has a devastating impact on their life trajectories. Straight hair is one of the standards of Eurocentric beauty that impacts Black women. Black women who do not attempt to adhere to this standard face discrimination (Emelone, 2020; Hagiwara, 2011; Orey, 2019; Rudman & McLean, 2016). In fact, hair texture as a basis of discrimination has its roots in chattel slavery

when light-skinned women with straight or wavy hair were given jobs within the house as opposed to outdoors. Post-emancipation, the legacy of discrimination based on hair texture persisted in the form of “the comb test,” which resulted in discrimination against Black women whose hair could not easily be combed because of texture (Orey, 2019). Interestingly, even though Black women are pressured to style their hair in ways that approximate characteristics of white hair, activist Rachel Cargle’s recent visit to a DryBar salon in Ohio and the outpouring of commentary on her Instagram post about the experience demonstrate that hairstylists are not adequately trained to style Black hair. Cargle, a Black woman, visited DryBar with her mother for an afternoon of pampering, which included having her hair blown out. In her Instagram story following the appointment, she showed off her hair and expressed disappointment at her stylist’s inability to properly treat and work with her hair texture. She later made a post detailing the exchange she had with a DryBar representative. Hairstylists who follow Cargle’s Instagram page commented on the post stating that they had received anywhere from one day to a maximum of two weeks of training in styling Black hair while others claimed not to have received any training at all in styling Black hair while studying cosmetology (Cargle, 2020). This phenomenon of hairstylists being trained primarily in how to style white hair is yet another extension of white supremacy.

Another example of how white supremacist beauty ideals impact women of colour is in the case of how these ideals are mobilized in Latin America. The idealized Latina body has become commodified and objectified globally (De Casanova, 2004). This ideal Latina body aligns with white supremacist beauty standards that include light skin, straight, lightened hair, and light eyes. It deviates slightly from American beauty

ideals in that while a thin waist is idealized, Latin American culture appreciates an ample bust, thick hips, and long, shapely legs (De Casanova, 2004; Llorens, 2013). In her study of the prevalence of elective aesthetic surgery in Latin America, Llorens (2013) posits that this trend is intimately connected to the "long history of colonization, slavery, and subjugation, racial and ethnic prejudice" that "deems the Latino/a body as inherently deficient when compared with the European body" (Llorens, 2013, p. 565-566). In her study of adolescent girls' attitudes toward beauty in Ecuador, De Casanova (2004) hosted focus groups at two schools involving a total of 65 girls between the ages of 11 and 18. In her findings, she reports that overall, the girls were harsher critics of beauty when they were asked to evaluate images of celebrities or people in the media while they were less likely to harshly critique images of regular Latinas. With that said, De Casanova (2004) reports the following Ecuadorian motto: "No hay mujer fea, sino mal arreglada," which means "there are no ugly women, just poorly-groomed ones." This phrase demonstrates the expectation of women to invest time, money, and effort into their appearance, which subsequently means that women who do not have access to the resources required to groom themselves appropriately will face discrimination. Latin American women's ability to adhere to white supremacist beauty standards significantly impacts their life chances. For instance, in Ecuador, even if women are qualified and educated, they are often discriminated against if they do not have a "pleasant face" or presence (De Casanova, 2004). For instance, De Casanova (2004) tells a story about a talented and qualified engineer who was unable to secure employment because of her plain appearance. In addition to discrimination in appearance-based hiring practices, the ability to adhere to white supremacist beauty

ideals can affect marriage choices. De Casanova (2004) writes, “In class-stratified societies such as Ecuador, marrying up is one of the few ways a woman can raise her social status; a woman considered attractive has a greater chance of marrying into a higher social class” (p. 292).

Lastly, for Indian women, it seems one of the defining features of the oppressive nature of white supremacist beauty standards is the pressure to change skin tone using chemical skin-whiteners. The emergence of chemical skin-whitening solutions is linked historically to the ways in which the white body came to be viewed as the paradigm of the universal human body, while Blackness and the non-white body was rendered deviant, degenerate and ugly (Mire, 2008). Associations of light skin with racial whiteness has “historically and in the contemporary moment been associated with citizenship, national belonging, wealth, cleanliness, intelligence, and refinement in ways that impact access to opportunities and life chances” (Shrestha, 2018, p. 111). For women of colour, skin-lightening solutions are offered as a tool for approximating whiteness; however, applying these toxic chemicals to their skin often has tragic health consequences (Mire, 2008). Paul (2016) writes that the first commercial skin whitening products appeared in India in 1978 and were marketed exclusively to women. It is not until 2005 that we see skin-lightening creams marketed to Indian men. Fascinatingly, Unilever, one of the biggest manufacturers of skin-lightening creams (and the parent company of Axe and Dove, two health and beauty brands with seemingly contradictory advertising messaging), hired Facebook to develop an app that allowed Indian men to lighten their skin tone using a filter and to then use the modified image as their Facebook profile photo (Paul, 2016). In 2012, India saw the introduction of chemical

skin-whiteners meant for lightening the skin of women's genitalia (Paul, 2016). Interestingly, in light of the current global movement for racial justice after the recent deaths of George Floyd and a number of other Black men, Black women, and Black trans women at the hands of American police—a movement that is more strongly than ever calling into question the insidious, dangerous, and violent nature of white supremacy—news reports state that the brands Unilever, L'Oreal, and Johnson & Johnson plan to "rename or discontinue some of their skincare brands in India as controversy grows over the use of skin-lightening products" (Toh, 2020, ¶ 1).

It is clear, then, that white beauty is social capital and that racialized women are under significant pressure to engage in disciplinary femininity that aligns their bodies with standards of white supremacist beauty ideals. These ideals make markers of whiteness aspirational: light skin, straight hair, and light hair colour all via chemical processes, particular eye shape and light eye colour, lack of body hair, body size (thinness as ideal, sometimes with larger busts and thicker hips), tone of voice, passivity, and overall "softness." These markers of a white supremacist femininity inform dominant feminine beauty ideals and are significantly informed by colonization.

**Producing the Fat Body: Weight stigmatization and fat as pathology**

Obsession with body size and demonization of fatness has been demonstrated at various points throughout history; however, it is fascinating to note that these moments are so few and far between that they can be considered an anomaly (Harrison, 2019). In fact, statistical estimates tell us that, historically, approximately 81 percent of human societies demonstrated beauty ideals that prioritized bigger bodies, especially for women (Brown, 2005). Demonization of fatness showed up as far back as Ancient

Greece and Rome when questions of control in the face of abundance led to declaration of moderation as the key to virtue, thus marking fatness as evidence of imbalance requiring "correction." These ideas were intertwined with morality in response to food—in other words, "good" versus "bad" food (Harrison, 2019). Food moralizing shows up again in early modern colonialism when colonizers occupying other lands were intentional about maintaining European diets out of fear of getting sick from foods native to the people on the land. Soon enough, colonizers began to believe that "food helped create the physical distinctions between Europeans and the 'others' they were encountering" (Harrison, 2019, p. 22). In addition to their beliefs about the morality of food and its ability to shape bodies, European colonizers also witnessed the appreciation and admiration African, Turkish, Inuit (then termed "Eskimo"), and Australian Indigenous people had for fat bodies—especially fat women's bodies. As a result, their feelings of disgust became inseparable from their views of racialized people as savage and uncivilized (Forth, 2012; 2015). Forth (2012) writes that as far as colonizers were concerned, "…any self-respecting European would dismiss [fatness and fat bodies] as unhealthy, unattractive and frankly disgusting" (p. 214). In this way, racism and fatphobia are inseparable.

An important site of power that shapes contemporary discourses and cultural devaluation of fatness (and subsequent dehumanization of fat bodies) is found in the medicalization and pathologizing of fatness as "obesity." The current social and political fatphobic landscape began in the 1990s when "obesity" discourse constructed fatness as an epidemic and national threat—rhetoric that continues to cling to fat bodies (Farrell, 2011). The so-called "obesity epidemic" is a construction deeply rooted in

political power and capital. It was born literally overnight in 1998 when the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the United States changed Body Mass Index (BMI) category cutoffs so that more people found themselves categorized as “obese.” The story gets more interesting—these new cutoffs were based on a report released by the World Health Organization (WHO) two years prior, but it turns out that an organization called the International Obesity Task Force (IOTF) was primarily responsible for authoring the WHO’s report. Unsurprisingly, the IOTF was funded by two pharmaceutical companies that specialized in the production of weight loss drugs. Furthermore, “obesity experts” whose “expertise” factored significantly into changing BMI cutoffs were also heavily tied to the diet industry. (Harrison, 2019). It’s evident, then, that when it comes to pathologizing bodies, money has the power to define and construct entire populations of people.

Historically, conditions that led to fat bodies being conceptualized as pathological include: the assumption that appearance reveals the nature of an individual; development of tools that could measure fatness in what was perceived to be an objective way (e.g. scales, Body Mass Index charts); and the privileging of quantitative measurement in evidence-based medicine (i.e. weighing people and assigning value to weight numbers) (Harrison, 2019; Jutel, 2009). This shift toward pathologizing fat bodies had many consequences. Once fatness was medicalized it became possible to diagnose fat bodies as ill, justifying the use of violent biopedagogical scripts in the treatment of “obesity” (Murray, 2008a, 2008b; Wright, 2009). Framing fatness as “obesity” allowed for establishing concrete parameters for “knowing” what fat bodies mean—in other words, making fat bodies intelligible and controllable (Murray, 2008a,

2008b). As Jutel (2009) notes, diagnosis is crucial to exerting social control. Diagnosis legitimizes, normalizes, and provides boundaries for what is acceptable. It also provides opportunity to delineate treatment plans. And of course, diagnosis controls and compels patients to become obedient to a set of normative obligations. Later in this chapter, I explore these ideas further for their connection to medical industry violence against fat bodies.

Socially and culturally, fatness is associated with extreme and negative stigma. Studies show that experiencing stigma is associated with physiological arousal and heightened vigilance. Fat people are inundated with stigmatizing messages about their bodies daily ensuring they remain in a chronic state of physiological arousal and heightened vigilance, which, as it turns out, contributes to negative physical and mental health outcomes (Calogero et al., 2019; Chrisler & Barney, 2017; Lind et al., 2018; Lindly et al., 2014; Meadows & Bombak, 2019; Muennig, 2008; Puhl & Brownell, 2006; Schafer & Ferraro, 2011; Van der Kolk, 2014). In other words, for all of the effort put into constructing fatness as a disease, it's remarkable that what actually harms fat people's health most is the stigma associated with being fat—stigma that is fueled markedly by the medicalization of fatness.

As both cause and effect of the pathologizing of fatness, fat bodies are read as lazy, gluttonous, greedy, immoral, uncontrolled, stupid, ugly, lacking will power, and of course, unhealthy (Akoury et al. 2019; Farrell, 2011; Gailey, 2015). Application of these stereotypes further dehumanizes fat people, which has tangible consequences—fat people suffer greatly in areas of employment, education, and relationships, and in navigating physical and mental health services compared to their non-fat counterparts.

And of course, fat women specifically suffer significantly in these areas (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012). Fat bodies as subjugated bodies are framed as out of control with respect to weight, tied intimately to ideas of taking up space. Under the "tyranny of slenderness," women are forbidden from taking up space (Bartky, 2010). Women who take up more than their share of territory are often regarded with suspicion for the ways in which they seemingly refuse to adhere to codes of femininity that position thinness as ideal (Hartley, 2001). This may inadvertently vilify fat women's bodies further by suggesting an inherent noncompliance simply because they exist as fat at all. It is within the context of women taking up space that Boero (2012) suggests that the "obesity epidemic" is actually about dominance and control over women. We see this control mediated by diet culture and the self-governing and self-disciplinary behaviours it enforces. I explore these ideas around taking up space in more detail and in relation to my data in chapter five.

As an extension of the limits put on women occupying space, Gailey (2014) asserts that fat people occupy a position of "hyper(in)visibility," which is defined as a state of being in which "…a person is sometimes paid exceptional attention and is sometimes exceptionally overlooked," explaining that "Fat presents an apparent paradox because it is visible and dissected publicly; in this respect, it is hypervisible. Fat is also marginalized and erased; in this respect, it is hyperinvisible" (p. 7). She contends that this can happen simultaneously, and so often does for fat women whose bodies are hypervisible because of the amount of physical space they take up, while the complexity of their lives is entirely disregarded—they are seen only for their fatness and the various stereotypes and stigma associated with it are applied, stifling any chance they will be

read as subjects. Additionally, fatness is gendered in particular ways. For instance, discourse around fatness and the "obesity epidemic" is driven by emotion, which, in Western contexts, is associated with femininity (Fraser et al., 2010). Both Bordo (1993) and Murray (2008a) write about the gendering of fat, explaining that the construction of fatness as feminine and excessive therefore attaches to traits like ambiguity, unruliness, and irrationality. As a result, female fatness solidifies women's status as lesser subjects. Importantly, however, fatness is associated with the feminine, therefore also rendering fat men and fat children as lesser subjects (Fraser et al., 2010).

## Violence Against Marginalized Bodies

In this section, I aim to provide an overview of how marginalization may open a body up to increased risk of experiencing violence. Not all women experience violence to the same extent or in the same capacity. Crucial to discussions of gender-based violence is recognition that occupying marginalized identities may put someone at greater risk of experiencing different forms of violence. In saying this, I want to be clear that I do not mean to suggest that there is some sort of linear relationship between marginalized identities and susceptibility to violence. There are many ways we walk in and out of privilege. For instance, I might be interviewed for a job based on my education level and work experience, two elements of my professional self that afford me a high degree of privilege, but I am at risk of not being hired because of my fatness (Harrison, 2019). Or maybe after I kick ass at the job interview I walk down the street to grab a coffee and someone in a passing car launches some sort of fatphobic insult my way. To put it another way, bodies that are perceived as deviating from the normative

ideal citizenship or the idealized white subject—typically defined as white, heterosexual, able-bodied and class privileged cisgender men—have additive constraints on their ability to more smoothly navigate certain parts of their worlds both personally and systemically.

When violence is enacted upon a body in the form of racism, ableism, homophobia, sexism, cissexism, transphobia, sizeism and so on, it reflects cultural devaluation of specific bodies. As Levy (2008) and Royce (2009) assert, some women are targets of violence *because* of their gender and race and/or socioeconomic status and/or sexuality, demonstrating how certain bodies become marked as requiring control and dominance. In an effort to frame a detailed discussion of the trauma of fatphobia and violence against fat bodies, I spend the next few pages exploring how violence has shaped the bodies and experiences of Black women, Indigenous women, women of colour, and disabled women. These accounts of dehumanization and experiences of violence serve as examples of the way marginalized bodies have historically been (and are presently) constructed as inherently subordinate and deserving of the violence committed against them. The histories and information presented here is only a snapshot of the violence various marginalized women face/have faced.

Black women's experiences of violence are rooted in legacies of slavery. Racist ideologies born out of slavery defined (and continue to define) Black women specifically as hypersexual, animalistic, immoral, and depraved. These ideologies are used to justify their continued enslavement, rape, subordination, and overall treatment as subhuman. Racial stereotypes, such as the Jezebel, served not only as a means for creating the notion of pure white womanhood, but also ensured that Black women "could not be

raped" and had no recourse against Black men (let alone white men) who raped them (Collins, 2004). Slavery was the foundation upon which United States capitalism was built. The buying and selling of Black people turned Black bodies into commodities, objects to be traded on the market. This required the dehumanization of Black people. In other words, it was necessary for Black bodies to be constructed, via racism, as subhuman in order to justify the violence of slavery (Collins, 2004). For Black women specifically, not only were they expected to do the same work performed by Black men, they experienced an added element of exploitation because of their reproductive capacities. Institutionalized rape was designed to eliminate any agency they possessed, and Black women's bodies were simply considered part of a system of profit. Post-emancipation, rape continued as a means of subordinating Black women (Collins, 2004). Historically, rape was a private phenomenon that received little to no public censure and depended on survivors' silence. In fact, as Collins (2004) notes, Black women bringing attention to the abuse they experienced behind closed doors was considered a diversion from the real problem of racism. Davis (2000) expands on this, describing the gendered nature of domestic violence as layers of aggression systematically aimed at women. She explains that these acts of violence within domestic spaces "were for so long relegated to secrecy or, worse, considered normal" (Davis, 2000, ¶ 5). Prior to the 1970s, rape and domestic abuse did not warrant public or legal intervention (Davis, 2000; Garcia & McManimon, 2011).

In Sabrina Strings' (2019) crucial contribution to the field of fat studies and critical race studies, she explores the history of racial origins of fatphobia. In her book *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, she identifies two historical

developments that led to an obsession with thinness and a fear or hatred of fatness: first, “the rise of the transatlantic slave trade,” and second, “the spread of Protestantism” (Strings, 2019, p. 6). She writes:

> “…the slender ideal and fat phobia are not distinct developments—as they are often treated in the literature. The fear of the imagined ‘fat black woman’ was created by racial and religious ideologies that have been used to both degrade black women and discipline white women. This is critical since most analyses of race and aesthetics describe the experiences of either black people (and other people of color) or white people…race [is] a double agent. It entails the synchronized repression of ‘savage’ blackness, and the generation of disciplined whiteness. The discourse of fatness as ‘coarse,’ ‘immoral,’ and ‘black’ worked to denigrate black women, and it concomitantly became the impetus for the promulgation of slender figures as the proper form of embodiment for elite white Christian women.” (Strings, 2019, p. 6-7)

Strings (2019) points to the absolute inseparability of racism and fatphobia. A poignant and significant historical example of commodification of and violence against Black women’s bodies that illustrates the dynamic Strings (2019) examines in her book is found in the abuse of Saartjie Baartman, a South African Khoikhoi woman who was exhibited as a freak show attraction in nineteenth century Europe because of European colonizers’ fascination with her physical make-up—in particular her large buttocks (Collins, 2004; Strings, 2019). In this example, Baartman’s commodification and exploitation required her to be objectified and dehumanized, creating the conditions for her to be viewed as inherently deserving of the violence associated with exploitation. Strings (2019) reports that fascination with Baartman’s size was “simultaneously grotesque and exotic: a sexual specimen with a peculiar racial identity” (p. 92). She notes that when Baartman was exhibited in London, England, people who came to “gawk at her proportions” were also able to pay extra to “experience the sensory pleasure of touching her” (Strings, 2019, p. 93), illustrating how the only proximity to

fatness and Blackness that people desired was fueled by objectification and exploitation. In Baartman's case, the violence of objectification and exploitation continued after her death in 1815 when she was dissected and her genitalia and buttocks were placed on display in a museum, exemplifying a disturbing historical preoccupation with Black women's genitalia within Western science (Collins, 2009).

Continuing the discussion of bodies being more vulnerable to violence when they are systematically dehumanized, it is vital to recognize that the ongoing project of colonization in Canada means that Indigenous women are often not viewed as human and deserving of rights and protection (Razack, 1994). Violence against Indigenous women is intentional, echoing 500 years of sexual colonization and violation that can only be justified through ideologies that mark Indigenous women's bodies as inherently impure (Hall, 2015). Sexualized violence against racialized Others is the mark of white settler societies, integral to settler strategies of domination (Jiwani & Young, 2006; Razack, 2002). The murder of Pamela George by two white men is a poignant example of sexualized violence against an Indigenous woman. Razack (2002) details George's story, illustrating the connection between dehumanization of Indigenous women, resultant violence, and violence as a tool for proving and maintaining white hegemonic masculinity. In addition to constructing Indigenous women as subhuman and deserving of violence, processes of colonization displace Indigenous women who are forced to migrate in search of work and housing. Many Indigenous women turn to prostitution[6] as a means of survival, positioning them precariously and dangerously in "spaces of

[6] Razack uses the term prostitution, so I am maintaining that in spaces where I reference her work. In conversations with sex workers, I have learned it is a problematic term.

degeneracy" where prostitution is taken as license for men to do as they please, regardless of how it affects a woman's personhood (Razack, 2002). Spaces of degeneracy are where white men can confirm their positions of power by proving they can move freely in and out of these spaces, "surviving dangerous encounters" with racialized Others. The two white men who killed Pamela George provide an example of how masculinity—and in this case, white masculinity—is secured through sexual violence, and debasing and degrading a woman in the presence of other men. This reinforces masculinity as aggressive and violent (Razack, 2002). The intersecting elements of gender, race, and class in relation to colonization ensured that, as Razack (2002) notes, there was only a small chance Pamela George's murderers viewed her as a human being.

Pre-contact, Indigenous communities were generally nonhierarchical with women at the center of families (Koshan, 1997). Additionally, the impact of colonization is such that Indigenous women not only suffer from state violence and the violence of white supremacy, but also violence perpetrated by Indigenous men whose actions are connected to internalization of qualities ascribed to them for centuries *through* colonization (O'Toole et al., 2007). Furthermore, mobilization of discourses framing Indigenous communities as broken and irreparably violent is used to justify violent state intervention, which influences and is intimately connected to rates of domestic violence (Hall, 2015).

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how white supremacist beauty standards are mobilized against Latin American women. As I have maintained, white supremacist beauty standards in and of themselves are a form of violence against women. These

standards are the star of beauty pageants in Latin American, which are popular and celebrated mediatized events. At the Miss Peru pageant in 2017, a marriage of beauty and protest took place. At this pageant, it is customary for contestants to recite their measurements to the audience; however, at the 2017 pageant contestants instead shared alarming statistics of violence against women in Peru (Pérez-Rosario, 2018). Contestants reported on cases of feminicide, death rates of girls who experience sexual exploitation, and rates of street harassment reported by women in Peru.

In colonial Latin America, Spanish colonizers used violence as a regular means of asserting and defending their reputational status, which included the enslavement of Indigenous women who became the men's partners, many bearing their children (van Deusen, 2012; Walker, 2019). We can see this legacy of colonization carry through in Latin American history of "improving" Indigenous races through marriages that would produce children with lighter skin and features that approximate whiteness—exemplifying control over status (Pérez-Rosario, 2018). The value placed on whiteness as a status marker means that Indigenous and Black Latin American women are more likely to experience violence and are twice as likely to be killed as a result of the violence compared to women of other races (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2014). For Latin American survivors, what is to be made of questions about what Walker (2019) calls the "embodied afterlife of violence"? In Townsend's (2019) analysis of group interviews conducted with three women who survived imprisonment in Chile under Augusto Pinochet's regime, she draws out how in these oral histories, the three women speak significantly about the violence taken against their bodies to convey the devastation of state violence. These oral histories

reveal how complex and difficult it was for these women—as it would be for any survivor—to try to balance living with histories of enduring sexual torture while also working to defy conventional ideas about sex and sexuality. Additionally, their stories illuminate deeply seated ideas in Chilean culture that sustain men's domination over women's bodies—ideas that predate Pinochet's rule (Townsend, 2019). I am interested in this idea of the "embodied afterlife of violence," which Walker (2019) asserts is a concept that requires further inquiry. I see this concept wrapped up with questions of how trauma lives both in and on the body, physically and psychologically. To employ the language of affect theory covered later in this chapter, how are experiences with violence reactivated over a lifetime to shape a person's bodily capacities, possibilities, and potentials?

Thus far, we have learned how patriarchal violence rooted in colonization and white supremacy informs violence against Black and Indigenous women and women of colour. When questions of the cultural devaluation of certain bodies are considered, disabled bodies enter the conversation from a different angle, especially in a neoliberal context of bodies only being considered valuable if they are fit for productivity. To expand on this briefly, neoliberalism describes an aggressively and often violent economic system that is rooted in ever-growing wealth for the richest among us while the gap between the rich and the poor continuously widens. It is founded on ideas of self-reliance and self-government and as a consequence, social issues that should be addressed in community-minded ways are blamed on individuals. In this way, a body's worth—and subsequently the worth of human life itself—is predicated on its ability to be productive in order to keep the system working. Disabled bodies are seen as worth less

because they do not align with ideas of what it means to be fit for productivity. As a result, so much of the violence enacted upon disabled bodies is in attempts to "cure" disability and to make these bodies more intelligible or knowable (Grosz, 1996). Disabled bodies are devalued and dehumanized for not conforming to cultural standards of beauty, health, fitness, competence and intelligence, and are denied the cultural capital given freely to those who do inhabit these privileged identities (Garland-Thomson, 2002). There are important parallels drawn between disability and female positioning in society. Garland-Thomson (2002) elaborates on the ways in which Western thought has positioned both femaleness and disability as defective departures from a valued standard (able-bodied, cisgender man).

Feminist disability theorists have suggested that both femininity and race are performances of disability in a sexist and racist society (Garland-Thomson, 2002). Historically, difference from the valued standard of humanity has led to application of violent regimes and normalizing strategies. Garland-Thomson (2002) writes:

> "…women, people with disabilities or appearance impairments, ethnic Others, gays and lesbians, and people of color are variously the objects of infanticide, selective abortion, eugenics programs, hate crimes, mercy killing, assisted suicide, lynching, bride burning, honor killings, forced conversion, coercive rehabilitation, domestic violence, genocide, normalizing surgical procedures, racial profiling, and neglect." (p. 9)

Subjugated bodies—disabled bodies, racialized bodies, fat bodies, feminine bodies—are imbued with what Bordo (1993) refers to as a "too-muchness," illustrating the ways in which these bodies are ungovernable, confusing, or threatening. Bodies that threaten the status quo are in turn threatened by violent cultural, state, and/or medical intervention, subjected relentlessly to discipline as means of controlling, normalizing, and/or making subjugated bodies more intelligible.

The literature examined in this section provides the necessary grounding for moving into discussion of violence against fat bodies specifically. To understand the ways in which violence against fat bodies intersects with gendered and racialized violence, it is important to keep the following in mind: first, violence is easier to enact and justify when it is perpetrated against people who have been dehumanized or objectified; and second, a person is considered increasingly less human and less deserving of rights and protection the farther they find themselves positioned from the white, heterosexual, able-bodied, class-privileged cisgender man standard for humanity.

**Surveillance, Surgery, and the Trauma of Fatphobia: Violence against fat bodies**

Fatphobia, as one of various mechanisms shaping society's beliefs about bodies, ensures that fat bodies are perpetually at risk of being stigmatized and experiencing discrimination simply for existing as fat. Fat bodies are constructed as subordinate and lacking control, and fatness is often used as a reason to dehumanize people in larger bodies to justify continued violent attempts to "control" body size.

To begin, fatness is constructed as deviant and both diet culture and the beauty industry offer various disciplinary practices prescribed as tools with which women can "fix" this deviance (Bartky, 2010). Processes and products born of diet and beauty culture that promise to "fix" fatness in order to align bodies more closely to dominant beauty standards cause bodily damage (Rice, 2014). As the antithesis of what it means to be appropriately feminine, fat women are held to higher standards of feminine beauty (Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009); therefore, fat people—especially fat women—are under extreme pressure to constantly prove their humanity via body management wherein the ultimate goal is weight reduction, and thus reduction of the amount of space their bodies

occupy (Boero, 2012; LeBesco, 2004). The discipline women are encouraged to practice over their bodies is part of the violent backlash and political weaponry used against women's advances in society (Wolf, 1997). Fat bodies are constructed as deficient (Bartky, 2010), and "the fantasy of thin" (Harding, 2007) encourages us to imagine possibilities and to live our lives dreaming about a future self that is void of deficiency. Most importantly, beauty discourse exerts power over fat bodies by asking us to close our eyes to consequences and limits, to ignore physical and emotional pain in our effort to police ourselves and make our bodies more palatable (Bordo, 1993; Grosz, 1996).

Foucault's (1991) work on the importance of discipline in managing populations allows us to view diet and beauty culture as tools for exerting control over women. The many disciplinary practices women are encouraged to undertake to achieve and/or maintain particular standards of beauty are forms of surveillance and self-discipline. Here, Bartky (2010), whose work draws significantly from Foucault, is worth quoting at length:

> "The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or the rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy. It is also the reflection in woman's consciousness of the fact that *she* is under surveillance in ways that *he* is not, that whatever else she may become, she is importantly a body designed to please or to excite. There has been induced in many women, then, in Foucault's words, 'a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.' Since the standards of female bodily acceptability are impossible fully to realize, requiring as they do a virtual transcendence of nature, a woman may live much of her life with a pervasive feeling of bodily deficiency. Hence a tighter control of the body has gained a new kind of hold over the mind." (p. 416-17)

This quote exemplifies what Foucault (1994) refers to as “technologies of the self,” or, in this case, things we do for the sake of beauty and thinness that may harm our bodies and/or souls, but that we believe (regardless of evidence to the contrary) will help us achieve some semblance of happiness, perfection, or even immortality. They key is that the responsibility is put on *us* to achieve change. It is within beauty and diet culture that this striving for perfection and immortality (e.g. the promise of a longer life via thinness) is so dependent on engaging technologies of the self.

Diet culture is specifically concerned with control over a population. In our increasingly healthist society, fat people are targeted by fatphobic and abusive rhetoric that positions fat bodies as risking, or even deserving of, early death (Campos, 2004). By medicalizing and pathologizing fatness, the medical industry opened fat bodies to increased surveillance and violent intervention, medical and otherwise, leading fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco (2004) to call the enthusiastic drive toward eradicating obesity “modern-day eugenics.” For a moment, let’s entertain the idea that the medicalization of fatness as “obesity” suggests that the medical industry is then responsible for providing appropriate care to fat people. Makes sense, right? Even if it does make sense, research shows the medical industry does not take the health of fat people seriously at all. As Pausé (2019) outlines in her exploration of a queered fat therapy, “anti-fat attitudes are common across the healthcare sector” (p. 81). She points to various studies that call attention to the proliferation of anti-fat attitudes in health

researchers,[7] clinicians,[8] physicians,[9] nurses,[10] psychotherapists,[11] dieticians,[12] physiotherapists,[13] and in medical students.[14] She also writes that "professionals in the healthcare sector view fat people as less interested in their health, less likely to be compliant with clinical instruction, and less worthy of preventative care than average weight or thin people; some would prefer not to treat fat patients at all" [15] while "others are unable to treat fat patients effectively, due to inadequate knowledge, inappropriate equipment, or their own anti-fat bias"[16] (Pausé, 2019, p. 81). These anti-fat attitudes and

[7] Schwartz, M. B., Chambliss, H. O. N., Brownell, K. D., Blair, S. N., & Billington, C. (2003). Weight bias among health professionals specializing in obesity. *Obesity Research, 11*(9), 1033–1039. Doi: 10.1038/oby.2003.142

[8] Schwartz, M. B., Chambliss, H. O. N., Brownell, K. D., Blair, S. N., & Billington, C. (2003). Weight bias among health professionals specializing in obesity. Obesity Research, 11(9), 1033–1039. Doi: 10.1038/oby.2003.142

[9] Sabin, J. A., Marini, M., & Nosek, B. A. (2012). Implicit and explicit anti-fat bias among a large sample of medical doctors by BMI, race/ethnicity and gender. PloS One, 7(11), e48448. Doi: 10.1371/journal.pome.0048448

[10] Poon, M. Y., & Tarrant, M. (2009). Obesity: Attitudes of undergraduate student nurses and registered nurses. Journal of Clinical Nursing, 18(16), 2355–2365. Doi: 10.1111/j.13652702.2008.02709.x

[11] Davis-Coelho, K., Waltz, J., & Davis-Coelho, B. (2000). Awareness and prevention of bias against fat clients in psychotherapy. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 31(6), 682–684. Doi:10.1037/0735-7028.31.6.682

[12] Stone, O., & Werner, P. (2012). Israeli dietitians' professional stigma attached to obese patients. Qualitative Health Research, 22(6), 768–776.

[13] Setchell, J., Watson, B., Jones, L., & Gard, M. (2015). Weight stigma in physiotherapy practice: Patient perceptions of interactions with physiotherapists. Manual Therapy, 20(6), 835–841. Doi: 10.1016/j.math.2015.04.001

[14] Pantenburg, B., Sikorski, C., Luppa, M., Schomerus, G., Konig, H. H., Werner, P., & Riedel-Heller, S. G. (2012). Medical students' attitudes towards overweight and obesity. PLoS One, 7(11), e48113. Doi: 10.1037/journal.pone.0048113; Persky, S., & Eccleston, C. P. (2011). Medical student bias and care recommendations for an obese versus non-obese virtual patient. International Journal of Obesity, 35, 728–735. Doi: 10.1038/ijo.2010.173; Phelan, S. M., Dovidio, J. F., Puhl, R. M., Burgess, D. J., Nelson, D. B., Yeazel, M. W., van Ryn, M. (2014). Implicit and explicit weight bias in a national sample of 4,732 medical students: The medical student CHANGES study. Obesity, 22(4), 1201–1208. Doi: 10.1002/oby.20687

[15] Ferrante, J. M., Ohman-Strickland, P., Hudson, S. V., Hahn, K. A., Scott, J. G., & Crabtree, B. F. (2006). Colorectal cancer screening among obese versus non-obese patients in primary care practices. Cancer Detection and Prevention, 30(5), 459–465. Doi: 10.1016/ j.cdp.2006.09.003; Hebl, M. R., & Xu, J. (2001). Weighing the care: Physicians' reactions to the size of a patient. International Journal of Obesity & Related Metabolic Disorders, 25, 1246–1253. Doi: 10.1038/sj.ijo,0801681

[16] Amy, N. K., Aalborg, A., Lyons, P., & Keranen, L. (2006). Barriers to routine gynecological cancer screening for White and African-American obese women. International Journal of Obesity, 30(1), 147–155. Doi:10.1038/sj.ijo.0803105; Setchell, J., Watson, B., Jones, L., & Gard, M. (2015). Weight stigma in physiotherapy practice: Patient perceptions of interactions with physiotherapists. Manual Therapy, 20(6), 835–841. Doi: 10.1016/j.math.2015.04.001

the resultant sub-standard care medical professionals provide exemplify violence against fat people.

Additionally, the language used in connection with fat is sometimes inherently violent. The phrase "war on fat," for instance, is intentional—fatness was and continues to be constructed as the enemy, something to be defeated at all costs (Farrell, 2011). These cultural messages about fatness are internalized to the point that girls as young as six report being dissatisfied with their bodies[17] (Rice, 2014). Targeted most heavily at women, contemporary renditions of dieting and weight loss are couched in the language of wellness and health, but in such a way that these concepts are synonymous with thinness; however, this regime is less concerned with people actually becoming thin and is rooted more deeply in thwarting the development of a collective sense of strength (Wolf, 1997).

Based on Foucault's (1979) theorizing of the panopticon for understanding how people internalize a controlling gaze and therefore experience themselves as being under constant surveillance, Winch (2016) developed the concept of the "gynaeopticon," specifying that in this case, "the controlling gaze is female, and the many women watch the many women" (p. 901). She uses this concept to describe a network form of governance ensuring women police themselves and each other *especially* around body size. She writes, "The desire for normativity and belonging in a neoliberal promotional

[17] In 2019, Weight Watchers—or as the company has rebranded itself, WW—introduced an app called Kurbo aimed at kids from ages eight through 17. The app encourages children to track every bite of food they take and to post "before and after" pictures. These are important years for children's development and the introduction of an app that puts them at risk of long-term physical and emotional health complications is evidence of the violence of diet culture. Intuitive eating and anti-diet dietician Christy Harrison shares her thoughts here: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/18/opinion/weight-watchers-kids.html

culture means submitting oneself to regimes of looking within the gynaeopticon" (p. 901), explaining that women must always be seen actively participating in the process of controlling fat in order to be successful neoliberal subjects. Neoliberalism is an inherently colonial and white supremacist system; therefore, the worth of a body is mediated by its ability to conform to colonial, white supremacist standards. For all people—and for women in particular—this means existing in a state of fear of fatness. On one hand, fat women are expected to continuously work to shrink their bodies. On the other, non-fat women are charged with the task of protecting or defending their body against an imagined fat future—one which they are convinced is their reality if they do not maintain strict control.

In her chapter discussing the limits of subjectivity, Grosz (1996) writes that we come to recognize which bodies are acceptable, knowable, and tolerable by way of those who present as anomalies, ambiguities, and borderline cases. She explores the cases of conjoined twins and intersex people to illustrate that bodies that push the limits of subjectivity are constructed as needing to be "corrected." Grosz (1996) explains that attempts at fitting boundless identities into structured schemas can have profoundly negative effects on the individuals being targeted. Applying this lens to fatness, we can see that fatphobia creates conditions in which fat bodies challenge what is acceptable, knowable, and tolerable and weight loss culture presents "solutions" for "correcting" fat bodies in order to make them fit structured schemas, in other words, ideas of what bodies *should* be. And the physical and emotional trauma of restrictive dieting and weight loss meant to "correct" fatness is devastating (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Campos 2004; Harrison, 2019).

A seemingly infinite number of "solutions" meant to "correct" fatness is offered by the diet and weight loss industry. Diet and weight loss culture is violence against fat bodies in general, and fat women in particular. Contrary to rhetoric espoused by the diet and weight loss industry—which currently boasts profits of over $72 billion annually in the United States—there is yet to be discovered a strategy or product or procedure that leads to significant, long term weight loss (Cooper, 2016; Harrison, 2019; Wann, 2009). In fact, studies show that when we engage in restrictive and disordered eating, our bodies are triggered by what they perceive to be starvation and do what they need to do to survive. Metabolism suffers and can never recover. Lost weight is regained (and then some), and this is shown to be the case for over 95 percent of people who attempt to lose weight through dieting and exercising[18] (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Harrison, 2019).

Conceptualizing attempts to eradicate fatness as violence against fat people, it is interesting to note that even though fatness is more closely connected to negative health outcomes for fat men than fat women, between 80 and 90 percent of weight loss surgery is performed on women, and between 90 and 95 percent of anorectics and bulimics are women (Hartley, 2001). There is no clearer evidence to illustrate that violence against fat bodies is a gendered form of violence. In fact, as Hartley (2001) posits, "Most of the ways in which women feel physically 'wrong,' e.g., having womanly hips, bellies, breasts, and thighs, are manifestations of how their body is not that of a man" (p. 68). It is interesting, then, how thinness is held as a cornerstone of femininity

[18] See recent news about weight gain experienced by contestants from the reality television show *The Biggest Loser*. Please note that the linked article ultimately admits that weight loss does not appear to be possible to maintain in the long term, but that scientists are still trying to find a "cure" for "obesity" https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/02/health/biggest-loser-weight loss.html?_r=0

while at the same time the achievement of a thin body requires the eradication of features that are constructed as "feminine."

While the restriction of food intake and over-exercising are forms of violence against fat bodies framed as reasonable strategies for losing weight, bariatric or weight loss surgery is the most violent, invasive, and deadly procedure marketed to fat people as a means for significantly decreasing body size. The first bariatric surgery was performed in 1953 at the University of Minnesota (Harrison, 2019). At that time, it was considered a procedure to be used sparingly and only in rare cases; however, today it is prescribed by physicians to people across the spectrum of fatness (regardless of the type of health issue they present when they book an appointment with their doctor) and bariatric surgery is sometimes imposed as a condition that must be met before surgeons will agree to treat fat people who need other types of surgery.[19]

There are different forms of weight loss surgery, but most involve decreasing stomach size to allow for limited food intake. Sometimes this involves clamping the stomach, and sometimes this involves "amputating" the stomach.[20] In 2008, over 220,000 bariatric surgeries were performed in the United States (Farrell, 2011). Surgeries cost anywhere from US$15,000 to $25,000, making it big business for surgeons (Harrison, 2019). Weight loss surgery reduces bodies to broken machines that can be fixed, and promises happiness by way of thinness and normality—in other words, surgeries promise the experience of living in an unmarked body (Boero, 2012;

[19] It is consistently fascinating to hear fat people's stories about being told their weight made required surgery risky, only to then be told to undergo bariatric ***surgery*** first—reeks of medical fatphobia to me.
[20] Radical fat activists I follow in online spaces refer to weight loss surgery as "stomach amputation" surgery, pointing out the absurdity of removing part of a healthy, functioning organ for the purpose of shrinking a body.

Garland-Thomson, 2002; Murray, 2008a, 2008b). Sometimes, fatphobia is so violent and so debilitating that it even becomes internalized by those of us immersed in scholarly literature that examines the violence of weight loss culture, or those upheld as pillars of the fat positive community, who eventually fall victim to the clever marketing of bariatric surgery and its promise of normality.[21]

That promise, however, is false. Consider the following consequences and complications of bariatric surgery. The most serious risk associated with bariatric surgery is, of course, death. Statistics are varied, but one study found that of those who undergo weight loss surgery, one percent die within the first year and six percent die within five years due to complications related to the surgery (Omalu et al., 2007). In a study that followed 16,000 people who had weight loss surgery, 4.6 percent of them died within one year of their surgery (Flum et al., 2005). Studies that show more conservative estimates still demonstrate alarming results. One such study illustrated three out of every 1,000 patients die within 30 days of having bariatric surgery (The Longitudinal Assessment of Bariatric Surgery Consortium et al., 2009). For people who survive bariatric surgery, consequences that await them include: increased risk of suicide and drug overdose rates (five to 10 times the expected norm), and a 25 percent increase in prevalence of misuse of alcohol (King et al., 2012); onset of addiction and substance-use disorders (King et al., 2012; 2017); severe malnutrition (Gletsu-Miller & Wright, 2013), loss of bone mass (Coates et al., 2004), and long-term digestive problems with 70% of weight loss surgery patients reporting daily vomiting (Mitchell et al., 2001). The laparoscopic band procedure, a specific type of bariatric surgery that

[21] See fat activist commentary on Ashley Nell Tipton and Gabourey Sidibe undergoing weight loss surgery.

does not involve cutting up the stomach but instead placing an adjustable band around the upper portion of the stomach to close off the bottom portion, boasts results just as alarming. Complications reported by 40 to 60 percent of people who have laparoscopic band surgery include: esophagitis, obstruction due to band slippage, incisional hernia, and band erosion (occurring when the band erodes the wall of the stomach). As a result of these complications, most people require follow-up surgeries to correct them, and over half eventually need to have the band removed. The rest do not even experience the degree of weight loss expected (Himpens et al., 2011; Martikainen et al., 2004). As if all of this isn't enough, people who have weight loss surgery still regain the weight that they lose—about 5.7 percent of patients at two years to 75.6 percent of patients at six years post-surgery (Lauti et al., 2016; Magro et al., 2008). One study of the laparoscopic band procedure specifically reports that after 10 years, 40% of weight loss surgery patient outcomes can be classified as "fair," while another 50% are classified as total "failure." Based on these findings researchers conclude that the procedure should no longer be considered an effective approach for addressing "obesity" (Suter et al., 2006).

If all of this is true, why do people continue to subject themselves to the violence of diet culture? Why is the weight loss industry still boasting profits over $72 billion in the United States alone (Harrison, 2019)? One reason is that there is much at stake in achieving beauty standards in general—thinness in particular—not least of which is the ability to avert stigma by normalizing the body (Kwan, 2010). Commenting on conformity in the context of "curing" disabled bodies, Garland-Thomson (2002) writes:

> "This flight from the nonconforming body translates into individual efforts to look normal, neutral, unmarked, to not look disabled, queer, ugly, fat, ethnic, or raced. Beauty, then, dictates corporeal standards that create not distinction but utter conformity to a bland look that is at the same time unachievable, so as to leash us to consumer practices that promise to deliver such sameness…In truth, these procedures [for more closely aligning bodies with what is defined as beautiful] benefit not the affected individuals, but rather they expunge the kinds of corporeal human variations that contradict the ideologies the dominant order depends upon to anchor truths it insists are unequivocally encoded in bodies." (p. 11-14)

The weight stigma phenomenon that fuels efforts to "cure" nonconforming bodies is powered primarily by diet culture. Fatphobia cultivates particular messages about the relationship between fatness and health that illustrate fatness *causes* health issues like diabetes, heart disease, and certain forms of cancer. It is true that data does show *correlation* between higher weight and these negative health outcomes, but this is vastly different from causation. This is where research on the impact of weight stigma becomes interesting. First, weight stigma is linked to a variety of mental health conditions like disordered eating, emotional distress, negative body image, low self-esteem and depression (Harrison, 2019). This makes sense. What is even more interesting, and not at all discussed in mainstream conversations about fatness and health, is that weight stigma has been identified as an *independent* risk factor for various physical health outcomes like diabetes and heart disease—no matter the person's body size (Hunger et al, 2015). Weight stigma has even been identified as playing a role in higher rates of infertility in fat people with uteruses who want to have children. Since weight stigma is associated with an increase in chronic inflammation, and chronic inflammation can affect ovulation and hormone production, weight stigma contributes to reproductive conditions like polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) and endometriosis (Tomiyama, 2018). In essence, the stigma associated with being fat does

far greater damage to fat people's physical and emotional health than simply being fat ever will.

Further to the data illustrating the impact of weight stigma on fat people's physical and mental health, hatred of fatness simply makes life miserable for anyone who is fat. In our analysis of the circulation of fat hatred, my colleagues and I explored participant interview data to map out how bodies are defined or valued when "fat hatred circulates as an affective economy" (Rinaldi et al., 2020, p. 37). Ahmed (2004a) uses the concept of affective economies to demonstrate that emotions do not simply reside in individual people, but that they circulate among people and create connections between surfaces. As she puts it, emotions "do things"—they "align individuals with communities…through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 119). In Ahmed's (2004a) work on affective economies, she argues that emotions cannot simply be understood as psychic—as held within people—but that they are also social and material and therefore have the power to construct bodies and their experiences. Drawing on Ahmed's (2014) work on affective economies, we examined participants' experiences in healthcare, public transit, and gym contexts and found, unsurprisingly, that fatphobia creates barriers to accessing public participation, resources and services because it makes public spaces and social exchanges uncomfortable, unwelcoming, unsafe, and inaccessible (Rinaldi et al., 2020). Hatred (of fatness in this context) is an affective economy that, based on participants' accounts, created an atmosphere in which the felt aim of the hatred was to erase or expunge fat life.

Diet culture objectifies bodies and fuels fatphobia and weight stigma. In turn, fat bodies become commodified—products sold to the weight loss industry with the hope

that they will remain lifelong customers. Diet industry profits rely on consumers whose physical and mental health suffer as a result of engaging with their products and ideologies. The science tells us that long term significant weight loss is not possible, so maintaining myths about “obesity” and fatness as unhealthy and undesirable is vital to the continued success of the diet industry, keeping people’s wallets permanently open and their appetites consistently denied. Not least of all, “obesity” myths keep fat people preoccupied with shame, thoughts about food intake, calories burned, supplements ingested, and the promise of happiness offered by their future thin selves, leaving little room (let alone energy) for political thought and organizing.

## Fat Embodiment: Experiencing fatness via dehumanization and violence

The literature presented thus far has established that fat bodies are dehumanized, objectified, and ultimately commodified under diet and weight loss culture. Specifically, fat women are targeted and forced to prove their humanity (though they never really can) by adhering as closely as possible to feminine beauty standards that position thinness as the ultimate among them. I have outlined the ways in which medicalization of fatness has contributed significantly to the dehumanization of fat people, as well as how this dehumanization makes fat people more vulnerable to violence in the form of diet culture and medical/pseudo-medical intervention that intends to “cure” fatness. How does all of this influence fat people’s experiences of and in their bodies? In other words, how does a discourse of fatness impact fat people’s embodiment?

Fat embodiment refers to how fat people experience their bodies. Embodiment theory posits that our bodies are vehicles through which we explore, interact with, and understand our world and ourselves (Merleau-Ponty in Rice, 2014). As such, our bodily experiences both influence and are influenced by culture. In her work on embodiment, Carla Rice (2014) suggests that women's body concerns often represent a search for identity in an image-oriented world. She states that women learn to see their bodies as a measure of their value and worth, and that this becomes integral to their very sense of self. She frames the body as a battleground where issues of control are worked out (Rice, 2014). Rice is interested in "body becoming" theories and how particular biological, environmental, and cultural forces both expand and limit possibilities and potentialities for what bodies can be(come) and do. She takes up Kristeva's (1982) work on abjection, a concept rooted in the idea that we reject people and things that "challenge or undermine the integrity of [our] identities and selves" (Rice, 2014, p. 32). Rice (2014) writes that abjection theory is important for understanding embodiment because it reveals the body's significance to human development and social relations (more to come on the relationship between abjection and fatness) (Rice, 2014). Furthering her discussion on abjection, Rice (2014) asserts that we are "ever vigilant against anything that threatens our boundaries of our being" (p. 50). This idea of rejecting what threatens our "boundaries of being" can be applied to fatphobic discourses.

The materiality of the fat body is threatening in various ways. For some, it symbolizes a threat to the fat person's health, to community health, and to tax dollars that are allocated to health care. For some others, a fat woman who is comfortable in

her skin threatens neoliberal devotion to consistent bodily improvement, and to achieving/adhering to strict standards of feminine beauty (i.e. standards of whiteness and class).

The construction of fat people as lazy, sloppy, immoral, greedy "freaks," and the violence of diet culture and a medical industry that positions fat bodies as diseased, as broken and in need of repair through drugs, diets, and invasive (sometimes deadly) surgeries, influences the broader culture—these are part of what Rich et al. (2010) call the assemblage of "obesity." These cultural messages then shape how fat people experience their bodies. It's important that in the face of all of this, we continue to question who defines deviance and to what end. The Foucauldian turn in feminist theory positions bodies as discursive, as cultural texts that form a site for understanding modern power; in other words, bodies are politically inscribed entities (Bordo, 1999; Davis, 2010). In a fatphobic culture, it is difficult to imagine how fat people can experience their bodies in ways that are not completely negative.

Moving through a world in a body marked as deviant means consistently being reminded of our subhuman or subordinate status. For fat people, cultural attitudes toward fatness restrict our movement both physically and emotionally. Inaccessible seating, safety devices, and medical equipment—things that cause pain or misdiagnosis—are a stark reminder of societal devaluation of fat bodies, leaving physical and emotional marks on the body. Arguably, the emotional load that fat people carry from their interactions with the world is worse than the physical pain we experience trying to fit into inaccessible environments. These experiences of physical and emotional harm at the hands of fatphobia are violent and violence enacted upon

bodies has various consequences for the survivor. Violence destroys a sense of self-determination and undermines personal integrity. And these consequences are experienced more intensely by marginalized women (Collins, 2004). Significantly, then, it cannot be understated that people who experience the violence of fatphobia (and the more unique forms of violence associated with the interlocking of body size with various other marginalized identities) are at high risk for developing mental, emotional, and physical health issues as a result of trauma associated with stigma and discrimination (Calogero et al., 2019; Carpenter et al., 2000; Friedman et al., 2005, 2008; Harrison, 2019; Herndon, 2014; Hunger et al., 2015; Myers & Rosen, 1999; Puhl & Heuer, 2008; Tomiyama, 2014; Tomiyama et al., 2018).

As I have illustrated, cultural hatred of fat bodies results in various acts of violence perpetrated against fat bodies daily. These acts of violence collect and eventually register as trauma—what I call the trauma of fatphobia. Fatphobia works in the interest of disciplinary power in the sense that all people internalize ideas about fatness and are then encouraged to either address their own fatness via body management regimes or, in the case of non-fat people, they are taught to fear becoming fat and to do whatever they can to "prevent" fatness. Diet culture maintains harmful ideas about bodies and worth and offers tools (i.e. diet products, medications, surgeries, exercise regimens etc.) that are marketed as the answer to the socially constructed problem of fatness, but that ultimately fail. And it is designed that way because a $72 billion diet industry does not yield this level of revenue if its products work (thus rendering the industry unnecessary). The power that works to cultivate and enforce self-government and self-discipline (Foucault 1979, 1991) around body size is so strong that

it is nothing short of completely understandable why people become entangled with diet culture. Unfortunately, as I have discussed above, the physical and psychological consequences are dire. In fact, fear of fat and obsession with food while dieting actually changes brain functioning (Wolf, 1997). And there is irony in the cultural conflation of thinness and health in that when poor health is correlated with fatness in women, it is often as a result of chronic dieting and the emotional stress of self-hatred that is a direct consequence of attempts to be "healthy" by trying to be thinner (Wolf, 1997). This combination of pressure from both beauty and diet culture that prescribes for women how they must look in order to experience a full sense of humanity—a pressure that requires internalizing normalizing gazes, constant self-surveillance, obsession with calories in and calories out, and steadfast devotion to the idea that humanity is only ever and exclusively accessible to those who fit a particular image—*harms women*, and in extreme cases, kills them (Bartky, 2010; Boero, 2012).

## Affect as Intensity

One of the central questions explored in this dissertation is how the affective environment of BBW bashes impacts fat women's embodiment. In this section, I will present various approaches to defining affect and conceptualizing affect theory, and discuss what this framework will do for my research on embodiment. Additionally, I explore how fatphobia constitutes trauma, suggesting that fat people experience fatphobia as a form of everyday trauma ensuring they are in a chronic state of physiological arousal and heightened vigilance, factors that contribute to negative health outcomes in marginalized populations (Calogero et al., 2019; Chrisler & Barney, 2017;

Lind et al., 2018; Lindly et al., 2014; Meadows & Bombak, 2019; Muennig, 2008; Puhl & Brownell, 2006; Schafer & Ferraro, 2011; Van der Kolk, 2014).

Modern affect studies build on Spinoza's conceptualization of affect as "the power to affect and be affected," creating space and opportunity for theorizing how bodies "become" as they interact with the world. Gregg & Seigworth (2010) assert that the beauty of affect theory is that it has numerous and unending iterations, ensuring it can be used in a variety of ways to theorize bodies and their encounters with the world. In short, affect is the capacity to act and be acted upon (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). According to Shouse (2005), some affect theorists draw boundaries—perhaps problematically—between feelings, emotions, and affect. They categorize feelings as personal, biographical sensations that hinge on a person's previous experiences, clarifying that we all have a distinct set of these personal sensations. Emotions are social—feelings turn into emotions once we express, project, or display a feeling. In this way, we can even feign emotion in order to react to a situation in an acceptable or socially appropriate manner (Shouse, 2005). Affect, however, is defined by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as pre-personal, non-conscious experience of intensity. Above all, they conceptualize affect as unformed, unstructured potential. For Deleuze and Guattari, affect is the background intensity of our everyday lives, an "ongoing hum of quantity/quality that we experience when we are not really attuned to any experience at all" (Shouse, 2005, ¶6). Importantly, however, affect hinges on bodily responses to stimuli and these responses are intimately shaped by social discourse, as we will see.

What is meant by "intensity"? Every moment of every day, bodies are impacted by hundreds of thousands of stimuli which are infolded and registered as "intensity"—

affect *is* this intensity (Shouse, 2005). Intensity is activated exclusively in autonomic responses (non-conscious bodily responses that occur most of all through the skin), and affect is found in the intensities that pass from body to body (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Massumi, 1995). It's difficult to adequately theorize or conceptualize intensities because, as Massumi (1995) explains, they are "outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as [they are] from vital function" (p. 85). Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*, Shouse (2005) explains that affect/intensity is what influences consciousness by enhancing our awareness of our biological state. He writes that affect/intensity "plays an important role in determining the relationship between our bodies, our environment, and others, and the subjective experience that we feel/think as affect dissolves into experience" (Shouse, 2005, ¶11).

Massumi (1995) cites intensity as the first step in the process of bodies infolding contexts—in other words, experiencing things. He explains that our brains are marked by traces of experiences—experiences shaped by power relations that organize broader society—and these traces are ever present. When bodies affect each other, the moment may be fleeting, but the trace or residue left by the impression produces particular kinds of bodily capacities (i.e. possibilities, depending on how we interpret that moment/experience) (Watkins, 2010). This is a complex way of saying that we are impacted by our experiences with our world and in turn, the residue or stickiness of these experiences is continuously ready to be reactivated, starting with intensity. At this point, it is important to remember that thus far, the affect theorists whose work I have presented equate affect with intensity—affect *is* intensity. Affect/intensity is

conceptualized as *pre-conscious*, which seems to suggest it exists outside of social discourse; however, I suggest that since affect/intensity influences consciousness by enhancing our awareness of our biological state (discussed in the paragraph above), and since our biological state is in response to environmental stimuli that are shaped by discourse, then affect/intensity is not, as some of the literature thus far might imply, outside of social discourse. In fact, I suggest that affect/intensity is not only influenced by social discourse, but is *essential* to our ability to make sense of how experiences of our world impact how we feel in and about our bodies. Massumi (1995) asserts that when a trace experience is reactivated toward completion in a new context or experience, that reactivation does not signify the completion of a process, but instead can be conceptualized as the past (built up traces of experiences) meeting the future. It is, therefore, a continuous cycle: something happens > intensity makes us aware of our biological state in response to what is happening > we interpret how we are responding > we learn something about ourselves/our world > traces of that experience are stored in the body for future reactivation.

Why does Massumi (1995) state that this process or cycle demonstrates the past meeting the future and not the present? Affect is a slippery concept in that it's seemingly impossible to determine exactly what it is because it is non-conscious; however, in Massumi's important contribution to the field of affect studies, *The Autonomy of Affect*, he illustrates where affect is *located* in bodily processes. In this article, Massumi (1995) details experiments that were conducted to better understand how long it takes human brains to register affect. He explains that participants were asked to make a decision to do something. In that time, their brain activity was monitored. Participants had to

indicate the moment they had made their decision and, fascinatingly, findings illustrated that brain activity occurred 0.5 seconds before the person could indicate that they had decided something. Massumi (1995) uses these findings to assert that there is *no such thing as the present*, because it is lost in the half second it takes for the brain to register affect. In other words, *affect is the brain activity that occurs 0.5 seconds before we are consciously aware that we have made a decision*. This contribution to the understanding of affect as non-conscious, unstructured bodily process is pivotal to an overall understanding of how affect is triggered by bodily encounters with the world—a world wherein these encounters are shaped by power relations that organize broader society. As a scholar interested in, intrigued, enchanted, and confused by theories of affect, Massumi's findings and conclusions provide some clarity. Additionally, I find this information particularly useful for thinking through the ways fatphobic encounters are *stored* in the body, awaiting reactivation in new contexts, and impacting fat embodiment. These findings align with those reported by neuroscientists studying the impact of trauma (Clough & Halley, 2007; Leys, 2012). In fact, the processes involved in the movement and impact of affect and the experience and development of trauma are similar. In his time researching trauma associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Van der Kolk (2014) writes:

> "We have also begun to understand how overwhelming experiences affect our innermost sensations and our relationship to our physical reality—the core of who we are. We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present." (p. 21)

This understanding of trauma maps directly to understandings of affect. In this dissertation, I am primarily concerned with exploring the impact of the affective

environment of bashes on fat women's embodiment and these definitions of affect and trauma processes open up opportunity to ask important questions like: how does residue from a lifetime of trauma caused by fatphobia reactivate in bash spaces? How are messages reinforced? How are they challenged? And what healing opportunities do bashes offer?

How does intensity factor into the process of bodies becoming? Spinoza is famously quoted as expressing that "No one has yet determined what a body can do." Feminist scholars have used Deleuze and Guattari to think through the body and embodiment, demonstrating that an understanding of affect is integral to exploring the body's capacities. The body's experience of subjecthood is an ongoing process, one in which bodies are formed (but not determined) by the surfaces with which they engage or connect. As a result, identity and embodiment are active processes with endless potential. Deleuze (1992) calls this process "becoming"—a body is always becoming otherwise than what it is, however subtly (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). Significantly, affect is retained and it accumulates to form dispositions and to shape subjectivities (Watkins, 2010). In her examination of young people's experiences of body work via cosmetic surgery and its connection to affect and embodiment, Coffey (2016) takes an impactful position, explaining that "becoming" refers to "the particular ontological perspective that bodies are not autonomous entities (subjects or objects), but are constituted through their connections. Bodies are understood as intensities, rather than entities" (p. 81). Coffey's (2016) work aligns with theories of affect presented thus far in that it situates the potential for what bodies can *be* as located in the encounters they have with their world. Her assertion that bodies are not subjects nor objects challenges my

conceptualization of personhood. I have taken as true that we experience ourselves either as subjects, people who have unique consciousness of and connection to our bodies, or as objects, constituted by outsiders' standards and expectations (i.e. normalizing gazes). And I do not necessarily think Coffey's (2016) ideas negate my understanding, but instead help to enhance it. In other words, if it's the case that we are, in fact, constituted through our connections, it may then also be the case that sometimes these connections make us feel like subjects and sometimes these connections make us feel objectified. This shift in understanding is important and shows up in the analysis performed in chapters four and five when I demonstrate how my participants' experiences at bashes made them feel more connected to and safe in their bodies (an extension of feeling like a subject), or disconnected from and unsafe in their bodies (an extension of feeling objectified/like an object). In any case, understanding that affect/intensity mediates action, means recognizing that when a body comes into contact with the world in any of the myriad ways available to it from moment to moment, affect/intensity influences what the body can do as well as possibilities for living (Fox & Ward, 2008)—in essence, affect/intensity decides how a body interprets experience and how it moves forward with a revised understanding of itself and the world.

What this means for a person's experience of their own embodiment is that it depends on how their body assembles through various connections that include discourses, norms, ideals, institutions, bodies, affects and practices, providing me with an important framework for understanding how race, gender, sexuality, and ability impact embodiment. In the introductory chapter of *The Affect Theory Reader*, Gregg & Seigworth (2010) outline various convergences and divergences within affect theory

that have emerged (and continue to emerge) over time. Theories of affect that align best with the work I'm doing in this dissertation land fifth on their list, and are described as follows:

> "The fifth [approach to affect theory] is found in the regularly hidden-in-plain-sight politically engaged work—perhaps most often undertaken by feminists, queer theorists, disability activists, and subaltern peoples living under the thumb of a normativizing power—that attends to the hard and fast materialities, as well as the fleeting and flowing ephemera, of the daily and the workaday, of everyday and every-night life, and of 'experience' (understood in ways far more collective and 'external' than individual and interior) where persistent, repetitious practices of power can simultaneously provide a body (or, better, collectivized bodies) with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm." (p. 7)

As with most bodies of theory, affect theory has a straight white guy problem. A queered approach to affect theory prioritizes bodily possibility and potential in an effort to destabilize the "norm." A variety of queer and feminist theorists' work underpins this approach, building upon and disrupting the field seemingly beholden to straight, white, cisgender men. Garcia-Rojas (2017) asserts that approaches to affect theory by women of colour pre-date and have, overall, been disregarded by white affect studies—an area of scholarly inquiry formed in the early 1990s and referred to as the "affective turn" (named by sociologist Patricia Clough). Garcia-Rojas (2017) writes that traditional affect studies privilege a Western-European standpoint and establish "a sociopolitical structure of affects that positions white affects as universal, concrete, and true" (p. 255). Formed from a history of colonization and genocide, we are encouraged to critically examine white affect studies by questioning whose affects matter.

By accepting the origin of affect theory as located within the continental (white) tradition of social sciences like philosophy and psychoanalysis, the diversity of ways in which women of colour conceptualize intensities, impulses, feelings, and emotions

continues to be ignored, therefore limiting how these articulations of feeling enable alternative understandings of affective economies. Garcia-Rojas (2017) examines the work of three women of colour: writer, feminist and civil rights activist Audre Lorde, rhetoric studies scholar Natalia A. Martinez, and Guatemalan performance poet Maya Chinchilla. I found her reading of Lorde's work on "the erotic" to be most useful for thinking through the possibilities and potentials opened up by a woman of colour approach to affect. For Lorde, the erotic is "a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence" (Lorde, 1984 in Garcias-Rojas, 2017, p. 260). Women of colour tap into the erotic as an exercise in interpreting their unique position in relation to others, to objects, and to power structures. The erotic allows women of colour to distance themselves from plasticized sensations—those that align with the state's racist, homophobic, and patriarchal norms—in an effort to listen to their bodies and determine what is pleasurable and sensual for themselves.

I am interested in the ways I can draw from Lorde's framework for the erotic to theorize how fat women experience their bodies within bash spaces—in what ways do bashes allow fat women to evoke the erotic and experience desire and sensuality in bodies that fatphobic culture deems unworthy of pleasure? In what ways does the erotic provide a lens through which I can explore how my participants determine what is *not* pleasurable or sensual? Lorde favours the erotic over the pornographic, differentiating the two based on how the erotic allows the subject to experience what is sensual for the self, while the pornographic draws from structures of power that superimpose representations of self that are empty of meaning and predicated on routinized and performative acts that deplete the subject's affective energies. "Pornography," Lorde

writes, instead of cultivating feeling, “emphasizes sensation without feeling” (Lorde, 1984 in Garcia-Rojas, 2017, p. 260). In the literature explored above there seems to be no space made for talking about how feeling factors into these processes of a body “becoming.” There is significant emphasis on the work being done by affect/intensity, but not feeling—as discussed earlier, affect studies under the helm of theorists who are cisgender white men appears to impose strict boundaries around definitions of feeling, emotion, and affect, asserting that they must be thought of as three separate entities. In this way, perhaps white affect studies better aligns with Lorde’s definition of the pornographic than the erotic.

Further insight offered by Garcia-Rojas (2017) is that the affective turn was less a turn toward affect, and was instead a reproduction of straight lines—that is, lines that privilege white philosophers and psychoanalysts whose work foregrounds white affect studies as an exclusively white body of knowledge created by theorists like Deleuze, Guattari, Spinoza, Bergson, and then more contemporary white theorists such as Berlant, Butler, Grosz and Sedgewick. Ahmed (2017) notes that an area of inquiry is shaped by who we cite. The affective turn is dominated by white standpoints because white voices are continuously cited (I am guilty of this myself in this chapter). And as we see above, Garcia-Rojas (2017) includes queer and feminist theorists among those who contribute to shaping affect studies as a white body of theory, calling attention to how whiteness persists even within marginalized areas of study.

Sara Ahmed’s work has been most influential for me throughout my doctoral studies and shapes so much of the way I have conceptualized my research project. Earlier we learned that affect theorists like Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi maintain

defined boundaries between affect, feeling, and emotion. Ahmed (2014) has been critiqued for using emotion in the place of affect. She responds by asserting that in her theorizing of emotion, she includes analysis of affective processes. For Ahmed, emotions involve bodily processes of affecting and being affected. She is interested in the "stickiness" of affect and how it sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects, while also shaping bodies and boundaries (Ahmed, 2010a, 2014). She writes, "Emotion is the feeling of bodily change. The immediacy of the 'is' suggests that emotions do not involve processes of thought, attribution or evaluation: we feel fear, for example, because our heart is racing, our skin is sweating. Emotions involve appraisals, judgements, attitudes or a 'specific manner of apprehending the world' (Sartre 1962: 9)" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 5). Ahmed (2014) maintains that affect is intentional, it directs or orients us towards objects, cultivating within us a stance on the world or a way of taking in the world around us.

Ahmed's conceptualization of affect is useful for my analysis when I think about bash spaces and their various elements as objects toward which fat women are directed. What imagined liberatory promises are held by bashes in order for fat women's emotions to orient them toward participating in bashes? How do emotions shape how fat women interact with the bash environment?

Ahmed's work on happiness is particularly relevant to my analysis. In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010b), she examines happiness through the lens of the feminist killjoy, unhappy queers, and melancholy migrants. The book is a critical examination of happiness and the idea that certain people cannot access forms of happiness that are promoted as desirable under capitalism—happiness that looks like a

straight line (i.e. finish school→start career→get married→buy a house→have kids→retire→die). Deviating from the straight lines or norms delineated by capitalist happiness is met with resistance, so it follows that the less we deviate, the less resistance we face and the happier we might feel. Happiness scripts, she suggests, can be conceptualized as straightening devices that align bodies with what is already determined as the "right way" to live a life—ways of living that are shaped by ideologies circulated and maintained by the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist heteropatriarchy. Ahmed's (2010b) assertion that some objects become happy for us if we believe they will bring happiness to us opens up space for thinking about the promises made by bashes, if not explicitly in their advertising then implicitly in the ideas that circulate within and around them pertaining to sex, desire, and community. How do these promises connect to ideas of happiness that circulate in fat women's daily lives?

Disgust as an affect is meaningful to my project. Ahmed (2014) explains that disgust is connected to bad taste and to what is considered strange or "other." Disgust is rooted in imperialism, surfacing when there is an evaluation of bodies that are strange or unfamiliar to us (like when white colonizers were disgusted by African, Turkish and Inuit appreciation for fat women's bodies). Disgust is also rooted in abjection (Kristeva, 1982), defined as the "rejection of bodies, or aspects of bodies, that threaten cultural norms about how human bodies should look and behave" (Rice, 2014, p. 197). Abjection applies to anything that is confusing or poses a threat to cultural norms of bodies (in this case, fatness threatens the cultural norm of thinness) (Rice, 2014). Fatness is abject, inspiring disgust. Ahmed (2014) describes disgust as a sticky affect—once an object is experienced as disgusting, disgust sticks to it. In this project, I find it

significant to think of the ways in which fat has been produced as a disgusting object. Fatness, therefore, becomes synonymous with disgusting. In their article exploring how emotion shapes fat feminine subjects on a weight loss reality television program, Norman et al. (2014) assert that the truth about fatness is revealed through "felt certainty," through the cultural work of emotions. This work builds on Fraser et al. (2010) who write that "obesity" epidemic discourse is driven by emotion—concern, horror, fear, loathing, obsession and panic. Furthermore, this "truth" about fat bodies constitutes an intensification of feeling—it is quite literally *felt into reality* via emotions connected to the idea of fatness. The "truth" about "obesity" does not reside in rational, scientific facts, but instead in the sticky feelings of "disgust, anxiety, fear and chaos that arise in relation to fat bodies" via "historically congealed embodied relations of differentiation" (Norman et al., 2014, p. 19). Discourse that shapes feelings about fatness, thus constructing what is taken for granted as the "truth" about fatness, circulates and intensifies through the assemblage of "obesity", an extensive network that includes schools, policy documents, recreation programs, commercial weight loss clinics, the beauty industry, the medical industry, and so on (Rich et al., 2010). In essence, the threat of fatness is really the threat of the stickiness of disgust. Fat people want to rid themselves of this stickiness and non-fat people want to avoid getting wrapped up in the stickiness at all costs. I'm interested in exploring how disgust manifests as an affect that orients fat women toward bashes, and also in the ways in which it circulates within bash spaces to shape my participants' experiences in and of their bodies.

## The BBW Collective: Trauma culture, crisis ordinariness, and fatphobia as traumatic

How does affect bring people together? More specifically, how is affect implicated in the formation of BBW community? In *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich (2003) examines the act of speaking trauma as a catalyst for creating counterpublic spheres. She focuses specifically on lesbian public cultures, performing an analysis that examines the value of transforming loss into collective memory and political action. She states that she wants to "hold out for the presence and promise of cultural formations that bring traumatic histories into the public sphere and use accounts of affective experience to transform our sense of what constitutes a public sphere" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 15-16). In examining potential applications of Cvetkovich's (2003) work to an analysis of the BBW community and my participants' experiences in and of their bodies at bashes, I am interested in looking at the BBW community as a "trauma culture." She uses the term trauma culture to refer to public cultures that form out of affects associated with trauma. In many ways, she says, these cultures serve as therapeutic for people within them. Cvetkovich (2003) uses a social and cultural model of trauma, which opens up space to speak about trauma as everyday and ongoing. This way of thinking about trauma is useful for conceptualizing fatphobia as trauma given that so much fatphobia is experienced as microaggression—expressions of negativity that are often subtle, potentially unintentional, and aimed at people as a result of their marginalized identity (Akoury et al., 2019; Sue et al., 2007). These subtle expressions of negativity may not register as traumatic in the moment, but build up over time to severely impact their targets (Akoury et al. 2019).

Similarly, Ahmed (2004b) talks about the power of emotions to shape collectivities (groups). She says that emotions are not private, but rather work to define who belongs and who does not belong to a collective. In other words, how we feel about other people is what aligns us with a collective, and how we feel about other people is shaped by our affective encounters with the world (i.e. activation of "intensity"). One of the primary affects activated by fatphobic encounters with the world is shame—shame over body size, body weight, clothing and appearance, literally and figuratively fitting into spaces, requiring accessibility aids etc. In their study of feminist resistance to online hate, Sundén & Paasonen (2018) state: "Not unlike fear, shame works on and through bodies by shaping and reshaping the social spaces in which they move. When animated by shame, bodies turn away and inward in ways that imply their shrinking of sorts, as well as the shrinking of spaces in which they move" (p. 647). Shame is an affect of "relatively high toxicity" that deeply impacts how we interpret and experience our world (Tomkins, 2008, p. 387). It is mobilized in many ways, but especially in support of conformity to norms and ideologies (Tomkins, 2008). Shame operates to create a sense of inferiority and emerges when our desire for approval and recognition is not met. We experience shame when our ability to relate to others is interrupted (Sundén & Paasonen, 2018). For Sedgwick (2003), there are people who inhabit shame-prone identities, which, she says, are closely linked to queer shame. In the same way Ahmed (2004b) suggests that affects such as fear, disgust, and anger can shape social and political collectivities, shame as a primary affect of trauma associated with fatphobia also works to shape collectivities. Some examples of collectivities born out of emotions that fuel fatphobia and encourage intense attachments to one group or another include

fat versus thin, virtuous versus lazy, and soft versus hard. But more specific to this project are the collectivities organized around what fat activist and feminist storyteller Kate Harding (2008) calls the good fatty versus bad fatty false dichotomy. In this case, those of us who belong to the "wrong" or less desirable group (bad fatty) experience the crisis and trauma of shame because we are inundated with messages about just how "wrong" we are and experience resistance to the very ways we live our lives and navigate our worlds. Good fatties don't have it much better. I suggest that those who cling to their good fatty lifestyle also experience the crisis and trauma of shame because it takes a lot of work and denial of bodily needs to maintain status on the "right" side of this false dichotomy. And to be certain, as far as I can tell, being on the "right" side of any dichotomy leaves very little room for the messiness of being human. When there is no room for messiness, but messiness is inevitable, shame thrives.

Berlant's (2011) work on cruel optimism is another contribution to affect theory that proves useful for my analysis. She defines cruel optimism as a relation that exists "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (p. 1). She explains that we build attachments to objects that we believe will bring us happiness, or will somehow improve our lives, asserting that the attachments are not inherently cruel, but that they become so once they actively impede our ability to achieve happiness. The cruelty is also found in tendencies to continue viewing an object optimistically when there is ample proof that it will not, in fact, lead to happiness. Berlant (2011) writes:

> "The affective structure of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way. However, this optimism is cruel when that object that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to transform. It is doubly cruel in that

> sometimes attachment to that object is comfortable because it is familiar, even if the relation to the object is quite threatening to the subject." (p. 2)

The "affective structure" Berlant refers to here connects with the concept of "intensities" described earlier—pre-conscious rhythms that vibrate and produce potential for myriad feelings and expressions of emotion. I suggest that these intensities that produce optimistic attachment work to keep us attached to an object, even when the object threatens our path to happiness, because of the *possibilities* opened up by the intensities themselves. We remain cruelly attached to an object because we think that perhaps next time things might turn out differently. As discussed earlier, Massumi (1995) suggests there is always leftover intensity that becomes wrapped up in other experiences, and this creates opportunity for interpreting, feeling and experiencing an attachment differently (Clough, 2010). I wonder whether bashes are objects of cruel optimism. If we struggle with how the emotional environment impacts our experiences of our bodies in these spaces, what continues to draw us to the events?

Berlant's (2011) overarching project in *Cruel Optimism* is to explore how fantasies of the good life are affected when our day-to-day encounters with the world become so overwhelming that crises are ordinary happenings that require us to be in a state of constant crisis management. Berlant (2011) connects with Cvetkovich (2003) here when she refers to "crisis ordinariness" to describe crisis as systematic, as built into our daily lives. She writes: "Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming" (Berlant, 2011, p. 10).

In light of the preceding discussion of trauma culture and crisis ordinariness, I offer the following critical insights. First, living in a society that stigmatizes, devalues,

and degrades fat bodies causes trauma (Calogero et al., 2019; Carpenter et al., 2000; Friedman et al., 2005, 2008; Harrison, 2019; Herndon, 2014; Hunger et al., 2015; Myers & Rosen, 1999; Puhl & Heuer, 2008; Tomiyama, 2014). Next, diet culture, which I have outlined as a significant negative and sometimes deadly force shaping fat embodiment, is trauma in and of itself (Harrison, 2019). Earlier, I outlined how trauma theory overlaps with affect theory. Van der Kolk (2014) asserts that for people to heal from trauma, "the body needs to learn that the danger has passed and to live in the reality of the present" (p. 21); however, fatphobia is fat people's perpetual present. The danger never passes. It is without hesitation that I suggest *trauma is undoubtedly and constantly at the center of fat embodiment in a fatphobic society*.

I propose that the BBW community constitutes trauma culture—a collectivity of people who inhabit shame-prone identities who align with each other because of shame-based trauma they have faced living as fat in a fatphobic society. Additionally, I assert that fatphobia constitutes crisis ordinariness because it is embedded into systems that organize society, infiltrating all interactions we have in and outside of institutions. Moreover, as I explore in the following chapters, I suggest that BBW bashes, as complex and complicated spaces, may reinforce or reactivate shame-based trauma—or even create new trauma—for participants. Tensions arise within BBW community spaces because of personal, political, and social differences (this is one drawback of creating community around the watered down politic of body positivity), and yet the bashes continue to be popular and well-attended. I wonder what emotional labour we are asked to do in order to attend bashes to maintain alignment with a collective that offers us a chance to feel "normal" for a few days every now and then.

Furthermore, I also explore the opportunities bashes offer attendees to heal from the trauma of fatphobia, illustrating Cvetkovich's (2003) understanding of trauma cultures as therapeutic for people who belong to them.

This dissertation builds on a limited selection of research that makes connections between affect theory and fat embodiment (Bronstein, 2015; Cain et al., 2017; Fraser et al., 2010; Gailey, 2012; Kargbo, 2013; Kotow, 2020; Kyrola, 2014; Norman et al., 2014; Phillipson, 2013). Affect theory is significant to my understanding of the dynamics at work in BBW bash spaces and their influence over fat women's embodiment. In summary, emotions define the "truth" about fatness (Fraser et al., 2010), which then works to shape collectivities like the BBW community (Ahmed, 2004), which are further produced and impacted by the everyday crisis (Berlant, 2011) of fatphobia and the trauma culture (Cvetkovich, 2003) it creates.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented an overview of significant feminist texts theorizing women's bodies and various ways women's embodiment is structured. Literature exploring power and the production of fat women's bodies, violence against fat bodies, the impact of violence on fat embodiment, and finally, affective structures and their influence over embodiment sets a framework for analyzing how the affective environment of BBW bashes shapes fat women's experiences of and in their bodies. In addition to the questions posed throughout the chapter, this framework provides a solid grounding in existing academic literature to explore the following: What do fat women learn about their bodies at bashes and how does this influence their sense of self? What power structures are at play at bashes that produce particular types of affect? And how

do the sticky affects that circulate bashes operate in the context of fat women's everyday lives?

# Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter I describe the methods I used to explore fat women's embodiment in relation to the affective environment of BBW bashes, as well as my methodological framework which is rooted in a feminist approach to knowledge creation. I begin with a section describing how I planned, organized, and executed autoethnography and in-depth interviews followed by an exploration of feminist methodological approaches to autoethnography and in-depth interviewing. Then I go on to discuss thematic analysis as my analytical framework and wrap up the chapter with a discussion of potential ethical issues that shaped my approach to this research.

## Methods

### Autoethnography

I conducted autoethnography at two bashes held during the summer of 2018—the Best BBW Bash in Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada, and the Toledo BBW Unity Bash in Lima, Ohio, U.S.A. Performing autoethnography at two bashes provided me with seven full days of research at the ground level, engaging in experience- and observation-based fieldwork. I kept a handwritten journal, reflecting on experiences three times each day (mid-morning, mid-afternoon, and before bed each night). The journal was split into three columns with the headings "event," "feelings," and "reflection." I waited one week after each bash to revisit the handwritten notes and type them up, turning them into longer journal reflections.

To begin, I reflected on how I perceived my fat body prior to each bash, including consideration for how my fatness shapes my embodiment in everyday life. This helped

me to set up a framework for comparing how my everyday embodiment may shift within bash spaces. At the bashes, I paid close attention to how I felt in or about my body during various activities and events, and I also reflected on my feelings leading up to and directly after each bash. Additionally, I was mindful of how power worked in these spaces, considering the role power dynamics played in how I felt in or about my body.

**Interviews: Choosing the sample**

I conducted interviews with 12 participants from the BBW community. I recruited participants by posting a call for interviewees in two BBW Facebook groups that each had over 3,000 members. The following language appeared on the poster:

**Are you a plus-size woman who has been to at least one BBW bash?**

**Do you feel that your BBW bash experiences have had an impact on your body image?**

**Would you like to share your story? I'd love to hear from you!**

My name is Crystal Kotow and I am a Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies PhD candidate at York University in Toronto, ON. My research project is based on the connections between BBW bash experiences and women's relationships with their bodies, including self-esteem, self-confidence, and body image. I am looking for women who identify as plus-size/BBW/thick/fat etc., and who have attended at least one BBW bash to share their stories in a one-on-one interview setting.

*Figure 1: Participant recruitment poster*

I used fat body descriptors that I believed the majority of readers would view as politically-neutral (e.g. "plus-size" instead of "fat"). I accepted participants on a first-come basis, initially aiming for 10 interviewees. I enforced three parameters for participation: 1) participants must have attended at least one BBW bash; 2) participants must identify as women; and 3) participants must identify as fat. One of my concerns going into recruitment is that I would attract participants who I would not consider fat. People of all body sizes attend bashes. It was important for me to balance the material

realities of actually being fat with the tension between acknowledging the subjective experience of body size shaped by fatphobia which makes it possible for even non-fat people to consider themselves fat. I also considered how formerly fat people fit into my study given the prevalence of weight loss surgery in the BBW community. In the end, there were no participants whose body size made me feel uncomfortable about including them in a study of fat women's embodiment.

To prepare for this research I built my presence in the community, networking in online spaces and attending various bashes. It was and continues to be important to me to cultivate trust in my relationships with other BBW community members. Between networking and my position as a superfat woman with experience and connections within the community, I was able to better achieve my goal of conducting research that was non-exploitative.

Interviews were semi-structured, ensuring a balance between having my questions answered and leaving room for follow-up questions where necessary. Interviews were conducted in person or via videoconference. I opted to videoconference nine of the 12 interviews because I was physically unable to travel to my participants, both due to an injury that made it difficult to travel, and because eight of the 12 participants live well outside of the Greater Toronto Area. My concerns about building rapport through videoconferencing were unfounded because of my efforts to build a presence in the community; in fact, I had spent time in person with 10 out of the 12 participants in the year leading up to these interviews, so rapport had already been established to varying degrees.

Interview lengths ranged from 45 minutes to over two hours—the majority clocking in at around 90 minutes. I chose to transcribe the interviews myself, giving me the opportunity to review the data closely and begin to formulate ideas for thematic analysis (Bird, 2005)—more on this method of qualitative analysis later.

## Interviews: Questions and participant demographics

The following figures present the list of questions that guided each interview and a summary of participant demographics.

| **Interview Questions** | |
|---|---|
| 1 | How would you describe the size of your body? What does this description mean to you? |
| 2 | Tell me a bit about what self-esteem means to you. How would you describe your current level of self-esteem? |
| 3 | In your opinion, what is the purpose or various purposes of bashes? |
| 4 | What made you decide to attend your first BBW bash? What makes you decide to continue attending bashes? |
| 5 | Tell me about some of the expectations you had leading up to your first BBW bash. How have your expectations changed since the first bash you attended? |
| 6 | Describe for me how you feel about your body or how you feel IN your body at BBW bashes. |
| 7 | You've described how you feel about your body within BBW bash spaces, and I'm also curious about how you feel about your body outside of bash spaces. Can you tell me a bit about that? |
| 8 | In your bash experiences, are there any notable times of feeling negatively/positively about your body? If so, what influenced these negative/positive feelings? |
| 9 | In what ways do the feelings about your body that you experience at bashes influence how you feel about your body once the bash is over? |
| 10 | How do you think sex or the potential for sex at bashes influences how you feel in your body within these spaces? |
| 11 | Do you notice a difference in how you feel about your body at the various BBW bashes you have attended? In other words, does location make a difference? |
| 12 | How would you describe BBW bashes in terms of emotion? In other words, what emotions do you experience when you attend a bash? Why do you think you experience these emotions? |
| 13 | Are there non-BBW bash spaces that make you feel the same way about your body as BBW bash spaces? If so, can you tell me about those? If not, why do you think that's the case? |
| 14 | Do you feel that BBW bash spaces are fat-positive spaces? Why or why not? How do you think this influences your experience as a fat woman at a bash? |
| 15 | How would you describe the gender dynamics of the bashes you've been to? |

*Figure 2: List of interview questions*

| Pseudonym, Age, Gender, Sexual Orientation | Marital Status | Education & Yearly Income | Race and/or Ethnicity | Disability | Size Descriptor | Number of Bashes Attended |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Annabelle, 44, Woman, Heterosexual | Divorced/ Single | Master's Degree US$40,000 | Latina (Mexican and Irish) | No | BBW, Fluffy, Fat | 4 |
| Brienne, 39, Woman, Bisexual, Polyamorous | Married | Bachelor's Degree CA$100,000 | White | No | Plus-size | 9 |
| Sarai, 48, Woman, Heterosexual | Married | PhD US$100,000 | White | Yes (physical) | Supersize | 15 |
| Ava, 49, Woman, Bisexual | Widowed | High School CA$50,000 | White | No | Plus-size, Small Fat | 5 |
| Miriam, 32, Woman, Bisexual | Partnered | College Diploma CA$32,000 | White | Yes (physical and mental) | Fat, Superfat | 10 |
| Alyssa, Woman, 40, Bisexual | Divorced | College Degree US$80,000 | White | No | Fat | 10 |
| Julie, 34, Woman, Heterosexual | Single | Master's Degree CA$150,000 | White | Yes (physical) | Fat | 9 |
| Hailey, 45, Woman, Heterosexual | Single | Associate's Degree US$33,000 | White | No | Fat | 4 |
| Georgia, 28, Woman, Heterosexual | Single | Master's Degree; Professional Degree CA$89,000 | White | No | Fat (in safe spaces) | 1 |
| Rose, 45, Woman, Heterosexual | Single | Bachelor's Degree CA$65,000 | White | Yes (not specified) | Fat | 2 |
| Betty, 43, Woman/ Femme, Bisexual/ Pansexual | Single | Master's Degree US$60,000 | White | Yes (not specified) | Fat, Pear-Shaped, Mid-size and Supersize, BBW | 2 |
| Sofia, 42, Woman, Pansexual | Divorced | Some college US$47,000 | Black | Yes (physical) | Fat, Supersize, BBW, Infinifat | Over 70 |

*Figure 3: Participant demographics*

## Feminist Methodology: Autoethnography and in-depth interviewing

Undertaking this research meant evaluating my choice of methods and methodology in relation to the tenets of feminist research—a form of research that is

"connected in principle to feminist struggle" (Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993, p. 266). Feminist research explores and documents the experiences of people who inhabit marginalized identities. It often seeks to illuminate stereotypes, stigma, and biases, and privileges knowledge creation with, by, and for people whose lived experiences are not taken seriously as knowledge-generating by traditional scholars. In this way, feminist research "foster[s] empowerment and emancipation for women and other marginalized groups, and feminist researchers often apply their findings in the service of promoting social change and social justice for women" (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 4). It is important here to reinforce messaging discussed in chapter one that, historically, feminism has collapsed women under an umbrella that includes a wide range of experiences and intersections, including those of trans men, trans women, non-binary, and gender non-conforming folks who (potentially) access the category "women" in different ways. Additionally, presenting women as a monolith does a disservice to women who live at the myriad intersections of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, ability, body size and so on.

This research project is grounded in feminist standpoint epistemology, an approach to knowledge creation that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as "a feminist critical theory about relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power" (Harding, 2004, p. 1). Feminist researchers critique the devotion to objectivity and neutrality practiced in traditional positivist research, which has ignored the subjective experiences of marginalized populations. For instance, traditional positivist research fails to take into account women's lives and experiences (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007). Feminist standpoint epistemology, and feminist approaches to research in

general, counter exclusionary positivist research by working toward knowledge creation that prioritizes interpretation, subjectivity, emotion, and embodiment (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007). Feminist standpoint epistemology works to achieve three main goals: 1) to give voice to women who have been silenced and/or ignored; 2) to reveal hidden knowledge held in women's experiences; and 3) to effect political and social change via women-centered solidarity (Brooks, 2007). Brooks (2007) uses the term women here, which has the effect of erasing the nuances of womanhood and how those of us who live at the intersection of various axes of oppression experience our worlds. Feminist standpoint epistemology seeks to meet the knower where they are to explore knowledge creation from their lens, and perhaps a shift in language in the definition of feminist standpoint epistemology might align us even more with anti-oppressive approaches to research—feminist standpoint epistemology must take into account how people of *all* marginalized identities create knowledge.

Questions that guide feminist standpoint epistemology ask what unique perspectives and insights marginalized people's experiences teach us in relation to how society functions as a whole. Feminist standpoint scholars identify the ability of members of oppressed groups to develop "double consciousness," which is "a heightened awareness not only of their own lives, but of the lives of the dominant group (men) as well" (Brooks, 2007, p. 63). It follows, then, that fat women's double consciousness may reveal a heightened awareness of how both male- and thin-privilege operate. The stories traditionally told about fat people by academics and researchers tend to objectify and pathologize fatness (Cooper, 2016). Fat people are rarely at the helm of producing knowledge about fat embodiment—about themselves

and their lived realities (Cooper, 2015; Pausé, 2012). In her book *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*, Charlotte Cooper (2016) champions a fat epistemology that is instigated by fat people themselves, supporting one of the primary goals of this dissertation, which is to give fat women (and intersections of their various other/ed identities) the opportunity to contribute to knowledge creation that honours their unique experiences and perspectives.

Feminist standpoint scholars argue that as part of an oppressed class, women have no cause or motivation to misconstrue reality because they do not benefit from reality as it stands. This is a complicated assertion given that, for instance, white women can and do benefit from interpretations of reality that uphold white supremacy. A significant reason that feminist standpoint epistemology proves useful as a grounding approach to my research is that feminist research attends to emotion, recognizing it as an important site of knowledge creation. Emotion is often ignored in traditional research paradigms that prioritize objectivity and neutrality. Women become especially skilled at expressing and reading emotion as a result of gendered roles that categorize and condition women as nurturers and caretakers (hooks, 2002; Jagger, 1997). My research is an exploration of how fat women cultivate a sense of self within and through emotionally-saturated fat-specific social events. Embracing emotion as a conduit for knowledge creation counters the idea that knowledge is only credible or useful if it is created according to standards of objectivity and neutrality. The value-free and emotionally disconnected researcher does not exist—even in studies that claim objectivity, the research is guided by researcher interest and bias. By valuing emotion, subjectivities, and unique lived experiences, we create space for new insight, new

understanding, and new knowledge (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007). Moreover, the ability to express and read emotion is particularly important because, as Jaggar (1997) writes: "Emotion is necessary for human survival…Without emotion, human life would be unthinkable" (p. 190). Feminist research explores experiences unique to marginalized populations, paying attention to how these perspectives are catalyzed by/filtered through/wrapped up in an intricate dance with emotion, and the resulting analysis is richer for it.

When I designed my research, it was important for me to be able to explore how my relationship with my body is impacted by affective structures shaping and circulating bash spaces. In order to accomplish this, I used a form of ethnography called autoethnography. Buch & Staller (2007) define ethnography as the comprehensive study of groups of people to gain a holistic understanding of their everyday lives. It is concerned with the social and cultural practices that comprise these other "life worlds." By immersing themselves in environments where social life takes place, ethnographers aim to view all activities as worthy of analysis. In other words, ethnographers work to understand how groups of people make sense of their lived realities. In autoethnography, the researcher uses "lived experience as the primary source of ethnographic data" (Buch & Staller, 2007, p. 189). *Auto*ethnography encompasses stories of or about the self, told through the lens of culture, allowing us to connect the autobiographical and personal to the social and cultural (Ellis, 2004). In autoethnography, the researcher incorporates themselves into the research and writing, while also analyzing themselves as if they were studying an "other" (Davis & Ellis, 2008). Corresponding with the rise of identity politics, autoethnography first appeared as

a methodological term in 1975 and has since evolved in terms of its framework and implementation strategies. This particular method allows for artistic and analytic demonstration of how we come to "know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience" (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 1). It is questionable whether a researcher can ever actually study themselves as an other given that the self is constituted in relationship with the other. How do I see myself as an other when I am my*self*? In my experience conducting autoethnography for this research project, I do not think that I met the condition of analyzing myself as an other, especially because the nature of the autoethnographic portion of my study was rooted in intense focus on interpreting bodily sensation, feelings and expression of emotions for how they made me feel in and about my body. I do not think it's possible to perform that level of analysis while also trying to see myself as "other" and in that way, I may not have met standards outlined by researchers and scholars who define autoethnography. Given the richness of the upcoming analysis, I am fine with that.

Autoethnography as a research method is particularly meaningful for theory building in fat studies, which is still relatively new as a scholarly discipline (Pausé, 2020). Cooper (2016) writes that autoethnography is powerful in its ability to move ethnography beyond the academy because "it can destabilise researcher privilege" and "bring marginal experience to the centre" (p. 40). There is a plethora of research conducted on and about fat people that is driven by oppressive fatphobic research design and aims, often conducted by people who are not and have never been fat. Using autoethnography, fat people can reclaim agency over their bodies and experiences. Autoethnography allows for knowledge production about, by, and for fat

people. It provides us with the necessary tools for documenting and interpreting our lived experiences. In this way, autoethnography is an activist-oriented research method that aligns with the tenets of feminist standpoint epistemology (Pausé, 2020).

The subject matter of this dissertation is intensely emotional and deeply personal, attending to the range of affects circulating and shaping the experiences of fat women in spaces that are often emotionally-charged before bash attendees even physically arrive.[22] In other words, my study deals in the messiness of social life, compounded by histories of trauma carried by fat people navigating a fatphobic world. Autoethnography is a research method that "to the best of its/our ability, acknowledges and accommodates mess and chaos, uncertainty and emotion" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 9). Social research has a history of bias against affect and emotion, and autoethnography provides a method for not only combatting this bias, but fully embracing affect and emotion as devices for knowledge creation. Autoethnography sees fieldwork as personal and knowledge as "an embodied, critical, and ethical exploration of culture" and allows for scholarship that is more "human, useful, emotional and evocative" (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 3-5). Autoethnography allowed

[22] For example, the private Facebook groups associated with bashes tend to create a particular emotional environment well before the bash takes place. In general, I have found these groups to maintain a flirty and sexually charged online environment. For instance, while perhaps not intentionally or explicitly, posts that ask members to post a photo of themselves and disclose their age, location, relationship status, and sexual orientation serve a number of purposes, not least of which indicating who may be open to and available for flirting and casual sex at the bash. In my experience, participating in these posts results in several private messages from men attending the bash—messages that intend to make a pre-bash connection with the hope it will turn into something more during the bash weekend. This is common and women often compare notes to see which men are messaging several women at a time. Emotions that circulate as a result: a sense of excitement, competitiveness, inadequacy, and even envy.

me to explore my experiences at two bashes, helping me to make meaning of my relationship with my body and my body in relationship with others'.

It was also important to me to understand how these complex spaces shape other fat women's understanding of their bodies. The nature of my study as rooted in an exploration of deeply emotional elements of embodiment inspired me to choose interviews (over focus groups, for instance) to enhance the chances participants would feel comfortable opening up about difficult feelings they have about bashes or have experienced at bashes. I deemed in-depth interviews the best method for allowing my participants to share their stories and to have their voices heard by a researcher who is deeply invested in *their* understanding of their experiences.

What distinguishes feminist in-depth interviewing from interviewing in general? Ensuring a feminist approach to in-depth interviewing requires careful examination of the types of interview questions asked, mindfulness of the researcher-researched relationship, and awareness of power and authority of the researcher role. Additionally, regardless of method, feminist researchers should practice reflexivity through all phases of a research project. It is to the question of reflexivity in feminist research that I now turn.

**Feminist Research and Reflexivity**

By engaging with feminist research methods in this project, I commit to the practice of researcher reflexivity, which is a process by which researchers work to *continuously acknowledge how our positionality—our identities, lives, beliefs, feelings and relationships—contributes to how we approach our research and to how we report our findings*. Reflexivity is both epistemologically and methodologically significant—

researchers must be reflexive throughout the process of identifying what might constitute knowledge, as well as when we decide what methods are suitable for obtaining it (Nencel, 2014). As much as feminist standpoint epistemology seeks to explore knowledge creation from the standpoint of the knower and seeks to prioritize knowledge creation by those of us traditionally left out of positivist research, there are still limits to the practice that make it possible to reinforce more oppressive practices involved in conducting research on other people. I am thinking particularly about limits to analysis of other people's stories—something I take on in chapters four and five. While I may never be able to know for certain that I have interpreted and represented my participants' stories exactly as they intended for me to do so, I can use tenets of feminist researcher reflexivity as well as my previously discussed researcher positionality to do the most justice possible in my analysis. In the following discussion, I explore how researcher reflexivity can be mobilized in the context of my chosen methods: autoethnography and in-depth interviews.

Researchers engaged in autoethnographic work use reflexivity to reflect on "experiences, identities, and relationships in order to consider how they influence our present work" (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 29). While performing autoethnography at two bashes, I remained acutely aware that as a white, queer, disabled, mentally ill, working class, superfat, cisgender woman, these elements of my identity shape how I am affected in bash spaces; moreover, they also impact how I affect the bash environment and other attendees. Autoethnography required me to be in a constant state of observation and reflection—what was I experiencing? What did I notice? What might I miss as a result of my positionality? What might I attend to more

closely as a result of my positionality? How did experiences make me feel? Why was I feeling this way? What aspects of who I am physically, emotionally, and intellectually are influencing these feelings? What power dynamics are at play influencing how I am feeling, and in which direction(s) is the power moving?

For in-depth interviewing, reflexivity "goes to the heart of the in-depth interview; it is a process whereby the researcher is sensitive to the important 'situational' dynamics that exist between the researcher and the researched that can affect the creation of knowledge" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 130). Feminist researchers engaged in in-depth interviewing question how our assumptions intervene in our research and how these assumptions influence the type of questions we ask. We question how our biases guide us toward a particular research style and pay close attention to any agendas we may have that shape what we ask and, therefore, what we find.

The way my assumptions showed up in the design and execution of my research are more apparent to me now than they were when I initially carried out participant recruitment and interviewing. For instance, even though I intended to recruit any person who identified as a woman (or had at some point in their bash experiences), my perception of bash spaces and the BBW community in general as largely heterocentric led me to assume that I would likely end up with participants who were cisgender, straight women. In collecting demographics information, participants were asked to share their gender identity and sexual orientation. All of them identified as women and none of them specified whether their identification was cis- or trans-oriented—in other words, I cannot make conclusions about whether my assumptions about the gender identity distribution of my participants aligned with their reality; however, with respect to

sexual orientation, my assumptions turned out to be unfounded. Fully half of the participants identified as bisexual and/or pansexual. I also assumed that the majority of my participants would be white given my loose observations of race demographics at bashes and in online BBW groups. Next, instead of trying to control for diverse racial representation, I opted to accept interviewees as they responded to the call for participants. As a result, there was minimal racial diversity among my participants. One woman was Black, one woman was Latina, and the remaining 10 were white. Taking all of this into consideration, I now recognize I should have been more thorough in crafting interview questions that would have allowed participants to more meaningfully explore bash experiences in relation to their sexuality and race. I discuss this further in chapter six when I consider opportunities for future research.

Del Busso (2007) writes about embodied reflexivity as a methodological tool in interviews. The idea is that the physical body influences power dynamics in interview settings. The researcher is in a powerful position given that they are collecting participants' stories, interpreting them, and then presenting them as academic research findings. It is therefore imperative that reflexivity extends to querying how the physical body of the researcher might impact the information they gather. Interestingly—and perhaps not surprisingly—in advocating for research on fatness that is from a position of fat embodiment, Cooper (2016) cites a literature review conducted by Warin & Gunson (2013) that concluded that the normative bodies of many "obesity" researchers affect what participants are willing to share and that this particular body-centered power dynamic often produces silences in the research. This finding is echoed by Ingraham & Boero (2020) who write about the significance of standpoint and reflexivity to

sociological studies of fatness, asserting that “This is not to say that thin scholars cannot or should not study fatness, but when we consider how our bodies ‘show up’ to collect data and produce research—size actually does matter” (p. 115).

Pausé (2012) asks: “When it comes to fatness and fat bodies, who gets to be a knower?” (¶ 5). She is questioning who is given the power to generate knowledge about fat people. Pausé (2012) asserts that “obesity” researchers who are not and may have never been fat are granted the status of “knower,” while at the same time fat epistemology created by actual fat people who share stories about our own bodies and lives is not taken seriously. My position as a superfat researcher allowed me to connect with my participants on a level of relative body-size understanding. Experiencing fatphobia and the emotions tied to being overwhelmed by (and eventually managing) that trauma allowed me to: 1) ask meaningful questions about my participants’ experiences of/in their fat bodies, 2) ask these questions in a way that did not objectify my participants, and 3) connect emotionally with participants. Unexpectedly, connecting and being in conversation with my participants made me feel at home in my own body, especially during more vulnerable moments of sharing. Being embodied is never a private matter; instead, it is continuously mediated by our interactions with others. By acknowledging that interviewing itself is an embodied practice—by reflecting on how we affect and are affected by our interactions with research participants—we open up potential for more significant analysis and a more vibrant epistemological journey (Burns, 2003).

In many ways, embodied reflexivity allowed me to minimize harm and avoid objectifying my participants during interviews. Since some of my questions asked

participants to discuss sensitive or triggering topics, it was important for me to create as safe and comfortable of a space as possible, which I believed was rooted in illustrating to them that they could trust me to hold their stories and represent them accurately in my writing. I began this process a year before I even posted a call for participants. By increasing my presence in the BBW community and participating regularly in online BBW spaces on Facebook, I became recognizable and associated with particular feminist and fat-positive opinions and ideas. I also attended various parties and bashes, creating in-person connections. As a result, by the time I started interviewing, I was connected meaningfully in some way or another to almost every interviewee. Next, I have a warm, friendly, and open personality. I knew it was especially important to draw on these characteristics during my interviews to continue to build trust. Additionally, a special portion of the informed consent form told participants that there was a possibility sensitive topics would arise during the interviews, and I made sure to remind participants of that detail right before starting interviews. Each participant was told that if at any point they were uncomfortable with a question or uncomfortable with the interview in general, we could skip the question or stop the interview. This gave participants power and control over their stories before and during the interview. They were also made aware that if they decided at some point during the following year or so that they did not want their interview included in the analysis and dissertation, they could tell me and I would destroy the data (acknowledging that once the dissertation was written and defended, there would be little I could do to remove their contribution). Finally, and arguably most importantly, I did not withhold emotion. If difficult topics came up that triggered an emotional reaction on my part, I did not attempt to suppress the

emotion. For instance, there were several times I was brought to tears by participants' accounts of painful memories and experiences. By prioritizing emotional connection (as opposed to the rigidity of objectivity and neutrality), I believe I opened up opportunity for more meaningful connection with each of them.

## Qualitative Approaches to Data Analysis: Thematic analysis

Qualitative approaches to data analysis seek understanding phenomena from the perspective of those experiencing it. I used a form of qualitative analysis called thematic analysis to analyze my data. Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It's a flexible approach to data analysis because it is not wedded to any specific theoretical framework. Moreover, thematic analysis is a qualitative methodology driven by a belief in subjectivity and multiple realities, a commitment to understanding phenomena and participants' experiences, and finally, centering participant commentary in the reporting of findings (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). All of these characteristics of thematic analysis mark it as a well-suited method of analysis for a research project grounded in feminist standpoint epistemology.

In the last decade or so, researchers have distinguished thematic analysis from a more generalized content analysis, marking it as a flexible and useful research tool that provides researchers with the ability to deliver rich, detailed, and complex accounts of their data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In 2006, Braun & Clarke published a paper that served to demarcate thematic analysis, suggesting that many researchers use thematic analysis but that there were no existing guidelines for researchers to follow. They went on to develop the following phases as a roadmap for employing thematic analysis as

qualitative methodology:

| Phase | Description of the process |
|---|---|
| 1. Familiarizing yourself with your data: | Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas. |
| 2. Generating initial codes: | Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code. |
| 3. Searching for themes: | Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. |
| 4. Reviewing themes: | Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis. |
| 5. Defining and naming themes: | Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. |
| 6. Producing the report: | The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. |

*Figure 4: Braun & Clarke (2006) phases of thematic analysis*

Following the phases above I distilled my data down to the following themes (followed here by their sub-themes):

1. Participant reports of normalizing gazes and men's objectifying advances at bashes
    a. Participant experiences of bashes as spaces where fat women are supplied for men's consumption
    b. Participants' direct experiences with the male gaze and its interference with their ability to feel safe
    c. Participant experiences with the "hierarchy of attractiveness" in bash spaces
2. Participant encounters with diet culture in bash spaces
    a. Participants' exposure to diet talk and diet behaviours
    b. Participants' exposure to people who have had weight loss surgery
3. Participant access to pleasure and desirability

    a. Participant experiences receiving affirming and empowering attraction-based attention from men and women
    b. Participants having greater access to sexual pleasure and fat sex education
4. Participant access to fat community
    a. Participant reports of heightened self-esteem
    b. Participant experiences with and exposure to fat fashion
    c. Participant accounts of the power behind feeling “normal”
    d. Participant experiences carrying lessons learned at bashes into the real world

The first two themes are analyzed in chapter four, which is dedicated to exploring participant experiences at bashes that served to diminish their ability to feel safe and connected to their fat bodies. The second two themes are analyzed in chapter five, which is dedicated to exploring participant experiences at bashes that promoted feelings of safety, joy, and connection to and in their fat bodies. Each theme is interpreted in detail to theorize the significance of patterns and their broader meanings and implications, and analyzed in relation to theoretical perspectives presented in chapter two. Thematic analysis can remain at the *descriptive* level of analysis; however, I chose to also *interpret* my data which allowed me to identify and examine underlying ideas, assumptions, and ideologies that shape participants’ experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Ethical Issues

For as long as I've participated in the BBW community online and at social events, my relationship with the scene has been complicated. When I went to my first Club Attitude (a now defunct Toronto BBW group) event in 2011, I felt like for the first time in my life, I could walk into a club or bar and know for certain that if people were staring, it was more likely in the spirit of admiration than fat hatred; however, the novelty faded quickly. It became clear to me that most of the people who hit on me—men in particular—were only interested in sex. This is no different from dynamics at regular bars and clubs, but I see now how my expectations shaped my experience. Because I had never had access to what I conceptualize as "normative" forms of desire (a product of social capital seemingly freely given to non-fat people), I assumed that once I entered a space where my body type *was* considered desirable, somehow this would translate into desire for me as a *whole person*. Sadly, the radical nature of a fat-specific social scene existing in and of itself is not enough to overcome broader societal forces like misogyny and heteropatriarchy. These phenomena have a strong influence over power dynamics within the BBW community, as we will see play out in the following chapters.

Some key observations from my early days in the scene persist: first, objectification of women is explicit and rampant in many of the online BBW community spaces; second, there are generally more women at parties than men, so every event is flavoured by an undercurrent of competition for men's attention; third, it is all too common to turn down the advances of a man only to have him switch to another seat and chat up a friend. It seems like people play a game of chances—try enough times with enough people and eventually someone will bite.

I was also (and remain) disenchanted by the body politics of the spaces. As I explain in chapter one, at the time I found the community, I was in the middle of what I'll refer to as my "fat awakening," working to free myself from diet culture and, mistakenly, I expected this particular community of fat people to be just as interested in overthrowing thin ideals. What I found instead was that many people still clung to myths of fatness, engaged in the latest restrictive diets and food fads, and were devoted to remaining on the "good" side of the good fatty/bad fatty divide. At one point, I signed up to participate in a forum where many members of the Toronto BBW community hung out online. One topic thread was about bariatric surgery. Perhaps naively, I read the thread and responded the only way I knew how—with reading and research recommendations for people considering weight loss surgery that would hopefully deter them from undergoing such an invasive and sometimes life-threatening procedure. It became clear I was not welcome in that particular thread when I was met with intense vitriol by a woman who had already had weight loss surgery and whose seeming success made her an expert in knowing what was best for fat people. I suppose I also came across as though I knew what was best for fat people and I understand now that it was a mistake for me to wander into that space at all. In other words, it should have come as no surprise that I would be met with resistance. I also understand now that my expectation of any space to be free of fatphobia and diet culture was, at best, optimistic.

Despite all of this, I kept attending the events because they were fun in general and I knew how to spot and connect with people who held feminist views—maybe I have feminist radar. In fact, I met many of the people I consider close friends through

the BBW community. The spaces may not be significantly politically radical, but radical people circulate within and through them.

Motivation for taking on this research project involved the various ways in which my relationship with my body had been affected by my experiences at bashes. I struggled significantly with the tensions between a variety of bash phenomena: seeing how bashes reinforced sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia; how they made me feel like I needed to compete with other fat women for men's attention; how utterly blissful it was when I made flirtatious and playful connections with people who caught my interest; and the sense of community and strength I felt when I made connections with other women. The complexity of bash environments challenged my orientation toward binary thinking. Bashes are not good spaces. Bashes are not bad spaces. Instead, they are a combination of all of the elements that structure society that just happen to feel more intense because of the histories of body trauma rooted in fatphobia that circulate the events.

In many ways, this complex and complicated relationship with the BBW community and my experience at bashes shaped my approach to planning, executing, and interpreting this research. Is this an ethical issue? Maybe in some ways. The majority of my interviewees are people I have connected with over the years at events, which means they are mostly all already more progressive thinkers who know my political leanings. This means that my data is likely skewed toward participants being able to perform a more critical analysis of their own experiences before I even apply my own critical and theoretical lenses.

All of this considered, my experience and position within the community helped me to connect with my participants in ways an outsider would not. The interview questions were shaped by my experiences, yes, but I was also able to ask them in a way that allowed participants to tell their stories freely. I entered into this research three years ago adamant about exposing these so-called “body positive” spaces as anything but. Instead, I learned from my participants and from myself that bashes offer fat women a variety of experiences ranging from awful to joyful, and that in a fatphobic world having access to these joyful experiences of fat embodiment is important. Many of my participants recognized how they were affected by the more oppressive aspects of the bash environment; however, they also acknowledged bashes as fat-specific social spaces where they have learned about themselves in significant ways, gained confidence, built community, and built resilience to arm themselves against trauma inflicted by fatphobia. Some interviewees were affected deeply enough by negative experiences that they left the community altogether, while for others, positive bash experiences make it worth continuing to wade through the less desirable aspects.

## Conclusion

Feminist research is sometimes messy and this project was born of an equally messy and complicated relationship to community. There are no definitive conclusions or generalizations to be made, just stories to be held. I knew this going into the project, which flavoured the research, analysis, and writing processes with a hint of magic and whimsy—this is more than I could have ever asked of my work. Making room for messiness encouraged me to remain open while bearing witness to the variety of stories I was fortunate enough to receive—even my own stories, which have shifted in

the short amount of time between recording them and reporting them in the upcoming chapters.

Through feminist approaches to autoethnography and in-depth interviewing, I honour the tenets of feminist research by contributing to the creation of new knowledge by allowing marginalized voices to tell their stories and by making space for social change as a result of the power of stories to help us understand and connect.

# Chapter Four: Interrupting Embodiment—Normalizing Gazes and Diet Culture in BBW Bash Spaces

## Introduction

One of the range of experiences interview participants identified having at bashes was disconnection from their bodies—in other words, dis-embodiment. If the term embodiment is used to describe how we experience our bodies and how our bodies become vehicles for understanding our world and ourselves (Cooper, 2016; Merleau-Ponty in Rice, 2014), this chapter presents participant accounts of bash experiences that stifled their ability to be present in their bodies and feel free to explore and understand their environment. Experiences that resulted in bodily disconnection were both subtle and explicit, stimulated by two categories of phenomena that comprise the overarching themes of this chapter:

1. Normalizing gazes and men's objectifying advances at bashes
2. Encountering diet culture in bash spaces where participants assumed they would be safe from its influence

The aim of this chapter is to explore various stories of how participants felt objectified at bashes and to identify how these experiences are an extension of a normalizing gaze that I refer to as the "objectifying gaze of fatphobia;" which operates as an agent of dis-embodiment.

When I use the word "objectified," I am speaking specifically to participants' encounters with the bash environment that intensified self-surveillance (Bartky, 2010; Berger, 1972), creating a rift in their ability to feel at home, comfortable, or at ease in

their bodies. From the moment their bodies are marked as fat, fat people's experiences are shaped by an objectifying fatphobic gaze. It works like this: cultural messaging around fatness creates an atmosphere in which fat people become increasingly concerned with how their fat bodies are being read by others. This encourages self-surveillance and self-discipline—in other words, intense preoccupation with how their bodies are perceived, with assumptions being made about them based on their body size, and with implementing disciplinary practices like dieting in order to shrink their bodies or wearing shapewear in order to manipulate their bodies into more desirable or acceptable forms. This preoccupation stems from shame connected to the fat body's violation of social norms (Sedgwick, 1995, 2003; Tomkins, 2008). Fat women internalize fatphobic stereotypes and work to "prove" the stereotypes do not apply, resulting in a shame-based performance meant for others to consume. As I mentioned above, the objectifying gaze of fatphobia is one of a variety of normalizing gazes, all of which are connected. What is the relationship between the fatphobic gaze and other normalizing gazes? First, the fatphobic gaze is an extension of the male gaze in the sense that the male gaze identifies thinness as an ideal for women and the fatphobic gaze serves to uphold and further reinforce that ideal by presenting a variety of reasons fat is unhealthy and unattractive. Next, the fatphobic gaze is an extension of a white supremacist gaze given the historical and inseparable relationship between racism and fatphobia (Forth, 2012; 2015; Strings, 2019). The fatphobic gaze is also an extension of a heteronormative gaze in that heteronormative ideals of bodies rely upon men's evaluation of the attractiveness of women, which, of course, values thinness (Gailey, 2015). Finally, as I explore in more depth later in this chapter, the fatphobic gaze is also

in relationship with the gynaeopticon gaze (Winch, 2016), which describes a network form of governance that trains women to police themselves and each other *especially* around body size. As the discussion and analysis presented in this chapter illustrates, these normalizing gazes circulate bash spaces, shaping the affective environment and influencing how my participants feel in and about their bodies.

An example of the way fatphobic and other normalizing gazes have shaped my experience in my superfat body is by impacting how I choose to dress. For many years I wore clothing that tucked my body into a more acceptable fat shape. I was rarely physically comfortable, but it allowed me to feel better about being in the world. Almost daily strangers on public transit or walking by me on a sidewalk would stop to tell me how "put together" I looked. In my mind, I felt more at ease knowing that even though I am a superfat person, at least I was not feeding the stereotype that fat people are "sloppy." Being told I looked "put together" essentially implied: "You're fat, but you put effort into your appearance. Bravo." In fact, there were a handful of times that messaging was explicit. Constant concern with proving I did not fit a stereotype meant sacrificing physical comfort, money (because plus size fashion is anything but financially accessible), and overall emotional and physical energy. Most importantly, this performance was rooted in my desire to limit the chance I might be targeted and harassed while in public. This raises questions about how the *anticipation* of fatphobic vitriol impacts a body in addition to what we already know about the physical and emotional effects of actually experiencing weight stigma. As a superfat woman, I'm held to a higher standard of feminine beauty, so I feel pressure to perform my femininity above and beyond non-fat feminine people (Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009). Wearing

skirts and dresses that draw my waist inwards against its natural shape is a type of body management, making up for my superfatness by, at the very least, occupying space in a more acceptable form—literally attempting to exert control over a body marked as out of control. Literature points to fat women specifically feeling pressured to constantly prove their humanity by engaging in these sorts of disciplinary practices, and that the ultimate goal for fat women is to take up as little physical space as possible (Boero, 2012; LeBesco, 2004).

When I had determined the content of this chapter would illustrate participants' experiences with objectification, dis-embodiment, and resultant self-surveillance, one question kept repeating: what emotional toll is taken by existing in a near constant state of concern with how you are being perceived by others? In chapter two, I presented theory that exemplified the violence of fatphobia and discussed how it puts fat people at risk of developing mental, emotional, and physical health issues. This conclusion is supported by literature that illustrates these health issues arise in response to trauma associated with stigma and discrimination (Calogero et al., 2019; Carpenter et al., 2000; Friedman et al., 2005, 2008; Herndon, 2014; Hunger et al., 2015; Myers & Rosen, 1999; Puhl & Heuer, 2008; Tomiyama, 2014). Fatphobia causes trauma, and the objectifying gaze of fatphobia creates and maintains stigma and discrimination against fat people. This is the toll taken when we are taught that we are not allowed to experience our bodies as subjects, and instead learn how to engage in near constant self-surveillance. In the following discussion, I introduce how some of the participants described their relationship with their bodies, thus revealing how they are affected by the objectifying gaze of fatphobia.

A few years ago, Brienne, a 39-year old white woman who identifies as plus-size, renewed her vows with her husband in Las Vegas surrounded by the friends she has made in the two years she has been attending BBW bashes. She talked about bodily preoccupation being her "only concern leading up to that day," sharing with me that in the last 30 years she has never worn sleeveless tops or dresses because she hates the appearance of her arms. She described having an "emotional meltdown" in Las Vegas because her vow renewal dress was sleeveless. While her friends assured her she looked beautiful, she chose not to post pictures of the event on social media because of shame she feels about the appearance of her arms. Additionally, Brienne explained that she is frequently concerned with people seeing her value and that she thinks she needs to "work harder for that" than she would if she were thin, exemplifying how fat women must constantly work to prove their humanity (Boero, 2012; LeBesco, 2004).

Ava, a 49-year old white woman who describes herself as a smaller fat, identified the impact of internalizing fatphobic opinions of her body.

> Ava: You know, I think when I used to look at my body when I was younger, the act of being fat or having fat on my body, my squishy belly and all that stuff—I don't think that's not a pleasurable experience, I'm just told that it's not. For me, I didn't really know there was anything wrong with me until somebody told me there was something wrong with me. So I think bodies are just bodies, man. The reason I probably feel the way I do about my own body is because I've been told all my life that there's something wrong with it and it looks ugly.

When Ava talks about being told all her life that her fat body is wrong, she speaks to the assemblage of "obesity," identified by Rich et al. (2010) as the extensive network through which "obesity" discourse circulates and intensifies. This includes things like educational institutions, the diet and beauty industries, the medical industry and health policy, but also taps into sources like friends and family who perpetuate and reinforce

the seemingly “official” messages in circulation, but at a more personal level. Ava explained to me that much of what she has internalized about fatness is compounded by age at this point. She explained that she does not think she would feel as badly about her body, or be as concerned with how her fatness is perceived if she were younger and “gravity hadn’t set in.”

Miriam, a 32-year old white woman who identifies as superfat, revealed how fatphobia and ableism intersect to create a seemingly more intense and complex form of self-surveillance and how this impacts her self-esteem.

> Miriam: I think especially because for my particular disability, which is moderate to severe arthritis in my knees, and then I get back pain that is related to my size, because I know size exacerbates things, and it’s hard because it’s invisible a lot of the time. So people will see me struggle on stairs and they think well, “she’s so fat,” and that can kind of really mess with me as far as my self-esteem because I’m way too concerned about what someone thinks about my disability. Like the times I need to use a permit in my car so I can park closer because I’m having a bad knee day or just like physical pain, like because after a certain amount of walking my knee locks up and doesn’t bend, I’m literally just walking on toothpicks. I worry so much about every time I open my door when I use one of those permits and [an accessible parking] spot that someone’s going to yell at me, call me fake or lazy and fat. And that messes with my self-esteem because I also think that anyone looking at me will see the fat lady. Like they don’t think of my disability, they just think I’m a fat lady.

The fat disabled body experiences oppression at the intersection of body size and ability. Notions of the neoliberal body factor into this particular experience of oppression in that fat bodies and disabled bodies are viewed as unfit, incapable, and especially in the case of fat bodies, as a drain on the healthcare system. These conditions violate neoliberal standards that require bodies to be productive (Guthman, 2009). Miriam’s self-surveillance is heightened by this intersection of oppression and she shared that sometimes her concern with what others might think of her using an accessible parking spot is so overwhelming that struggling through the physical pain becomes preferable to

the potential emotional pain of being judged or harassed. Additionally, mirroring my own experiences as a superfat woman, Miriam explained that she is treated significantly better in public when she "steps it up," presenting as ultra-feminine, work she does to try to temper public reaction to her body. This work is particularly important for her when plans include eating in public.

> Miriam: There is that subconscious, or even conscious need to put on the makeup, put on the outfit, and like people will see me and be like "oh she's huge and eating, but at least she's taking care of herself appearance-wise."

Hailey is a 45-year old white woman who describes her body as fat. In addition to experiencing societal fatphobia, Hailey's preoccupation with her body and how it is perceived is deeply impacted by emotional abuse in romantic relationships.

> Hailey: Every relationship that I was in was, there was never a healthy relationship so it was always, there was demeaning, look at you, nobody's going to want you, look at your body. And it was worse, what was crazy, is when I was 365 pounds my self esteem was better because I had been heavy for so long that I became comfortable with myself. My best friend used to tell me, she's like, after I lost the weight I would ask her does this make me look fatter? And she was like "girl, when you were 365 pounds you used to strut your stuff like a peacock. Couldn't nobody tell you nothing. Now you've lost weight and you're harder on yourself now than you were then." After I lost the weight and I was in a relationship, my ex told me my body was disfigured and I developed body dysmorphia.

Hailey's experiences with relationship violence as a fat woman maps to the literature discussed in chapter two that illustrated how in a society where white, heterosexual, able-bodied and class privileged cis men are considered the standard for humanity, people who do not fit that standard are more susceptible to violence (Farrell, 2011). In Hailey's case, she experienced abuse that called her value into question based on her fat body prior to losing weight, and then based on her "disfigured" body once she had lost weight, ensuring she could never feel safe, comfortable, or at home in her body.

Sofia, a 42-year old Black woman who describes her body as infinifat revealed that at this point in her life, she feels good in her body on a daily basis, including when she is out in public. She recognizes she is hypervisible and talked about the work she puts into her appearance to really give people something to look at.

> Sofia: I definitely feel like I'm under a microscope in public. Like I still wear probably more daring things than just the average person in general, regardless of body size. Like I'm not afraid of form fitting or low-cut or super tight. But there's never a time, if I'm going to go out in something like that, I have to have armour. So it's full face of makeup, full hair, full whatever, so it's like if you're going to look then I'm going to give you something to look at. And if my picture ends up on the internet at least I'll look at it and go, honestly, I look fantastic.

Sofia's experiences of self-surveillance identified above are impacted by race and body size. As discussed in chapter two, racist ideologies mark Black women's bodies as both de-sexed and hypersexual, animalistic, immoral, and depraved, thus justifying their dehumanization (Collins, 2009). Additionally, both the Black body and the fat body are considered deviant and out of control. As a Black, infinfat woman, Sofia recognizes that she will garner attention when she's out in public and works to protect herself by performing her femininity at a higher and seemingly enjoyable level.

These excerpts serve as a sample of how my participants experience their bodies from outside of themselves, as observers taking on the outsider's gaze which affects how they view themselves and the steps they take to mitigate further harm. Again, this begs the question—what is the emotional toll taken by being nearly constantly concerned with how others perceive you? More to the point of this chapter, what relationships of power rooted in objectification circulate BBW bash spaces to reinforce bodily preoccupation and disconnection? And how are fat women's bodies, sexuality, and desirability produced by these power relations? To explore these

questions, the following weaves together participant accounts of bash experiences that encourage and intensify self-surveillance with applicable journal excerpts from autoethnography I performed at two bashes.

## Normalizing Gazes and Objectification at BBW Bashes

In 2018, a video surfaced on YouTube by a user named Chris Maverick who decided to attend a BBW bash in Las Vegas to find out what these events entailed and to interview people about their motivations for attending. At the time of this writing, the video has over 50,000 views. Ever the skeptic, I decided to watch the video. I recognized a number of people and he seemed to be filming them without their knowledge. The first 16 minutes or so, the video is relatively harmless, but eventually he offers up his opinion that one woman's breasts look like triangles, a man on the dance floor looks like a child molester, and that ultimately, he would never have sex with any of the women at the bash.[23] This story exemplifies just one way bash attendees are at risk of being objectified and denigrated. While I have not heard of anything specifically like this happening in the BBW community before, it fits into a larger theme that considers how and why violence and discrimination is perpetuated against people inhabiting marginalized bodies—in this case, fat people just trying to have a good time. What levels of entitlement did Chris Maverick bestow upon himself to give him the confidence to enter a space not meant for him, and how much of that entitlement relied on the fact

[23] Interestingly, when I revisited the video on May 2, 2020 in order to write this section, I found it had been cut down by almost eight minutes and all of the objectifying and disrespectful commentary had been removed. He has left the comments section open and has not deleted any of the critiques that members of the community left on the video. While I do not recommend actually viewing the video, interested parties can find it here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QX3PgXwaZIo&t=2s&has_verified=1

that he was entering a space specifically for people the broader culture defines as unworthy, uncivilized, and undeserving of respect?

Chris Maverick's actions caused harm to the community and constituted objectification of fat bodies. What became clear in my discussions with participants is that the objectification they experienced at the hands of normalizing gazes in bash spaces strongly impacted their ability to feel safe in and connected to their bodies. In chapter five, I examine how fat women's access to desire in bash spaces can help to address or even heal some of the trauma caused by fatphobia, thus helping them feel fully embodied; however, in this chapter, I present accounts of how that same access to desire sometimes comes at the cost of being objectified and made to feel unsafe. Three sub-themes were identified in the interviews that I will explore in depth:

1. Overwhelming feeling that bashes are where fat women are supplied for men's consumption
2. Participants' direct experiences with the male gaze and its interference with their ability to feel safe
3. The impact of what participants called the "hierarchy of attractiveness" in bash spaces.

**"Come get your meat!": Fat women as objects for consumption**

I intended to begin each themed section with an appropriate excerpt from my autoethnography journals; however, in this case—and only this case—there were no circumstances at the two bashes I attended as part of conducting my research that connect specifically to this theme. With that said, I have certainly had bash experiences in which the affect circulating the event space was heavy with the feeling of being

consumed. For instance, I recall walking into a lingerie party with a friend at a bash years ago. Both of us immediately felt uncomfortable in the room. Men lined the perimeter watching women dancing in the middle. My friend and I sat along the perimeter as well and kept our robes tied for most of the night because we already felt on display and did not want to amplify the negative feelings by only wearing lingerie. At one point, my friend was overwhelmed enough to leave. I also distinctly remember someone asked me to dance, but I was so preoccupied with who was watching me and how I was being watched that I declined. Self-surveillance made it impossible for me to enjoy being near her, moving with her, and having fun together. The atmosphere in the room made it difficult for me to feel connected to my body and to experience what would have been a truly joyful moment.

The atmosphere is not intended to make people feel uneasy—quite the opposite, I am sure. But what I describe above is not a one-off experience. Colls (2012) identified the same dynamic—men standing around the outer edges of the dance floor, watching women—in her study of nightclub events hosted by the UK BBW group LargeLife. It is important to note how entering this space impacted my ability to feel embodied. As a fat woman, I have lived a lifetime of messaging telling me I'm not sexy, nor desirable, so attending a lingerie party was my chance to be a superfat body in a public space wearing lingerie—a concept that defies all fatphobic cultural messaging. With that in mind, I removed my robe for about 20 minutes to try to seize the opportunity to feel free in my body, but that feeling never arrived. If anything, I felt more suffocated.

Keeping this idea of women at bashes being on display for men's consumption in mind, I now turn to discussion of how this dynamic is created and maintained. Bash

advertising tends to set the stage for an event. Miriam has been in the BBW community for over a decade and in that time has attended countless parties and approximately 10 BBW bashes. She is also a BBW web model who has been in the business since her early 20s and, for whom, bashes have served as key sites of networking and promotion. Her position in the BBW community and as a sex worker provides her with important and nuanced insight into the messaging delivered by bash advertisements. Ultimately, she says the advertising, which sometimes features photos of women from the BBW adult industry, communicates a strong message that bashes are sexualized spaces.

> Miriam: Even if you're not saying this person's here to have sex, the association is there. If you look at the ads, they all have curvy women in sexy and seductive poses, sometimes in bikinis. A lot of men come to meet the women of the bash. I think there's a level of "here's your meat, gentlemen. Come get your meat." Whether they're intentionally doing that or it's subconsciously coming out and being noticed by people, that's a tone of "look what's available for you when you get here," as opposed to "look at this community of friends."

Miriam was careful to explain that even though this messaging is clear, it is still couched in the language of friendship and community-building. Brienne echoed this sentiment, explaining that she struggles between two conflicting ideas—that she wants attention from men at bashes, but that she also often feels as though she is "being paraded in as an available option."

Betty, a 43-year old white femme who describes her body as fat, mid-fat and supersize, has only been to two bashes, but quickly sensed that bashes are where men can trust there will be a variety of fat women to choose from.

> Betty: I really can't get away from the feeling that [bashes are] kind of supplying a bunch of beautiful, amazing fat women to a bunch of guys. And I don't mean to like, I feel pretty complicated about fat admirers and there is stigma associated with being a fat admirer, but they're also like not great. Like the women are

> always bringing their top game and then [the men are] often kind of disappointing in every way.

Betty has built a strong queer community in her personal life, which informed her analysis of her time at these bashes. She elaborated on her observation that women seem to bring their "top game" at bashes while men tend to show up to the nightly parties dressed as they would on any regular day. She had expected men would also be concerned with looking their best based on her experiences at queer events.

> Betty: But like, the number of just t-shirt and jeans, or like just blah outfits was surprising to me, especially given like the queer spaces that I've been in where there are plenty of butches that dress it up for the dance event. Or just like, even if it is a t-shirt and jeans vibe, it's a very-carefully-chosen-for-the-occasion t-shirt and jeans, and not just like, here's the polo shirt I wear every Saturday.

She also acknowledged that not everyone is interested in "peacocking," but the number of men in regular dress who seemed to be uninterested in putting their best fashion foot forward was staggering.

At bashes, women are known for pulling out all the fashion stops—a feat in the face of plus-size fashion that generally offers us so little to work with. This fashion performance is fueled not only by the pressure fat women feel to meet a higher standard of femininity than their non-fat counterparts, but by the fact that bashes offer fat women an environment where—unlike in their day-to-day lives—they are encouraged to shine and command attention. Why would men not put forth the same effort? I thought about this in relation to the cultural devaluation of fat women in general and suspect that between cultural stereotypes that position fat women as less than and desperate, and the fact that at all bashes, women outnumber men, men may be under the impression that there is little reason for them to expend energy (and money) to

impress women. Both Miriam and Ava elaborate on this seeming sense of entitlement men exhibit at bashes.

> Miriam: But there's like, there's a sense of entitlement and a sense of these guys, even if they love fat women and even if they love your size and they think you're hot and all these other things, they still somewhere back there, think you're desperate and that you should be fucking thankful that they give a crap about you and that they're showing you attention. So they think they can get away with murder.
>
> Ava: I think there's some senses of entitlement these men have to these bodies and to the fat body and the idea of "I'm doing you a favour." There's a disconnect there for me. I see stuff and I hear the language men use to talk about women's bodies and I don't know that I'm quite on board.

Another observation Betty made is that bashes are intensely sexualized spaces—as the advertising implies—but that they are also extremely sex negative. Betty explained that she is probably an outlier in terms of her approach to sex positivity in that, for her, sex is simply an activity people can do together, much the same as they might decide to go to brunch. Nonetheless, her analysis of the sex negative environment of the two bashes she attended is insightful.

> Betty: Like I really am not interested in having sex with someone that doesn't understand me as a sexual subject. And that can't discuss, like, what they like and don't like in sex positive, adult ways. And even having a sexually tinged conversation with some of the men I did interact with, it was really clear that a lot of them couldn't really talk about sex and that in general it was a weirdly sex negative environment. But it seemed like there was a simultaneous like, super cruisy meat market environment with a whole lot of sex shame. And those things didn't sit well together. And it seemed really hard. And I felt like, simultaneously, I felt compassion, like wow it must be really hard to navigate this, like weird, everyone is here for sex feeling and vibe, but also intense shame about that. These aren't things I'm used to seeing together.

Betty went on to say that she noticed there are people at bashes who are embarrassed about their desire for immediate sex, and that this also plays a role in creating an atmosphere in which objectification is prominent.

> Betty: I think if you're really ashamed about it but you want to do it, you have to kind of see your potential sex partners as objects because they can't be real people with thoughts of their own, because it pulls you out of the ability to do the thing you're ashamed of. But it also helps create the environment where it's shameful, so it's like a vicious cycle.

Betty's perception picked up on some of my own experiences at bashes and I wondered about the association between the sex negative bash environment, the idea that women at bashes are "supplied" to men, and this overarching question of bodily disconnection. There is something happening at the affective level that produces sex negativity in these highly sexualized spaces. In chapter two I explored the various processes and mechanisms of affect offered by some of the leading contributors to the area of affect theory. Massumi (1995) explains that our brains are marked by traces of experiences, and these traces are ever present—interestingly, a process similar to that described by neuroscientists studying trauma (Clough & Halley, 2007; Leys, 2012). These traces, or the residue of experience are continuously available for reactivation by new experiences, thus influencing a body's capacity to act upon, influence, and interpret their environment (Watkins, 2010). The intricate dance I can identify taking place at bashes is as follows: cultural devaluation of fat women's bodies ensures that fat women enter bash spaces with brains and bodies marked by a rich history of trauma associated with fatphobia telling them they are not sexual subjects and that their bodies make them undesirable. They are also already well-trained in self-surveillance and self-discipline—trained to be concerned with what men think of them. They find themselves socializing with men who have also learned that fat women (and all of their complex and intersecting identities) are of less value from a sexist, racist, homophobic, heterocentric, fatphobic and ableist culture. These men know, whether consciously or subconsciously, that their desire for fat women is a form of deviancy in a culture that associates thinness

with worthiness and attractiveness. It's necessary at this point to note that there are absolutely some men who go to bashes who are not concerned with any of this—men who truly appreciate, respect, and love fat women and see them as fully human subjects. But as we will see later in this chapter, almost all of the interviewees identify men's objectifying gaze as defining their negative bash experiences, and men with this gaze are prominent in the bash community. With all of this said, as Betty identifies, shame may contribute to the sex negative environment. Perhaps men at bashes experience shame for desiring fat women. Moreover, fat women may experience shame if they settle for the desire and attention of men who demonstrate that they have internalized cultural messages of fat women's diminished value—these women know, at least subconsciously, that they deserve better. This sex negative bash dynamic speaks to what Ahmed (2010a, 2014) refers to as the stickiness of affect and its ability to determine our relationship with our bodies and, more importantly in this context, how we impact our environment—all of these affective forces contribute to the sex negativity Betty describes as saturating bash spaces.

If the discussion thus far seems focused on heterosexual relations, it's because bashes are significantly shaped by heteronormative dynamics, which may also contribute to the sex negative vibe. The term heteronormativity was coined in the early 1990s, but has been the focus of poststructural philosophers and queer theorists since Foucault's analysis of LGBTQ oppression in the late 1970s (Marchia & Sommer, 2017). While the genealogy of definitions of heteronormativity is filled with inconsistency, and debates around its use sometimes muddy understanding of the concept, it ultimately denotes "a system that works to normalize behaviors and societal expectations that are

tied to the presumption of heterosexuality and an adherence to a strict gender binary" (Nelson, 2015, ¶11). Betty was particularly attuned to these dynamics as a queer femme.

> Betty: But I find that I really felt like, um, yes, I felt like it was a very heteronormative environment.
>
> Crystal: Can you elaborate?
>
> Betty: Yeah. What that means is that I witnessed a lot of women doing, like, highly gendered, subordinate woman type of behaviours. Like their body language, and their voice getting high and like, you know that kind of classic stuff. And I definitely saw men like, kind of, there were some men who were engaging with different women and there were some men that were clearly looking for the next one while they're still talking to this one. Which is super creepy, but I guess is a normal thing to happen in like a club environment, but that's just really gross. Like don't talk to me then! I saw and heard women being competitive with each other for the attention of men. And I also saw, I don't know exactly what was going on because this person had other people that were more primary giving her some care, but there was a very upset person in the bathroom who, something had happened with a man, like an emotional something, not like an assault or anything. And she was very upset and hiding in the bathroom and crying. So when I said people had prepared me for what was like, adult high school, it kind of did have an adult high school feeling in terms of the gendered norms. Or like a combination of a club and a high school where, not all men, but generally there's a sense that men were on the prowl. And again, not all women, but generally a sense that women were like, being presented to them is how it felt.

Heteronormativity erects boundaries around what is considered acceptable and appropriate masculinity. This includes providing strict guidelines that shape everything from what men are supposed to desire in women, to what bodily attributes women must achieve/maintain to be considered attractive.

In summary, a strong message is sent by advertising that marks bashes as spaces where fat women will be available to admirers for socializing. This advertising plays one part in a complex web of forces working to create an atmosphere where interview participants read bashes as significantly shaped by heteronormativity, creating

an environment where men feel entitled to the attention of beautiful fat women. Importantly, heteronormative dynamics also ensure that the sexually charged setting of bashes is overwhelmingly sex negative, amplifying existing shame in both men and women—shame that is linked to societal fatphobic discourse.

### Wandering Eyes, Orgasmic Sighs: Objectification and dis-embodiment

> *[Autoethnography Journal Entry]*
>
> *Leaning against the wall, sipping white wine, I notice I'm being watched. As this guy approaches me, I realize I've never met him nor do I recognize him from any of the online BBW spaces. He introduces himself, running his eyes down then back up my body in the same way I suspect he wishes to do with his hands. I'm uncomfortable, but I don't feel unsafe, so I entertain the small talk. I'm asked where I'm from, if I'm having fun, what sort of music I enjoy listening to. He tells me he lives in a mansion in [redacted]. Then he asks me how old I am. When I say I'm 34, he tells me he wouldn't guess I'm a day older than 22. Two things happen in this moment: I'm offended because this guy thinks I'll fall for this sort of bullshit "compliment" created and delivered on the back of societal beliefs about women's worth declining as they age; and I feel my skin crawling because a man who appears to be in his 50s seems far too hopeful and invested in the idea that he might be talking to a woman in her early 20s*.

In the journal entry above, I share what amounted to five minutes on day two of a four-day bash that changed how I felt for the remainder of the event. In the time since I created this journal entry, I have learned more about the circulation and stickiness of affect (Ahmed, 2010a, 2014; Massumi, 1995), which I can use to reflect on why I was particularly affected by this man's comment about my age. I have a history of encountering and sometimes dating older men who valued my youth (and naïveté). One of the first men I dated seriously was 17 years older than me. We met in a plus-size appreciation Facebook group when I was in my early 20s after he left a flirtatious comment on a photo I had posted. It made me feel special, so we started chatting and eventually met. This began a two-year period in which I would be continuously manipulated and gaslighted. Reflecting on this period of my life 15 years after the fact, I

can see more clearly how the combination of having low self-worth (influenced by fatphobia) and being young and inexperienced made me a prime candidate for an older man well-versed in manipulation. He valued the low self-esteem, docility, naiveté, and malleability that had been fostered in part by the trauma of fatphobia. Unfortunately, this introduction to dating men and the way it impacted my already fragile self-esteem ensured that many of the patterns I was used to in that relationship repeated themselves in successive relationships. I also want to clarify that I do not suggest my experience is some sort of model for all relationships between older men and younger women. Women in their 20s are self-determined and autonomous adults who are allowed to decide who and how they date. Additionally, age may not play as much of a role as attributes like weakness, vulnerability, and impressionability—an analysis offered by one of the survivors interviewed in the documentary *Surviving R. Kelly*, which is a documentary-style television series that tells the stories of the women who survived R. Kelly's predatory behaviour, and sexual, physical, and emotional abuse (Simmons, Hampton, Daniels, Karsbert, Everleth & Pepin, 2019). The stickiness of my experiences dating manipulative older men allowed me to aptly tune into this man's frequency. His eyes devoured me while he created one of two possible stories in his mind—that I was quite young, or that I would at the very least be flattered by his "compliment" and be open to further advances. As a result, I was forced to be aware of his presence for the rest of the weekend. Any time I saw him, I had to figure out how to avoid him. And eventually, I also had to block him on Facebook.

In their interviews, participants recounted various moments from bashes when they were taken out of their bodies by becoming aware they were being looked at in a

particular way. Sometimes this happened when men made advances and sometimes all it took was for a participant to walk into a room and feel eyes scanning her body from head to toe. Brienne talked to me about how she's struggled to accept that she can both desire attention from men at bashes and be upset by what she perceives to be explicit objectification and sexualisation. She explains the negative impact it has on her relationship with her body when she enters a bash party and knows she is being looked at by the men in the room.

> Brienne: I sometimes feel negative about my body when I walk into the room and there's all of these men there, kind of gawking. And I feel really insecure in that moment and because I kind of have this internal struggle with it, because I feel like I should be able to wear what I want to wear and do my thing and that if I'm in lingerie, because it is a lingerie party, it doesn't mean I'm sexually available; however, I do know that I also am flirty and it's hard. I don't want to say that I deserve it, but it sometimes becomes like you know I'm just being myself and I'm flirty. I get very insecure because you walk in and it's like, guys are looking. And I do want the attention though, and that's the thing. I didn't do the hair and makeup and honestly if I came down and nobody was paying attention, I would be just as upset. Sometimes it feels like you walk in and there's so many guys kind of just checking out their options. And I hate that. I feel like that's super negative and that I want to put on my cover up. So like, that becomes a thing for me of like, oh my god I need to cover up. And often I'll leave a party because I need a break from the guys watching me. And I know they are because they're in my inbox. And I feel uncomfortable because I know you're watching me because you just told me. And now I have to stand here for the next hour thinking that you're watching me.

While the feeling of being watched is uncomfortable at best, it's seemingly one of the more benign approaches men use to communicate desire in these spaces. Sarai is a 48-year old white woman who describes her body type as "supersize," and who, at the time of the interview, was using a scooter as mobility aid. At that point, she was grappling with what it meant for her to be both fat and visibly disabled while using the scooter. She told me about a time when she had dressed up for one of the nightly parties at a bash, and as she was navigating the hallway on her scooter, a man

standing against the wall looked at her and let out what she described as an “orgasmic sigh.” She explained that this elicited strong negative feelings for her and that when she sought support from her friends at the bash, they didn’t understand why she was upset.

> Sarai: I had a lot of emotions from the fact that my friends didn’t get it when I was like, okay, I get that it was a compliment, but I actually feel like it just skeeved me out. And the fact they couldn’t understand what I meant and that instead I should really just take it as a compliment.

I mention Sarai’s use of a mobility aid because at another point in her interview, she talked about how a significant struggle for her is trying to feel attractive and good in her body while using a scooter as a fat person. The intersection of disability and fatness is complex. Scholars who have attempted to answer the question of whether fatness should be considered a disability based on the social model of disability have yet to come up with a clear answer—and I suspect this will never happen (Aphramor, 2009; Farrell, 2011; Herndon, 2002). It is possible that part of the reason Sarai’s friends did not see a problem with the way this man had communicated his desire is because heteronormativity, ableism, and fatphobia converge to suggest that a fat woman on a scooter is a more complex type of undesirable, therefore Sarai receiving any desire-based attention at all should be read as positive. In this instance, not only did Sarai experience disconnection from her body by way of a man’s sexualized reaction to her appearance, she was then gaslighted—made to question whether she was being too sensitive—by people she trusted.

One of the events that takes place at certain bashes is called a “room roam” or a “roaming room” party. Generally, a bash will take over most of the vacant rooms at a hotel. During a room roam party, certain floors are designated as party floors and whoever has a room on a party floor has to open their door to let people roam in and

out. Hosts decorate their rooms based on a theme and usually serve drinks and snacks. Party-goers roam the hallways of party floors for an hour or so at a time, checking out the theme in each room. Eventually, bashers are asked to vote for their favourite room and the hosts win a prize. Personally, this event is one of my favourite parts of a bash because it is a unique way to meet people that I might not get the chance to bump elbows with at a dance night or throughout the day; however, it can also be overwhelming. Hallways become hot and crowded and, truthfully, the only way I have been able to survive room roam parties is by dulling my senses with alcohol—otherwise, I would not likely attend. In sharing her own experiences with room roam parties, Miriam offered a glimpse into one of the ways these bash events make her feel unsafe and anxious as a result of the threat of violation. Earlier, I explained that Miriam is a BBW web model. She has thousands of fans and many of them attend bashes with the hope of meeting her. She talked to me about a phenomenon called the "fatty arm grab," which is essentially when fat admirers grab at fat women's arms. She describes this as akin to a person grabbing someone's breasts or buttocks because fat admirers sexualize soft, pillowy upper arms.

> Miriam: I purposely during the roaming room look down the hallway and all I see is a hallway of hands. Men pushed against the wall and women had to walk down this hallway, even with my partner behind me, any amount of hands would reach out and touch me or grab me. There's no escape. They're all up and down the hallway down the sides and women parade up and down the middle for their entertainment. I had anxiety about it. It felt like, you know, sheep being led to the slaughter. Oh is there just a big gang bang at the end of the hallway because there's a line of men on both sides and if I get to the end, what's going to happen?

Julie, a 34-year old white woman who describes her body as fat, confirms this entitlement to touching based on her bash experiences.

> Julie: It's almost accepted for men to touch and they do get after people a little bit more than it would ever happen in real life if I were a "normal" size or in a "normal" party environment.

It is interesting that Julie would come to these conclusions, especially given the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault women (and anyone who does not identify as a straight, cisgender man) face in party spaces in general. There are two possible explanations for Julie's assertions. First, she may feel this way because the trauma of fatphobia teaches fat women their bodies are not valuable and are deserving of public consumption and commentary. This might then translate into the idea that a thin woman's body is less likely to be viewed as *deserving* of violation. What is also likely to be true is that body parts like arms are not generally sexualized, so in a "normal" party environment, a combination of fatphobia and decreased possibility of being surrounded by fat admirers means that fat women are less likely to be casually touched by strangers. Additionally, if someone does touch a fat woman's arm, for instance, she may not read it as a violation of boundaries because the affective atmosphere of a non-fat-specific event would not necessarily be shaped by a heavy presence of fat admirers and fat fetishists.

In addition to her insights on men's tendency to grab at fat women's bodies at bashes, Miriam shared her observation of and experience with fat admirers who see fat women as a collection of body parts, or as particular shapes.

> Miriam: There's just a way that these guys look at these women, like do you even see these women have a face or are you just looking at the ass? Or you're just noticing their shape and why care about the rest? The men are very much like, oh that's an hourglass, that's a pear, that's a blah blah blah. Like they're looking for their shape. They're looking for their nut.

What Miriam picks up on in the excerpt above is that men at bashes seem to care more about hooking up with a fat woman who fits their particular ideal in terms of body shape than they do about her as a person. This isn't novel nor exclusive to the BBW community, but it most certainly carries a different weight in an environment where so many people enter with a history of objectification and bodily disconnection associated with fatphobia.

Again, while our culture generally devalues fat bodies regardless of their shape, in *bash spaces specifically*, fat bodies are devalued if they do not fit the shape more desired by fat admirers. Julie provides insightful analysis of men's preoccupation with fat women's body parts and body shapes at bashes. She told me that she's observed a radical difference between the way men and women seek out casual sex in these spaces. For example, when she wants to hook up with someone at a bash, she focuses on the person as a whole. If a man's body is great but she doesn't connect with his personality, she will not pursue anything further with him. With respect to men at bashes, she has observed that they tend to have a "that'll do" attitude when they approach women.

> Julie: That's what it comes down to. And if it's only based on physical attributes then that's really what it is—that'll do. That should never be enough for a woman. But a lot of women at bashes will say yes to men saying "that'll do."

While choosing to pursue casual sex based solely on physical attraction is not exclusive to BBW bashes, the way participants have described being desired specifically for their body parts and, more importantly, for their body shape, is an extreme intensification of societal objectification of women.

In my interview with Georgia, a 28-year old white woman who describes her body as fat and who has attended one bash with no intention of attending another, she defined the environment of that bash as one in which rape culture seemed to shape what men thought was acceptable behaviour. Ultimately, she did not think anything bad was going to happen to her, but she also didn't feel entirely safe. For Georgia, these feelings were rooted in objectification and the idea that "a man feels entitled to look at me in a sexual way." As a newcomer to the world of body positivity, Georgia has been working on recovery from an eating disorder and learning to feel at home in her body. She signed up to attend a bash because she thought it might offer her a sense of body freedom that she does not experience in her regular life, but that ultimately any chance of feeling free in her body was undermined by perceived sexualisation.

> Georgia: I recall feeling very tense and honestly like, not that much more free in my body than I normally would. I bought my first bikini and brought it to the bash. And it was the first time I wore it outside of my house basically. And I was able to, but then actually I remember walking through the lobby in the bikini and seeing guys looking at me, and I was like, oh, that's not what I want though. I just want to be here and not actually engage in that and, like, I don't want to. Just, like, everybody ignore me. Just let me do my thing. Like I'm just trying to exist at peace here. I don't need to worry about you. I also remember feeling very tense at the first pool party because of the way the room was set up. A lot of women were in the pool, including myself, and a lot of men alone not talking to anyone, were sat around the perimeter of the pool just watching the people in the pool. I found that really disconcerting. And like, basically any time I had to pass men, especially if I was by myself, I was very tense.

Georgia uses the word "tense" to describe how she felt in these moments when men were looking at her while she felt more vulnerable because she was wearing a bikini. She had hoped to experience body freedom—in other words, the ability to feel connected to and in her body, a feeling the objectifying gaze of fatphobia takes away from her in her regular life. Instead, she was tense, which was the physical

manifestation of the anxiety that arose as a result of preoccupation with how her body was being perceived, consumed, and analyzed by men in an environment she had already interpreted as organized by principles of rape culture.

Experiencing an interruption of subjecthood is particularly alarming when you're not used to it. This was the case for Betty who, outside of the seemingly heteronormative bash structure, is firmly and intentionally surrounded by queer community. In many ways, queerness and queer community has allowed her to foster a relationship with her fat body that is rooted in subjecthood—she told me that she rarely feels "taken outside" of her body and forced to consider how she is being viewed. As she mentioned earlier, she heard from others that bash dynamics often feel a lot like adult high school, so she went prepared, having created a "queer bubble" for herself at the bash. She hosted a queer potluck brunch as well as a queer sex party at one of the two bashes she attended. Intentionally creating queer space at the bash had the interesting effect of illuminating for Betty how she felt in her body during the events hosted by bash organizers compared to the smaller events she hosted in her room throughout the weekend.

> Betty: I also felt in the general areas, I felt super aware of my body and how it compared to other people's so that I was like, not really *in* my body and experiencing it from the inside as a subject, but I felt more objectified. And like experiencing myself as an object. And I think some women feel like that all the time, but I usually don't feel like that. So that was really weird and uncomfortable. And it made it hard to enjoy some things. Like at the dance it was really hard to enjoy dancing and the feeling of dancing because I was so hyperaware of what it might look like and what ways people might be enjoying the way my body looked, or not enjoying my body looking this way. And that's just something I normally don't even think about. So that was an experience. And in contrast, at the sex party that I hosted, you know I was in a hosting role, and there were some things happening that were performative in some ways, if that makes sense. I was really in my body the whole time even when I was like, topping other people. And like, I

> was focused on my body and their body and how we were working together, and not at all about what it looked like or what the people that were watching—because there were observers—thought about it. And probably if there were men there observing it would have still felt that way. But I don't think it's because of the gender of the people, but because of the kind of gaze that they have, if that makes sense.

In clarifying what she meant by "the kind of gaze" observers have, Betty, who is a sociologist, turned to Goffman's (1959) work that theorizes social interaction as theatrical. He posits that people are actors and everyone plays a variety of roles, thus suggesting that a) we are always performing in some way, and b) we are always both actors and the audience/observers. In the following excerpt, Betty elaborates on her experiences hosting a sex party to define the nuances of a "sympathetic gaze" versus an "objectifying gaze" and the role each type plays in her ability to experience her body as a subject versus an object.

> Betty: I think about how at the sex party, it was like a femme party and everybody was definitely wise and had a sympathetic gaze and an inclusive gaze, rather than an objectifying one. So even the observers felt like they were part of the play, if that makes sense. They were part of the scene, rather than it being like, complete outsiders. But there are certain—again not all men—I think there are men at bashes that have that same sympathetic gaze, and like see fat women as people, okay? For these men, there's an essential understanding that other people are subjects. So there are definitely men in those public bash spaces that are wise and see fat women as people, but not all of them do. And so I think that there's enough, I don't know at which point it becomes, like there's enough of that [evidence of objectification]. It's really hard to pin down to figure out exactly what behaviours are happening that give me that feeling. But when I sensed a critical amount of that, I completely got taken out of my body and started observing it, kind of? And there was nobody with that kind of gaze at the sex party.

One of the intriguing elements of Betty's analysis above is that she is not able to put her finger on what it is specifically about a man's behaviour at a bash that tells her he does not see fat women as subjects—as people. Drawing upon affect theorists' work on the stickiness of affect (Ahmed 2010a, 2014) and the idea that affect presents in our bodies

as intensities that make us aware of biological processes happening in response to our encounters with our world (Massumi, 1995), it seems to me that in these moments when Betty is pulled from her body and forced to take on an observer role while being unsure of what is causing it to happen, she is specifically experiencing the affective process—a process that is non-conscious (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Her fat body has a lifetime of processing and understanding her world through experiences shaped by fatphobia. At bashes, she does not necessarily need to be able to pin point the behaviours that suggest men do not see fat women as subjects. This particular knowledge is, in many ways, and as a result of affective processes, embodied. Consequently, it better prepares her for evaluating what feels safe and what does not and to take appropriate action.

Feeling, as denigrated under patriarchy as it is, determines how we learn about our world and ourselves. In chapter two, I introduced the erotic, a concept developed by Audre Lorde (1984) to help demonstrate a different way for women of colour to listen to their bodies and determine what is pleasurable and sensual for themselves independent of the boundaries erected by racist, homophobic and patriarchal norms. She puts the erotic into relationship with the pornographic, stating that the erotic allows us to cultivate feeling while the pornographic focuses on sensation with little regard for feeling. I think the erotic and the pornographic are useful in trying to understand the tensions explored in this section. Fat women, as marginalized people, need to be able to determine what feels right for them. As I have illustrated in this section, what does not feel right is being looked at in sexualizing ways without consent, being viewed as a collection of body parts, being sighed at, and having body parts grabbed and groped while walking down

hallways. These actions were *done to* my participants who had no control over the responses to their bodies. The men *doing* the actions felt entitled to do so with arguably no regard for how it made my participants feel. Or maybe they did have some sort of regard, but in the sense that these men may have believed fat women would feel good about receiving the attention. These actions align with Lorde's (1984) conceptualization of the pornographic, whereas Betty's experiences of being in her body and feeling like a subject at the queer sex party speak more to the erotic. In that space, Betty felt self-determined and in control of what she found pleasurable. In chapter five, I continue this analysis of the erotic in relationship to my participants' positive experiences of their sexuality at bashes.

In summary, fatphobia and misogyny converge to intensify the separating of women's body parts from the whole in bash spaces, these parts are then susceptible to men who feel entitled to look and to touch without consent. This objectification is part and parcel of rape culture, which Georgia identified as strongly influencing the affective environment of bashes, and works to stop fat women from experiencing themselves as subjects. Instead, they must remain preoccupied with maintaining their safety by preventing or interfering with violations of their bodies.

## Big Beautiful Eurocentric Beauty Standards: Bashes and the hierarchy of attractiveness

> *[Autoethnography Journal Entry]*
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> *It's been interesting coming into this bash with the intention of paying close attention to how I feel in my body throughout the weekend. I'm not sure I necessarily feel any different than usual, but I am thinking about those feelings in more critical ways. I'm laying here resting after this afternoon's pool party, which was incredibly fun, but I also found it difficult to simply enjoy my body. The stairs leading into the pool have a strangely small first step, making it difficult for me to*

> *fit both of my feet. As a result, I felt anxious and unsafe getting into and out of the pool, especially in front of the pool party crowd. As a temporarily disabled superfat, the physical pain I'm in right now coupled with the anxiety I feel about re-injuring myself prevent me from being able to relax into my body and enjoy the party. Instead, I found myself concerned with other people knowing that I'm moving this way because of an injury, not because of my body size. Truthfully, I think I've been completely insufferable all weekend because of how much I've been talking about my injury—and I know it's because I don't want to be viewed as disabled* ***because*** *I'm fat.*

When I attended the two bashes where I performed autoethnography, I was only a few months into recovery from a surgery on my knee that repaired significant damage sustained when I fell at the end of March 2018. The whole event was traumatizing in a variety of ways, from dealing with medical professionals as a superfat person, to navigating the world as a superfat disabled person. At that point (and to this day) I was terrified of falling and re-injuring myself. But what became alarmingly clear at both of the bashes is that I was overwhelmed with concern over people knowing a) that I used a cane because I was recovering from a knee injury, and b) that the injury happened when I was walking around Toronto running errands and that it was not, in fact, a knee replacement because I am so fat I wore out my knee by the time I was 34-years old. In almost any critical discussion I have had with fellow BBW community members about the state of the community and our experiences at social events, the "hierarchy of attractiveness" is examined in detail as an element of the community we were not prepared to face. Finding social events created for fat people and those who love/like/are attracted to/desire them means that finally I can experience what it's like to feel confident that I will not be rejected because of my body, right? Not quite. Thus far, I have had youth, whiteness, the ability to meet markers of traditional femininity, and (until I injured myself) physical ability on my side in these spaces. These characteristics marked me as desirable in the hierarchy of attractiveness, but not the most desirable—I

carry my weight most prominantly around my midsection, what the BBW community classifies as an “apple” shaped body. The more desirable body shapes mirror societal beauty standards—hourglass or “pear” shaped bodies, but plus-size. Disability added another layer to my preoccupation with how, or even if I was desired. Being able-bodied is a marker of hegemonic ideals of worthiness and value for all genders set by the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Fat people already face insurmountable criticism of the worth and value of their bodies, so much so that one of the ways some fat people fight against fat oppression is to highlight their physical ability,[24] thus implicitly denigrating fat disabled people. Entering a bash space as a newly disabled person brought to light my internalized fatphobia and ableism in that I laboured intensely to control the narrative of my disability and I worked even harder to intensify my femininity to “make up for” both superfatness and disability.

Unsurprisingly, the “hierarchy of attractiveness” was identified by a number of my participants as not only something they did not expect to experience in fat-specific spaces, but something that reinforced bodily disconnection and a heightened preoccupation with how they were being perceived by men specifically. This finding aligns with Hall’s (2018) research on fat women’s experiences navigating sex and sexuality in which participants reported receiving strong messages about the “right” way to be fat and sexy and that it was specifically connected to having “voluptuous” and “hourglass” shaped fat bodies. Ava, 49, talked to me about the history of her relationship with her body. Fat since childhood, she felt like she grew up in the shadow

[24] See the 12 “Good Fatty Archetypes” described by Stacy Bias http://stacybias.net/2014/06/12-good-fatty-archetypes/

of her thinner, prettier counterparts. She hung out with the popular crowd in high school and has always been the life of any party, lauded for her sense of humour and particularly dazzling personality. Ava is a smaller fat woman and has struggled with her weight for much of her life. She told me that her self-esteem has flourished in the eight or so years she has been part of the BBW community, but that there are still elements of the community and bashes that make her feel like the 16-year old fat girl who sat in the corner at dances and parties. One of these elements is this unspoken—but still recognized by many—hierarchy of attractiveness that defines fat admirers' attraction to fat women.

When she attended her first BBW party in 2011, she was convinced that as a smaller fat woman she would be appreciated in the BBW community because she better approximated the thin ideal set by dominant beauty standards. What she found was the opposite. Instead, while what is valued as attractive in the BBW scene mirrors societal Eurocentric beauty ideals, the difference is that fat admirers want those ideals in a bigger—and sometimes as big as possible—package. In terms of physical attributes, this speaks to a youthful and traditionally feminine appearance that includes an hourglass or "pear-shaped" body, clear and soft skin, white features, long hair, and little to no body hair, but super-sized. Ava describes her body as short and round, which does not match the preferred body type in the hierarchy of attractiveness. She also feels that being an older woman is a mark against her in general and specifically in bash spaces.

> Ava: You're expecting you're going to go into this space that they told you is for you and you'll be embraced in every way. People are going to find you interesting and be attracted to you. This isn't even real life if you think about it. But you kind

> of hope you're going to go in there and breathe this sigh of relief and get all this love, and when it doesn't happen I feel like it feels a bit more emotional. Okay, I don't fit in outside of here and now I don't fit in in here, either? I'm not interesting in here, either? My body isn't attractive in here, either? Oh, it must be because I'm not good looking in here, either. I start dissecting what's wrong with me. You learn pretty quickly in BBW spaces that there's a hierarchy based on physical appearance. The women that tend to get the most attention are going to be the ones that have the much fuller and more exaggerated hourglass figure, which would mean larger breasts, maybe larger hips, a larger bottom. Maybe a little thinner around the middle. Or a pear shape, so the wider hips, the really big butt and the bigger legs. Or even the supersize fatty, because a lot of these men don't have access to these sort of gorgeous women that come in and are 400 or 500 pounds. You see people like me every day rolling around, I get that. I'm a very average size sort of fat in the world of, you know, supersize women. And then of course there's these sort of young BBWs that are bright-eyed and bushy-tailed so to speak. So when it comes to myself, who's kind of in this gray area in between where it's kind of like you don't really have the body type that everyone's looking for, plus partnered with my age and maybe my own probably self-esteem issues. Because I think I'm older and because I'm short and I'm really belly heavy, and maybe not that notable because I'm not somebody that's going to really dress super sexy to really get all the attention from men. And I'm not somebody that you would maybe notice. I don't have those type of looks. The guys really, and especially if you go there and you want to feel lifted up, maybe you need a bit of attention from the opposite sex, and you go looking for that, sometimes you're let down. I have been sad on a couple of occasions.

As we can see in the excerpt above, Ava's experiences at BBW social events have caused a great deal of emotional pain by way of preoccupation with how her body is received and perceived by men. She noted that the hierarchy of attractiveness is not exclusive to BBW bash spaces; however, that she even needs to expend mental and emotional energy trying to analyze where she fits into the hierarchy is a problem, particularly in a space allegedly dedicated to body and size acceptance. She went on to describe how this hierarchy even tends to complicate her friendships with other women in the community. She described some of her closest friends in the community using adjectives like "extraordinary," "striking," "stunning," and "gorgeous," explaining that they often receive attention because of their appearance in combination with their reputation in the BBW community as politically progressive. Ava struggles with this, not because

she does not want her friends to get the attention they deserve, but because of how it reminds her of the attention she is not receiving herself.

> Ava: So I think about when I was in high school and the "fat friend" and now I'm not, actually. They're the fatter friends, which is funny in a way. And it takes me back to a place of insecurity that I used to feel when I was younger. Being uncomfortable with your friends getting a lot of attention, you not getting any, and although you're not unhappy with your friends getting attention it's kind of goes back to oh, okay well what's wrong with me? So now I'm being told I'm in this space that's supposed to be comfortable and maybe where people will find me interesting or attractive. And it's like, no, no, you're still not good enough. You're not pretty enough. You're not interesting enough. You're not young enough. You're not political enough...And it's like, hard to navigate that when you're going to be almost 50. Because these aren't feelings I should be having. And I'm starting to let go of them…I just gotta let these kind of feelings of inadequacy that I've been feeling since I was so young and surrounded by all the popular girls in school and I have to try to let it go. But it's been a process, and unfortunately, the bash spaces, that's one of the negative things because I feel like it can trigger me if I'm feeling in a vulnerable headspace…It's not so much I want to walk in there and go "woohoo, I'm the belle of the ball." If anybody knows me, that's not it. It's just feeling that people are not interested in you at any level. I think there's a bit of a sense of well damn, so nobody was attracted to me, so that means I'm unattractive.

Ava's description of being triggered by bash dynamics related to attraction and desire map to the affect theory literature that illustrates how the way we interpret and are affected by experiences is strongly influenced by traces of experiences left on our brains and in our bodies (Massumi, 1995). In these situations, she is immediately taken 35 years back in time to re-experience feelings she felt in high school.

As a superfat woman whose body and overall appearance reflects what is highly sought after by men at bashes, Miriam experiences the hierarchy differently and also recognizes not only how it shapes men's perceptions of fat women, but the damage it causes to fat women's relationships with their bodies.

> Miriam: It's wild at the parties because like, in the real world fat bodies are looked at as all the same to a degree. And also someone who is a small fat is seen as

> still too fat. Whereas at these events, all of a sudden the fattest win. Like someone my size is going to get a shit ton more attention than someone who is a smaller fat. Because of the size difference hierarchy in that community, it's like someone who's like 500 pounds or more is going to be looked at in a very desirable fashion that is not common to outside of those spaces. And that's going to cause its own dynamics. People that are on the smaller end of fat think now I'm too big for out there, I'm too small for in here, where do I belong? And a lot of this is left up to male approval, whether we like it or not because that's what we're told our value lies in, but especially as fat women, male approval is the be all end all. You're nothing if you're not being worshipped by men. And then the men don't even give a flying fuck, they're just like I'm going to fuck you and you and you. I'm going to fuck that pear, and that hourglass. It's like we're live fleshlights[25] to them.

She goes on to explain nuance in the hierarchy, specifically around women's ability to perform femininity.

> Miriam: If you notice, there are people who look more like society's ideal. Women are usually treated better and get more attention than people who don't fall toward that line. I have a double chin. It's prominent, it's there no matter what I'm doing. But there are people who have full round faces and there are people who, when they do their makeup or whatever, it's not hitting the way it does when other people do theirs for whatever reason. And so they're not going to be treated the way these other women get treated because they perform that femininity really well. It's a beauty privilege. Again there's layers. So if you're not hitting all the marks, you're going to not get the attention that other people are getting. And then it's probably not going to be as fun of a time or as comfortable of a setting.

That last sentence illustrates that the dynamics of bash spaces created and maintained by the hierarchy of attractiveness strongly impact fat women's ability to navigate these events as subjects. Miriam suggested that in order to have fun and feel comfortable at bashes, for many women it's necessary to perform femininity to a higher degree in order to attract attention. In this case, the power remains in men's court and women are increasingly preoccupied with how they are being perceived. Unfortunately, as I discussed earlier, so much of the attention garnered by my participants—whether they

[25] Fleshlights are sex toys that look like flashlights and are designed for providing pleasure to people with penises.

wanted it or not—also left them feeling objectified, unsafe, and disconnected from their bodies. Alyssa, a 40-year old white woman who describes her body as fat, confirmed this message when she explained why women at bashes care what men think.

> Alyssa: Because like anything else, it's ingrained in our heads. We're raised to worry about what men think of us and what guys think of us. And a lot of us, we base our self-esteem off of getting hit on. And I think that's a lot of the reason why people come away from bashes upset or hurting more after a bash than when they go in.

An unfortunate consequence of only valuing fat women deemed physically attractive is that common decency tends to fall by the wayside. At one bash, Julie was hanging out and talking with two friends when a man approached the three of them. He said hello and gave each of them a hug, and then proceeded to tell both of Julie's friends how beautiful they looked before he walked away.

> Julie: After it happened, my only question I had [to my friends] was oh, who was that guy? Neither of them had a clue. And then I thought okay, it wasn't so much that I felt negative about myself, but it was more like I find myself questioning people and their capacity to be human, because that's just not a nice thing to do period.

Betty's observations of the ways in which sexualized performance is rewarded or recognized in queer spaces compared to bash spaces not only demonstrate what seems to be valued in bash spaces in terms of fat women's appearance, but also how bash spaces are shaped by heteronormative ideals.

> Betty: One thing that I think I did expect that I was surprised at how intense it was is the beauty norms are like, actually not very challenged at all [at BBW bashes]. It just like, what is valued is like the same type of beauty but just fatter. Contrast it with NOLOSE[26] where people dress up, and that can be exhausting too. Like I just want to put it out there that like, exhausting sexualized performance is not limited to heterosexual environments. It can still be exhausting in queer spaces, but the variety of how people were choosing to express themselves [at NOLOSE]

[26] NOLOSE is an activist organization dedicated to ending oppression of fat people and creating a vibrant, fat queer culture. The organization has hosted conferences in the past.

> was super high. And people got positive attention for all of it. Not just for being the most beautiful, like blonde, hourglass shaped person with the best makeup and the shortest dress or whatever was valued the bash. So I wasn't really prepared for it to be like, there really is still a monolithic idea of beauty, it's just that we want it fatter.

These observations of the differences in types of beauty that are valued at queer events like NOLOSE versus BBW bashes are connected to the way heteronormativity shapes and circulates bash spaces, demonstrating that the women who adhere most closely to emphasized femininity (Connell,1987) are most likely to be rewarded.

In the following chapter, I present analysis of how bashes allow for community-building and social connection, offering fat women the chance to be embodied subjects and to build a relationship with their body based in subjecthood. It might seem that, after all of the evidence presented here, gender dynamics that position men as having power to interrupt fat women's ability to connect with their bodies makes it impossible for women who attend bashes to build community. Both Ava and Alyssa confirm that the way men treat women at bashes, which is influenced by the hierarchy of attractiveness and fat women's ability to adhere to dominant beauty standards, creates competition and conflict among women.

> Ava: I think a lot of women go in there and they want attention, sex, love, romance or whatever their idea is. And I think that as a result there's a competition. There is. And women don't ask for it. I certainly feel like when I go in there I'm being sized up by everybody.
>
> Alyssa: And the women will fight with each other and hate each other and dislike each other for a guy who basically was playing all of us at the same time. A lot of these guys though, they fill these girls' heads and they know these girls don't feel good about themselves and don't get a lot of attention outside of here, and the girls take what they say and use it for gospel and then they fight.
>
> Ava: I think if you take men out of it, I feel like I don't know. I guess I would feel less bad about myself. I don't even know if that's the right way to articulate it. It's gross. It's gross. It's a gross feeling to have. And it's just human. I don't like that part of being human at all. So I don't like leaving a bash—and it doesn't crush me

> or keep me up at night—but I don't like that, you know what, that having a small amount of men's attention matters. I don't like that. That's why I'm saying if you take men out of it, I feel like I wouldn't feel like as much of a loser or as unattractive.

The experiences analyzed in this section shed light on some of the central questions of this dissertation. My participants show up in bash spaces with myriad expectations, but it is clear one of them is *not* that they will feel the oppressive weight of dominant beauty standards. When I think about the affective environment of bash spaces and the influence this has on fat women's embodiment, it is difficult to reconcile official bash messages of body love and body positivity on one hand with the reality that, as my participants have illustrated, fat women must continue to feel pressure—whether they ask for it or not—to vie for and derive value from the attention of men. This particular element of the bash atmosphere only serves to further reinforce the trauma of fatphobia. My participants spend their day-to-day lives navigating physically and emotionally inaccessible and fatphobic worlds and pay hundreds of dollars to escape it for a weekend at a bash only to be told, implicitly and explicitly, that there are still standards and that they still do not meet them.

The hierarchy of attractiveness that determines who is most valued for appearance at bashes significantly impacts participants' ability to see themselves as subjects, regardless of their place in the hierarchy. The standards set by the hierarchy mirror those that shape desire in regular society, but they seem to be intensified in bash spaces. This is likely because fat women are under heightened pressure to adhere to codes of femininity to "make up" for their fatness. The closer they are to meeting the plus-size version of societal beauty standards, the more affirmation they receive by way of compliments and men's advances—and as we have learned, men's advances at

bashes are often another reminder that women are not meant to feel safe or comfortable in their bodies.

## Diet Culture, BBW Party Spaces, and Bodily Disconnection

In a society that devalues and degrades fat people, the mere existence of events where fat people and their admirers come together to socialize and explore relationships is politically radical; however, the reality of some of the circumstances that shape BBW spaces is not. As we saw in the previous sections, normalizing gazes are intensified at bashes. It is therefore unsurprising that societal fatphobia also shows up in BBW spaces in the form of diet culture. After all, the vast majority of bash attendees are people who have been taught their entire lives that they must do anything they can to lose weight and take up less space. Additionally, fat people hold anti-fat attitudes at the same rate and level of significance as non-fat people (Schwartz et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2004), contributing to the level at which diet culture circulates bashes. In the following sections I explore two sub-themes identified in the data on diet culture and how they affected participants' ability to feel safe in, present in, and connected to their bodies:

1. Participants' exposure to diet talk and diet behaviours
2. Participants' exposure to people who have had weight loss surgery

As we will see, these sub-themes exemplify a concept I introduced in chapter two called the "gynaeopticon." Extending from Foucault's (1979) use of the panopticon to understand how people internalize a controlling gaze and experience themselves as being under constant surveillance, the gynaeopticon is more specific in that "the

controlling gaze is female, and the many women watch the many women," (Winch, 2016, p. 901). This concept describes a network form of governance that trains women to police themselves and each other *especially* around body size, putting it in direct relationship with the fatphobic gaze. Women must always demonstrate that they are actively participating in the process of controlling fat. Diet culture works to take us out of the moment and actively disconnects us from ourselves and others (Harrison, 2019). Unsurprisingly then, the next two subsections illustrate that exposure to diet talk/behaviours and socializing with people who have had weight loss surgery in bash spaces worked effectively (and affectively) to disconnect participants from their bodies and intensified self-surveillance.

### "Can we just be fat and have snacks?": Diet talk/behaviour in fat-centric party spaces

> *[Autoethnography Journal Entry]*
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> *One of my friends at this bash has been losing weight consistently over the last while. We hung out for a bit before dinner and I told him I was going to grab something quick at Panera Bread, asking if he'd like to join me. He reminded me that he's "watching his weight" and needed to go workout anyway. He is one of several people who participate it what feels like a performative phenomenon in the bash group on Facebook where they post asking who is going to the gym or the pool to get a workout in before the day begins. This often results in several people either saying they will meet each other at the gym and applauding each other for continuing their workout regime even on vacation. When I say that it feels performative, what I mean is that the people participating in these posts seem to be happy to set themselves apart by inhabiting the "good fatty" archetype. I'm certain many people at this bash exercise for fitness or pain management—whatever—and when I see these posts, I feel ashamed for not joining the workout group. I feel left out.*

In the journal excerpt above, I'm reflecting on how shame sets in at bashes when I encounter diet talk or behaviours. In these moments, it becomes difficult to remain present and connected to my body because I am immediately concerned with how

others might view me in light of my disinterest in joining other bash attendees at the gym. The feeling was heavier at this bash specifically because even if I did want to join, the knee pain and instability I was dealing with at that time prevented me from doing so. This shame is amplified by the trauma of fatphobia that has worked to convince me that not being interested in exercising makes me a “bad fatty.” To be clear, exercising is not exclusively a diet behaviour, but in this particular context it is. The friend I refer to in the journal entry above is obsessed with food, with telling people about the healthy food he eats, and with working out—as people on their weight loss journeys tend to be. If this were a one-off experience, I would not find it remarkable; however, encountering diet talk and dieting behaviours is so commonplace at bashes that it warranted its own category in a dissertation. It is little more than wishful thinking to expect that diet talk and behaviours would not exist at a gathering of hundreds of fat people. Fatphobia is one of modern culture’s defining characteristics, structuring the way we view all bodies via promotion of the flawed argument that health should be of utmost concern to everyone and that, of course, being fat is not healthy. Bash attendees carry their full histories into bash spaces, including their desire for and active attempts at weight loss; however, I also carry my position as a fat feminist killjoy into these spaces and do my best to challenge, disturb, and disrupt diet culture when it rears its head. Sedgewick (2005) points to the power of the margins—to the power of people who simply do not agree with the status quo and who push back. This is one way I am able to combat the shame I feel in moments like the one I describe above, thus rendering me able to return to my body. Importantly, I maintain that diet culture actively encourages violence against fat bodies and the expression of diet talk and behaviours in bash spaces where fat

bodies should feel safer from the everyday trauma (Cvetkovich, 2003) of fatphobia perpetuates that violence.

Annabelle, a 44-year old Latina who uses the words fluffy and fat to describe her body, found the BBW community two years ago and, since then, has developed higher self-esteem. She sees the rise in self-love as directly connected to her participation in BBW community events and online discussions, but she says that it is difficult to still be faced with diet culture in these spaces.

> Annabelle: I do feel like there are conversations or discussions that happen where I feel like people are still hanging on to that "I need to conform to this body ideal," which is less fat. So I hear people say things about being healthier, or eating healthier, or exercising or losing weight, or doing things and I think to myself, okay, well how are you framing that? Is this a goal because you don't want to be fat anymore because you think that's what you have to do? You think you're not going to be attractive if you don't do that? That's your idea of what you want to be? There are whispers and things that pop up and things where I think, no I don't agree with that. I don't want to make someone feel like doing some kind of a, you know, diet or challenge or whatever is like, healthy.

For Annabelle, so much of her growth in the BBW community has been as a result of its ability to cultivate love for all bodies, so overhearing conversations that indicate she is surrounded by people who do not want to be fat and are actively trying not to be inspires her to question the motivation and to try to impart some of her own learning about body acceptance. In Annabelle's case, I suspect she is not necessarily disconnected from her body when she overhears diet talk, but instead becomes concerned with mentoring the people engaging in it—this is not a bad thing, though it is arguably not something she should have to contend with in body accepting spaces. Sarai's experience aligns with Annabelle's in that, in bash spaces, she recognizes the majority of people seem to accept the cultural notion that being fat is unhealthy and bad.

> Sarai: How do we get a space that's self-accepting of fat people as fat if underlying is this definition of it as wrong and bad? It doesn't work. It doesn't fit, you know?

Sarai acknowledged that while there are a number of reasons people might change their eating habits—gluten sensitivities, health issues etc.—she states that there are many people who attend bashes who are still focused specifically on weight loss as a primary goal in life.

Bash advertising, especially in online spaces like Facebook groups, often promises a weekend of fun devoted to body and size acceptance and free from judgement of all kinds, especially judgement based on body size. This is a lofty goal for any social event, especially one where attendees have lived lifetimes of feeling judged (and internalizing that judgement) for their body size. Almost all of my participants talked about wanting to attend bashes because they expected the environment would provide some sort of escape from day-to-day insidiousness of diet culture.

> Brienne: You know, they're talking about their keto diets. And I'm kinda like, okay but we're at like, a fat bash. Can we just be fat and have snacks? Why are we keto-ing today? It's a thing for me that's uncomfortable because then I feel like, do they think that I should be losing weight? Because this is supposed to be a safe place. And now it's still almost like that judgement creeps in. Like, we'll all go out to eat and they're kinda picking at this salad and making these choices. And that's fine, eat what you want. But then it becomes like, we are at a body positive plus size event. I mean I just want to eat the cake. Like why is everyone else eating salad. It's weird. I don't know, it becomes hard for me. Sometimes I feel uncomfortable with it.

Overhearing diet talk or seeing diet behaviour hooks into Brienne's history of struggle with her own weight, undermining attempts towards acceptance and inclusivity; however, in these moments when Brienne reads other people's choices as diet-minded, she is immediately engaged in self-surveillance, concerned with how her own choices might be policed. She also finds herself judging people who engage in diet talk and

behaviour. She cannot be blamed for reaching these conclusions and for the upset these experiences cause. These habits are coded as diet behaviours as a result of her own experiences with dieting, picking up on the trauma that dieting inflicts on fat bodies by way of encouraging things like disordered eating and exercising, taking weight loss drugs, and engaging in restrictive diets. Pursuing intentional weight loss by any of these means teaches the dieter to abandon all trust in their body, to totally disconnect from listening to their needs.

As a superfat, Miriam is powerfully affected by the messages propagated by diet culture.

> Miriam: There's a lot of diet talk still. There's a lot of "Oh, I lost so much weight. Oh, I had this surgery. Oh, have you considered having this surgery? Oh, I used to be fat but not that fat. Wow, she's big big, why is she getting so much attention? Like okay, let's respect everyone's decision." Yeah, you can respect everyone's decision—your body your choice—but there's still so much diet talk. There's so much. And it drives me bananas because I'm sitting there with half a pizza in my face and someone's like "and I lost 10 pounds," and it's frustrating. Like I keep going back to how in my head, if you think this about you, what do you think about me? I'm bigger than you before you did the thing, and now you've done the thing. What do you think when you look at me? Do I look disgusting? Are you judging the fact that I'm shoving half this pizza in my face right now? It's weird.

Miriam explained that attending bashes provides her with a glimpse into what it feels like to exist as a "normal" person, but encountering diet talk in bash spaces makes her feel like, as a superfat, she must be getting judged, especially for what she's eating. This is yet another example of how diet talk and behaviour shifts the affective environment of a bash, impacting how Miriam feels in and about her body, ensuring that she becomes instantly concerned with how she is being perceived by others.

In summary, the way participants discussed encountering diet talk and behaviours at bashes illustrates the disconnect between attending an event promoted as size accepting while also being in proximity to people who do not, in fact, accept their own body size. It can be anxiety inducing and as participants revealed, it makes them feel judged and can be counted as yet another way seIf-surveillance and bodily disconnection is intensified in bash spaces. In the next section, I further explore this disconnect by focusing specifically on participants' accounts of their encounters with bash attendees who have had weight loss surgery and how it made them feel about their own bodies.

**The Case of Bariatric Surgery: Shrinking bodies in spaces of abundance**

> *[Autoethnography Journal Entry]*
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> *Being around people who have had weight loss surgery is sometimes suffocating and there are so many of these people at this bash. It makes me feel like, because they generally know the struggle that comes with being fat, they look at me and take pity on me or judge me for not also choosing to hack up my stomach. I've been unable to escape weight loss surgery discussion throughout the weekend. Yesterday, I hosted the Woman's Hour event where 12 of us got together to talk about our relationship with our bodies. I've attended a few other Woman's Hour sessions, but this was my first time hosting and I wanted to create an empowering environment. I started with a five-minute discussion of my personal journey into radical body politics. When I asked that people break off into smaller groups to share stories, I could overhear one of the women who had weight loss surgery a few months ago talking about how she had serious mobility issues that were, she felt, directly related to her large size, to the point she was considering going on disability because it affected her ability to work. As I sit here writing this, I can't help but reflect on how complicated weight loss surgery is. On one hand, I'm totally against it being shoved down people's throats as a catch-all solution to any health issues fat people face. On the other, I am starting to be able to see why certain people choose it. I'm not talking about the 250-pound person, but maybe the 400-pound person who's in a lot of joint pain that could be relieved significantly through a decrease in weight. What makes this even more complicated is that I actually am that 400-pound person now. Maybe I'd be farther along in my surgery recovery if I weren't so big; however, I believe the science that's coming out that tracks weight loss surgery patients' health. I believe that it does not do most bodies well in the long run. How can it? When I*

*think about actively amputating a healthy organ for the sole purpose of limiting food intake, I think of disorder and surgeon-induced disease. There are so many risks, and for some people I guess I can see how the potential benefits outweigh those risks.*

*[Autoethnography Journal Entry]*

*Tonight I was sitting with a group of people hanging out in the common area of the hotel and a non-fat woman approached us. It was evident she's had weight loss surgery because I have noticed there tends to be a bit of droopiness in people's skin when they have lost a lot of weight quickly. When she walked up, one of the first things she said to the entire group of us was "I had the sleeve*[27] *18 months ago, you know." She seemed defiant, maybe simultaneously indicating perceived superiority but with undertones of feeling insecure and judged. It soon became clearer to me why she seemed on edge. There was a wedding at the bash tonight and she made a comment about only coming to the bash to support her friends who got married. She then said "no matter how hard you try, you can't get away from this"—"this" referring to the BBW bash community. I've wondered what it's like for people who have weight loss surgery to continue to go to bashes because of the community they have built. I imagine some of them face resentment and ostracizing.*

There are a variety of complex emotions highlighted in the above journal excerpts that illustrate how a bash environment tinged with weight loss surgery discussion makes me question choices I have made for my own body and makes me anxious about how I'm being perceived by people who have had weight loss surgery. Once self-surveillance sets in, it is difficult to feel safe in and connected to my body. At one of the first bashes I went to, I attended a Woman's Hour. At these sessions women gather together to create community through storytelling that is generally related to their relationship with fatness. At this first Woman's Hour event, I remember being deeply affected by the stories shared that afternoon, so much so that I softened my stance on people who elect to have weight loss surgery. Prior to that, I was almost angry with—and definitely resentful of—people who had weight loss surgery, especially if they seemed to be

[27] The "sleeve" refers to a type of bariatric/weight loss surgery that involves a surgeon removing part of the stomach and then joining the remaining parts together to form a new stomach that is about 1/10$^{th}$ the size of the original.

experiencing “successful” weight loss. This marked a turning point for me because the story of each and every woman who shared about their weight loss surgery was filled with heartache, with experiences with medical professionals who only prescribed weight loss instead of paying attention to symptoms, with relationship abuse of all varieties, and with a narrative about fatness that suggested they believed all of these things were to be blamed on their weight and weight loss surgery was the key to freedom, respect, and happiness. I realized that by resenting people who chose to have the surgery, I was enacting violence by refusing them agency and ignoring their body stories. I now rally my efforts around educating about the serious consequences of bariatric surgery, holding compassion for people who choose to have it, and, instead, direct my anger and resentment toward a society that makes it so stifling and impossible to exist as a fat person that people volunteer to have healthy stomachs chopped up for a chance to breathe.

Pursuing intentional weight loss is rarely healthy, though it’s not uncommon for people who are on a weight loss journey to say they are doing it for their health. This positions weight loss as a means of “accessing futurity” (Lind et al., 2018)—in other words, as an attempt to live longer—when in reality it is often health compromising. Having weight loss surgery is one of most extreme ways of losing weight that broader society also considers a sound decision. Unfortunately, the science says otherwise. In chapter two I present the results of various scientific studies of the complications and consequences of bariatric surgery. They paint a terrifying picture. Bashes are well attended by people who have had weight loss surgery, which creates an interesting and, as we will see, sometimes damaging dynamic for some of my participants. Brienne

was hesitant to say so, but she identified feeling uncomfortable at bashes when she is around women who have had weight loss surgery.

> Brienne: So I'm a huge fan of healthy is different on every body. And some of those girls they've all had the weight loss surgeries and they're there and they look great, and I'm not undermining the work that goes into that weight loss surgery, other than to say it becomes almost a weird cliquey-ness of these people that are like, you know, they're not super big. And I'm not saying they shouldn't come, but it is a weird space because you've got all these girls who are actually really big and then there's this whole section of people that are just kind of bigger than normal/typical, but they're not that big. And so it's hard. I am uncomfortable with it. I hate saying that. I hope that makes sense to you. I don't want to say that I'm uncomfortable around them, but sometimes I feel like they're judgemental of the weight, maybe not purposely. Or like, "well I lost all this weight so you can, too."

Similar to encountering diet behaviours, Brienne is affected by proximity to people she knows have had weight loss surgery in a way that forces her to be preoccupied with what they might think of *her* body size—evidence of the gynaeopticon at work (Winch, 2016).

While bashes do not claim to be fat positive,[28] Ava was passionate when she talked to me about how bash spaces should strive toward fat positivity. After a lifetime of struggling with her relationship with her body—of being preoccupied with how others perceive her—spaces that have the capacity to deliver body freedom are like sanctuaries. She told me that she feels like the presence of people who have had weight loss surgery tends to undermine any possibility of accessing the joyful effects of fat positivity at a bash.

> Ava: I don't know. To be pursuing a weight loss journey, I was just often surprised by it. I kind of want to surround—this is hard for me to say because I know in a way I should probably drop some weight because I'm diabetic—but it

[28] Fat positivity is generally considered to be more radical than body positivity. The accepted definition of fat positivity by more radical fat activists is that in order to be considered fat positive, there must be no discussion or weight loss and no pursuit of weight loss.

> actually surprises me someone can call themselves fat positive and have weight loss surgery. There's an astronomical amount, especially in the [American BBW] groups. To me, if you're actively seeking weight loss, to me that's not fat positive. When you have such a large group of people who are just dying to be thin, I just don't understand. But if we're in what should be a fat positive space, I don't want to hear about somebody's diet. Everybody has their journey they need to go on and I respect that. Our bodies are our own. But it's so crazy to me to go into these environments and have so many—and I'm not just talking one or two people that were maybe bedridden and needed weight loss surgery—I'm talking like maybe ten or 15 percent of a group of people, if not more, and they keep jumping on this sort of "let's have the weight loss surgery!" train. You don't embrace yourself as a fat person at all.

Often, these dynamics are set before bashes begin. Bash organizers set up private Facebook groups for bash attendees who have paid for their passes. The groups are meant to facilitate online socializing for several months before people come together at the bash hotel. There are fun games posted in the groups to give people a chance to introduce themselves and sometimes the games have themes like "then and now," which often results in people who have had weight loss surgery posting what are, effectively, "before and after" weight loss photos. Inevitably, they are celebrated and congratulated for their weight loss.

Sofia has been to over 70 bashes since she started going 15 years ago (for context, the next highest number of bashes attended by another participant was 15). As a result, Sofia has specific insight into how bashes are organized, what makes a good bash, and of course, what makes a bash not so great. She talked to me about how, at this point, she can predict the quality of a bash based solely on who is organizing it. There is one bash in particular that she no longer attends because the last time she went she was involved in a fight to stop the organizer from bringing a weight loss surgery doctor to the bash to do consultations.

> Sofia: I've been to a bash where they tried to have a weight loss doctor come in and talk to us. That's why I don't go to that bash anymore. Like in this one safe space, why would this enter? And it was because the demand is there, because these people have expressed interest. The organizer had weight loss surgery and lost a considerable amount of weight and people are always asking about her doctor and she said she'd have her doctor come to the bash and do consultations. And it was a knock down, drag out fight. Like how can you not see this as wrong? And in the end he didn't come, but I've never returned to that space. I think there are a lot of people that come to [bashes] for self-acceptance, but they're people who aren't happy in their bodies and will never be. They're looking for something very different in this experience. Yes, they found community, but they often find a community of people that feel the same as them. So I tend to see in groups like, there's a group, the same group that I've seen hang out for two or three years, and in the next two or three years the entire group will get surgery and support each other through it. And live your best life, however you want to get there. But it does get tedious in those spaces.

Ultimately, when an organizer invites a bariatric surgeon to a bash, it reinforces the message that fat is bad, which seems completely at odds with what bashes are meant to provide for attendees—a safer space to be fat and feel accepted. While I understand that there was demand, what does that demand speak to in terms of the affective environment of a bash? And how would this incident have impacted fat women's relationships with their bodies? Perhaps this serves as a timely occurrence, but after finishing a draft of this sub-theme, I was scrolling Instagram and noticed a photo of a group of people who are associated with one of the BBW groups in America. After doing a double take and collecting more intel by viewing social media profiles, I realized that it seems like a vast majority of the core group of people associated with the BBW group has now had some form of weight loss surgery. Adding to the questions I pose above—what does it mean to continue to host and benefit financially from fat-centric, supposedly size accepting events when many people who organize the events and are associated with the group have decided to surgically alter their stomachs to move their body as far away as possible from the bodies of the people who pay to attend their

events? It's complicated and illustrates Sofia's point above about entire groups in the BBW community getting weight loss surgery and supporting each other through it.

So far, I have examined how people who are not interested in pursuing weight loss respond to being around people who are actively dieting to lose weight or who have had weight loss surgery. Two of my participants are survivors of weight loss surgery. At the time of her interview, Alyssa was less than a year into her weight loss and had no regrets. She talked to me about how she chose to have weight loss surgery because she was facing what felt like insurmountable health issues. She also shared that prior to the surgery, she was concerned she would be ostracized from the BBW community as her body continued to shrink.

> Alyssa: I've never really talked about it but I did have weight loss surgery. So that like right there, I was more afraid of losing my friends and losing contacts and people weren't going to talk to me because I did this surgery. I was ashamed of that. But for me, like I cannot in my mind, I cannot, I will not get on my high horse about this shit. I can't do that. I was 325 pounds. How dare I say anything about anybody who's big. I can't judge people like that. In my heart I can't. I will support people and be like "hey, do this," or "hey, here's a tip." Or I'll help them. But I won't judge them. To me I'm still, even though I've lost all this weight, I'm still 325 pounds. I'm still a big girl. I just see myself in a lot of other women. It is different with weight loss surgery and I think as it's becoming more normalized or more people are doing it, it's not such a taboo topic. But there are people who are staunchly against it and I've gotten negative comments.

In this case, something Alyssa decided to do for herself caused anxiety about friendships and preoccupation with how she would be perceived in the BBW community—both phenomena limited her ability to remain connected to her body. And as this section demonstrates, another layer of this situation is that Alyssa's own weight loss and her eagerness to help others by giving them weight loss tips is something that would cause several of my other participants to engage in self-surveillance and to feel resentment and body shame. The various intricacies of how Alyssa's weight loss

surgery impacts both her and others around her is an important example of affect's ability to shape bodies and collectivities (Ahmed, 2014).

Hailey had weight loss surgery approximately 10 years ago. At that point, she was not part of the BBW community and therefore was not attending bashes, so she could not comment on her feelings about weight loss while being an active member of a size acceptance community; however, she did share the struggle she had—and continues to have—with her self-esteem after losing weight via surgery. As I revealed at the beginning of this chapter, she even developed body dysmorphia.

> Hailey: I was put down so many years. So many years. It's only been within probably the last five years that I've actually been building my self-esteem. After my surgery, I was seeing a psychiatrist and I had to do journaling because I didn't want to eat because I was afraid to put the weight back on. I ended up in the hospital and I was put on electrolytes. Everything. Everything just made me—I had such a negative view of myself. It wasn't until I got myself away from an abusive ex and started sitting back and not owning everybody's opinion of me, that I am starting now to work on my self esteem to feel better about myself, to have a positive image of myself. Not to pick on every little thing that is wrong with me. After I lost the weight I had started with the psychiatrist and my surgeon ended up removing my stomach skin for free because of how badly it was affecting my mental health. I had so many complications. We were going back for another surgery because of complications and he said we should remove the skin. I said maybe the insurance would cover it. They were paying for me to see a psychiatrist every week, but the one thing that would help would be the removal of the skin. They wouldn't pay for it because they considered it cosmetic. [The surgeon] ended up doing it pro bono, no charge. But after that, you find something else to pick on. Like I can't stand my legs. For the longest time I would not go anywhere without any stockings on because I couldn't stand the way my skin looked and the fat on my legs would droop. Like I used to not wear sleeveless tops because of how big my arms were because the skin now hangs. Then I lost all my boobs when I lost my weight. You can always find something to pick on. So now, like I said, my self-esteem is a work in progress.

Both Alyssa and Hailey's body stories add to the complexity of the how diet culture circulates bash spaces. While many of my interviewees were not thrilled to encounter diet talk and behaviour and were made self-conscious around people who have had

weight loss surgery, Alyssa and Hailey both make it clear that even though they now exist in bodies that better approximate societal ideals, they have no intention of judging others who do not pursue weight loss. For Alyssa, this is a conscious choice predicated on her own experience as a fat woman—she cannot imagine inflicting that type of judgement on someone when she knows the difficulties of existing in this world as a fat person. For Hailey, as the above excerpt reveals, self-surveillance seemed to intensify post-weight loss. She makes it clear that even though she has lost weight, there will always be something she can find on her body that makes her unhappy, thus illustrating the power of a variety of societal forces such as capitalism, patriarchal beauty ideals, and diet culture, all of which infect bodies with their messages about worth, or lack thereof. Finally, both Hailey and Alyssa's experiences illustrate the trauma of fatphobia at work. They both hold entire histories of navigating their worlds in fat bodies and having their embodiment shaped by a gradual build-up of experiences associated with anti-fat messaging. This provides insight into why people who have bariatric surgery continue to attend events designed as safer spaces for fat people. The trauma of fatphobia and the need for community and safety does not simply disappear as weight disappears.

## Discussion: How does white supremacy show up in bash spaces?

The preceding analysis of the relationship between negative affects at bashes and my participants' inability to feel embodied is significant to an understanding of how white supremacy specifically shows up in and shapes BBW bash spaces. Why is it important to include this discussion? It is no secret that writing a dissertation is not a linear process and, in fact, this discussion section is the last major addition I have made to the

dissertation. At the time of this writing, I am witnessing and participating in a global uprising against racial injustice, particularly with respect to Black people dying from police brutality. This movement for racial justice is happening amid the COVID-19 pandemic and both of these global phenomena are laying bare political, social, and structural inequities that inflict unending violence upon marginalized populations, leaving many suffering and many others dead.

I am awakening to my role in this fight, mining my privilege, skills, and resources to offer support and committing to doing the difficult and necessary work of anti-racism. In a video posted on Instagram TV, author, activist, and founder of the digital media and education company The Body is Not an Apology, Sonya Renee Taylor, deconstructs a viral video of a white teen girl named Hayley having a conversation with her white parents about why Black people should be valued and not consistently targeted and murdered by police. Taylor (2020) makes it clear that she appreciates what Hayley is doing while also calling attention to how sick it is that white people do not see the issue with being able to sit around their kitchen table debating Black people's worth. Instead, she says that the real work that needs to be done involves questioning how our devotion to white supremacist delusion shows up in who we are, what we do, what we say, what we believe, and what we value as white people. She calls upon white people to ask themselves the following question: "What are we so afraid of inside of ourselves that we constructed an entire world of disconnection and violence to protect us from ever having to look at ourselves?" (Taylor, 2020). As such, I would be remiss if I did not devote space in this dissertation to a discussion of how the negative affects and experiences described in this chapter are intimately tied to white supremacy.

White supremacy is an ideology that shapes and is reproduced by all systems and institutions. It is understood “as a logic of social organization that produces regimented, institutionalized, and militarized conceptions of ‘hierarchized’ human difference” (Rodriguez, 2006, p. 11). It is an agent of control, fueled by the idea that whiteness and all of its attachments is superior (Maynard, 2017), coding certain bodies as typical and other bodies as deviant (Rinaldi et al., 2020). White supremacy attempts to domesticate, manage, and render the world a knowable object through “scientific observation, classification, taxonomy, the production of data, detail, and description” (Puar, 2007, p. 24-25). At the same time, it “obscures and mystifies” those who benefit from these systems of classification—white people (and whiteness) (Puar, 2007), which reinforces messages about whiteness as the default, as existing outside of racialization, thus protecting it from critique. White supremacist ideology has been and continues to be used to justify colonial projects—projects that rely on the destruction of communal networks of marginalized populations (Maynard, 2017), and it thrives on violence, surveillance, punishment, and criminalization of BIPOC (Black people, Indigenous people, People of Colour) .

In my continuous learning about the insidious nature of white supremacy and in examining how it manifests in my own ideas, habits, and expectations, I have recognized some of the ways it shows up specifically in bash spaces both implicitly and explicitly. I want to be clear from the outset that the following discussion is not inclusive of every way white supremacy shapes bash experiences. It cannot be because of my own limitations for recognizing the nuances of white supremacy as a white person who

benefits from this system. As I sit with the question of how BBW bashes are shaped by and uphold white supremacy, these are the ways I recognize its presence thus far.

First, white supremacy objectifies bodies (Puar, 2007; Rodriguez, 2006). This is a legacy of colonization and chattel slavery and it shows up in my research when participants talk about how they sometimes feel as though they are objects for consumption when they navigate bash spaces. The process of being able to turn someone into a thing to be admired, consumed, and used is rooted in white supremacist notions of worth of bodies as they are constructed in and through the intersections of gender, race, ability, sexuality, and body size. Furthermore, in some cases, men's desire for fat women at bashes may be rooted in what Lorde (1984) defines as the pornographic. This is a concept she uses to capture the process by which structures of power construct and enforce representations of self that are empty of meaning and predicated on routinized and performative acts that deplete a subject's affective energies. Lorde (1984) makes clear that the pornographic is concerned with sensation devoid of feeling, which is perhaps a necessary condition for one's ability to not only remain disconnected from others in order to objectify, but to inspire disconnection in others by objectifying them.

Next, as I have discussed in detail thus far, Eurocentric beauty standards are white supremacist beauty standards and they constitute forms of physical and emotional violence. Even though bashes are spaces of size acceptance, as the participants reveal, the hierarchy of attractiveness constructs an atmosphere where women who adhere most closely to beauty ideals informed by white supremacy are of seemingly higher value with respect to men's interest and desire. This connects back to

Rodriguez's (2006) definition of white supremacy as constitutive of hierarchized human difference. As my participants reported, this hierarchy creates and reinforces the feeling that they are in competition with other women for the attention of men. Competition as a result of individualism is another hallmark of white supremacy (Okun, n.d.). With that said, a complex element of how beauty standards are mobilized in the BBW community in general is that features more commonly found on the bodies of Black women especially, like bigger bums, plump lips etc., are greatly admired, but most of all when they are found on the bodies of white women. This problematic phenomenon speaks to "the current popularization of the voluptuous body, specifically the butt, by women who do not identify as Black" which Gentles-Peart (2018) asserts "is not a celebration of the voluptuous Black female body; rather, it is an appropriation of a body image that Black women have long embraced" (p. 210).

On that note, in addition to what Gentles-Peart (2018) identifies as appropriation of a body image, other forms of appropriation show up in the BBW community. From my observations in online BBW spaces, there is ample evidence of the appropriation of Black Vernacular English (BVE), commonly known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), by white people. This may happen when they share memes or in the language they use in written posts and comments. BVE/AAVE has its roots in slavery. Enslaved Black people invented a new language for the purpose of Black unity, identity, and community-building without the interference of white enslavers (Phillips, 2020). Appropriation of BVE/AAVE is problematic and actively upholds white supremacy because "When BVE is used by non-Black people in verbal dialogue, and on social media, it erases this origin, while commodifying parts of Black culture" (Phillips, 2020, ¶

3). Additionally, appropriation is sometimes also evident in party themes planned by white organizers that are based on cultural traditions and celebrations belonging to BIPOC communities. This is problematic in and of itself, and especially so given these themes are often presented without offering education or context around the history of the cultural traditions on which they are based.

Next, diet culture creates and maintains fatphobia and fatphobia is "intimately tied to the project of white supremacy" (Senyonga, 2020, p. 223). Diet culture thrives on categorizing, classifying, and defining body types, a practice rooted in scientific racism that has historically contributed to efforts meant to "prove evolution of civilization and white supremacy" (Farrell, 2020, p. 32). The ideal body type defined by diet culture is distinctly not fat. As I discuss in depth in chapter two, anti-fatness and racism are inseparable (Forth, 2012; 2015; Strings, 2019). In this way, the pursuit of thinness can be conceptualized as desire to move away not only from fatness, but from Blackness and its associations. The spread of diet culture and the value placed on women's shrinking bodies in particular, whether to meet white supremacist beauty standards or equally problematic colonial and white supremacist standards of "health," is a deeply troubling manifestation of white supremacy in bash spaces and the BBW community as a whole. Bariatric surgery specifically evokes ideas of unnecessary medical procedures performed on marginalized populations as a form of control over bodies and futurity (e.g. sterilization of Indigenous women) via purposefully inflicting physical and mental harm (e.g. the Tuskegee syphilis experiment in which Black men were, unbeknownst to them, infected with syphilis so researchers could study the disease's natural progression). Additionally, as LeBesco (2004) notes, "anti-fat bias is more pronounced

in individualist cultures that emphasize personal freedom and autonomous goal achievement" (p. 55). Language mobilized by diet culture speaks about "progress" and "growth" and "individual responsibility" for correcting the fat body, which reflects the influence of broader neoliberal ideologies—ideologies rooted in white supremacy.

Another way that white supremacy circulates and shapes bash spaces is in the distinctly heteronormative atmosphere, identified most significantly in this dissertation by Betty. By definition, heteronormativity is a system that prioritizes presumption of heterosexuality and adherence to an often unforgiving gender binary (Nelson, 2015), and the "hegemonic gender roles" that are reflected by this binary "are predicated on white supremacy" (Lind, 2020, p. 185). While a number of my participants identify as bisexual, pansexual and/or queer, bash spaces are largely organized around principles of heteronormativity and exploration of sexuality and relationships between cisgender men and cisgender women. This emphasis on the heterosexual affect circulating bashes is revealed by several of my participants who reported they felt as though they were on display for men in particular. They report witnessing heteronormativity in action in terms of gender presentation defined by a gender binary (women and men adhering to characteristics of hegemonic femininity and masculinity respectively). Betty specifically identified observing characteristics of emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987), such as other women seemingly using a higher-pitched tone of voice in the presence of men. Labeling and defining sexuality and the creation of a strict gender binary are actions rooted in colonization and thus wrapped up in white supremacy (Gilley, 2006; Morgensen, 2011).

Last, but certainly not least, bashes are events hosted by a community that not only aligns itself with the body positivity movement, but is arguably an extension of it. Why does this matter in a discussion of how white supremacy shows up in bash spaces? Body positivity arose as a sub-category of fat liberation. Fat liberation and ideas about body love and acceptance started with Black women and was then appropriated by white women once it became mainstream and eventually profitable for corporations and influencers alike (Jennings, 2018). It bears repeating, fatphobia and racism are inseparable and the colonization of body positivity and body positive spaces by white women is an example of how the legacy of this relationship manifests presently. The very least the BBW community can do is pay homage to the history of the movement that informs its values.

One of questions that requires further investigation is why bashes tend to be spaces occupied most prominently by white women—in other words, what is it about bashes that does not speak to the interests of Black women, Indigenous women, and women of colour? I suggest that this overview of some of the ways bashes are shaped/informed by white supremacy gives us insight. While I can understand how white supremacy influences my own bash experiences (to a limited extent at this point), I can only begin to imagine how these processes might impact Black women, Indigenous women, and women of colour who choose to attend.

## Conclusion

In 2015 I attended the Allied Media Conference in Detroit, MI. Having a year of PhD course work behind me, I was still fairly new to (and in love with) the idea of “safe space,” a concept discussed in many of my classes. I started applying the principles of

safe space to my teaching and any workshops I would host. At the conference, I went to a session about radicalizing classroom spaces. So many people showed up that the presenters had to find a bigger auditorium—clearly people were interested. One of the organizers wrote “SAFER SPACE” in big, bold lettering on the chalk board at the front of the auditorium, beginning the session by telling the audience that there is no such thing as a safe space. She clarified that the best we can do is to aim for creating *safer* spaces for people. These words stuck with me and have been at the forefront of my mind while composing this chapter.

Weaving participants’ reports of being watched, approached, and groped by men at bashes together with their accounts of exposure to diet culture in spaces they assumed would live up to the promise of size acceptance, I have illustrated bashes do not seem to be safe spaces, particularly for fat women. There were a variety of ways that bash experiences impeded both my and my participants’ ability to be present in our bodies and to feel free to draw upon the affective atmosphere of the bash in order to better explore and understand ourselves and our world. Instead, the experiences required us to fall back into modes of self-preservation, making it impossible to remain open and feel safe in the moments captured in these accounts. The stories detailed in this chapter demonstrate how my participants’ bash experiences hooked into histories of body struggle, created and maintained by the assemblage of “obesity” (Rich et al., 2010)—histories of struggle that taught my participants how to internalize oppressive normalizing gazes. Participants reported feeling uncomfortable, unsafe, and overwhelmingly concerned with what other people thought about them.

These issues are cause for concern. What is also true is that nine of my 12 participants have attended four or more bashes (with Sofia topping the chart at 70), and only two participants said they would never attend another. This world makes existing as a fat person incredibly difficult, and for all of their problems bashes continue to be *safer* spaces for fat people. If the findings reported in this chapter are true, then what is it about bashes that keep my participants going back? To answer this, I turn to chapter five where I explore participants' stories of experiencing joyful embodiment, subjecthood, and bodily connection via access to desire and community at bashes.

# Chapter Five: Bashes as Spaces for Healing Everyday Trauma of Fatphobia

## Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored participants' accounts of experiences at bashes that stifled their ability to feel at home and connected to their bodies; however, I have also maintained that bashes are complicated and complex spaces. Nine out of 12 of my participants have attended between four and 70 bashes, suggesting there are significantly positive experiences to be had. In this chapter, I explore the bash experiences reported by participants that made them feel like embodied subjects who were connected to their bodies, and that helped to relieve the oppressive weight of normalizing gazes. While the stories discussed in chapter four illustrated how the affective environment of bashes often *reinforces* the trauma of fatphobia, in this chapter I am interested in demonstrating how other affective elements of the bash environment allowed participants to work on *healing* their relationship with their fat bodies by offering them the opportunity to challenge narratives controlled by fatphobia that contribute to everyday trauma (Cvetkovich, 2003). I contend that finding opportunities to feel free and present in one's body, to feel like a subject as opposed to an object, is one way for fat people to experience respite from the everyday trauma of fatphobia. Bodily connection at bashes was stimulated by two categories of phenomena that comprise the overarching themes of this chapter:

1. Having access to pleasure and desirability
2. Having access to fat community

The concepts of trauma culture (Cvetkovich, 2003) and crisis ordinariness (Berlant, 2011) factor heavily into the analysis I present in this chapter. First, Cvetkovich (2003) examines the creation of lesbian public cultures via activism, performance, and literature, determining the usefulness of speaking one's trauma as a means for defining political communities. She defines trauma cultures as specific types of public cultures that form out of affects associated with trauma. I see the BBW community as a type of trauma culture. As Cvetkovich (2003) asserts, affects associated with trauma serve as the foundation of public cultures and in the case of the BBW community, a public culture is formed around affects associated with the trauma of fatphobia. She contends that trauma cultures often serve as therapeutic for people within them, a significant assertion in light of the analysis presented in this chapter that aims to demonstrate how particular affective elements of bashes may help to heal some of the trauma fat people carry as a result of fatphobia. Significantly, Cvetkovich's (2003) work shares kinship with my own in that she examines the creation of public and trauma cultures through the temporary, intentional communities of people who come together via shared experiences of adversity and oppression in an attempt to create a different world. BBW bashes are temporary moments of in-person community-building that bring hundreds of people together who have shared experiences of discrimination and oppression based on large body size as well as the consequent trauma associated with those experiences. Additionally, I concluded the previous chapter with a reflection on the idea of safe/safer spaces for marginalized people. In her analysis of the sometimes hotly contested idea that the Michigan Women's Music Festival was a safe space, particularly for survivors of sexual trauma and homophobia, Cvetkovich (2003) insightfully asserts that "the power

of the notion of safe space resides in its double status as the name for both a space free of conflict and a space in which conflict and anger can emerge as a necessary component of psychic resolution," and that "the pain and conflict inevitably unleashed when safe spaces are established, should be considered signs of success rather than failure" (p. 87). It is her belief that the trauma that brings marginalized communities together in these temporary spaces can and should be worked on through constructive and careful use of conflict and release of anger.

Next, the second important concept offered by affect theory is crisis ordinariness, which Berlant (2011) defines as crisis which is systematic and built into our everyday lives. The central idea behind crisis ordinariness is that our everyday encounters with our world can become so intensely overwhelming that ordinary daily happenings end up constituting crises, thus requiring us to be in a constant state of crisis management. Fatphobia sets up an atmosphere of crisis ordinariness because it shapes systems that organize society (i.e. the assemblage of "obesity"). It saturates all interactions we have in and outside of institutions. As a result, fat people experience anti-fat attitudes as an everyday occurrence that requires a constant state of crisis management. For example, in our study of how fat hatred circulates in everyday contexts of healthcare, on public transit, and while participants engaged in exercise, Rinaldi et al. (2020) demonstrate that fatmisia (hatred of fat, fatness and fat persons) operates as an affective economy to erase or expunge fat life, illustrating the significant potential for fatphobia to cause trauma. This idea of fat hatred forcing fat people to live in a constant state of crisis management aligns with literature that illustrates that even *perceived* discrimination (let alone actual discrimination) results in a person living in a chronic state of physiological

arousal and heightened vigilance (Schnittker & McLeod, 2005; Williams & Neighbors, 2001). Additionally, for all of the concern about fat people's health that apparently drives fatphobia, it is important to note that studies show how remaining in a chronic state of physiological arousal and heightened vigilance as a result of weight stigma contributes to negative physical and mental health outcomes for fat people (Calogero et al., 2019; Chrisler & Barney, 2017; Harrison, 2019; Lind et al., 2018; Lindly et al., 2014; Meadows & Bombak, 2019; Schafer & Ferraro, 2011; Van der Kolk, 2014). The BBW community—referred to by Cooper (2016) as a key site of fat activism—is a collective of fat people who bear the weight of crisis ordinariness shaped by fatphobia and who have created community in an effort to access sites of respite, constituting a trauma culture.

I began chapter four by introducing excerpts from participants' interviews that illustrated the impact of fatphobia on how they view their bodies in order to demonstrate how fat people are already well-versed in self-surveillance before they even enter bash spaces. Continuing this endeavour, the following interview excerpts from three participants, and a glimpse into my own personal experience, provide further evidence of how fatphobia stifles fat women's ability to feel connected to their bodies, and in this case the focus is specifically on preoccupation with the space they take up in the world.

> Miriam: Like if I walk down the street right now and I walk up into the main part of town, when people look at me I'm not thinking oh, they like my outfit or my hair. No, they're looking at me because I'm big as hell. And that's hard to take sometimes. Especially if you see someone staring, or you see someone raise their phone and then you know what they're doing. And they apparently think you can't see them. And it's like draining to go out and be among general society sometimes because like, I can't get through my day without being like, is she staring at me, is he staring at me? There are times I am like "fuck it" and I do what I gotta do. But sometimes it's like I'm going through my checklist in my head and I see someone looking at me just a little too long and I'm like okay, here we go. I just want to live my life and be left alone instead of being judged. If you're

> going to have a judgement thought, don't look at me, don't interact or anything. Just let me be. But it's so ingrained in them to judge and so ingrained in me from experience to be hyperaware of that staring. And like, it's a mix. Sometimes I don't see it at all and other times I can't not see it.

As a disabled, superfat woman, Miriam is often on guard for how people respond to her when she is navigating public spaces. It is not uncommon for her to see people staring or trying to take pictures of her when she is running errands or going out to eat with her partner. As we will see later in the chapter, Miriam is freed of these concerns in bash spaces.

Alyssa is one of two participants who has had weight loss surgery. At the time of our interview, she had already lost a significant amount of weight, but revealed that she continues to be constantly preoccupied with her body size and that she still gets anxious about the space she takes up when she's in public—things she does not worry about at bashes.

> Alyssa: Oh I'm very self conscious about my body outside of bash spaces. On the bus or train, I'm always worried about taking up too much of a seat. Fitting in aisles. Like even traveling by plane, seatbelt extenders and stuff like that. I'm always aware of my size and where I can fit in with people. I try to make sure that I'm not going to sit in a small chair or the chair isn't rickety.

These feelings are common among fat people (Brown, 2018; Dark, 2019; Mitchell, 2006; Rinaldi et al., 2020). I connected particularly with Alyssa's discussion of being self-conscious of taking up too much space on public transit, which changed significantly after I was suddenly disabled. Prior to my knee injury, I performed ability by standing on public transit even if my chronic pain was flaring. At that point, the trade-off was easy: push through physical pain so I do not have to endure the emotional pain of being concerned people would judge me for taking up two seats and displacing another person from having space to sit. In doing so, I engaged in what Mitchell (2006) identifies

as attempting to “resist the shame of the fat body” (p. 206). The only time I sat down is when a transit vehicle was fairly empty. When I suddenly found myself disabled, the only way I could be safe on a moving bus, streetcar, or subway train was to sit. I was not steady on my feet anymore, but more importantly I could no longer bear pain. I could no longer stand for more than a few minutes without my entire body feeling like it might collapse. The anxiety I experienced commuting to and from work and school was overwhelming because I was highly aware of my body and the space it took up. What felt impossible to recognize in the moment is that I had every right to my safety and comfort on public transit, especially as a disabled person at risk of re-injury. But fatphobia won. It had done its job. It had convinced me I did not deserve the space my body occupied. Before I injured myself I could more easily shrink into a corner of a transit vehicle, ensuring that my fat body did not inconvenience anyone else. I could not feel safe in or connected to my body while navigating public spaces neither before nor after injury.

In the next excerpt, Ava picks up on how the emotional impact of navigating inaccessible public space sticks with her for the rest of her day.

> Ava: Even as I got here today for the interview, even trying to get onto a GO bus to come to Toronto and the challenge of my body just even getting into the entrance at the door and down the aisle, it’s like all of a sudden I feel uncomfortable. It’s not even just a physical uncomfortable. Like okay, so I squished myself by and sat in a comfy chair. But I’m all of a sudden uncomfortable and maybe a little bit more self-conscious, or even more uncomfortable for the rest of the day because that was kind of embarrassing, you know? And it kind of leaves you in a bit of a mood for the rest of the day. Like I’ll shake it off eventually. It’s like if you go to a restaurant and you sit on a chair that’s rickety, you’re kind of almost sitting above the chair. It’s all these little things and it makes you uncomfortable and tense for the rest of the day. Like again, I get on the bus today and I feel like—and maybe nobody thought

> anything—but I feel like people are looking at me like “oh is she going to make it?” and then I’m embarrassed.

These accounts illustrate how everyday experiences moving through public space robs fat people of the ability to feel free, safe, and comfortable in their bodies—feelings that persist for some time after the initial experience. Sometimes this robbery is the result of people’s actions, like when strangers take photos of Miriam, and sometimes it is as a result of physical space built to accommodate only certain types of bodies. These experiences also exemplify everyday trauma and crisis ordinariness associated with fatphobia. The following explores how particular elements of the affective environment of BBW bashes offer fat women the opportunity to heal some of this trauma and to challenge dominant societal narratives about their bodies being unwelcome and undesirable.

## BBW Bashes as Spaces of Access to Pleasure and Desirability

It is well documented that societal fatphobia teaches fat women they are not worthy of sexual and romantic desire and are thus unworthy of pleasure (Gailey, 2012; Jones, 2019; Murray, 2004; Nurka, 2014). These messages combine with a specific stereotype that circulates about fat people’s insatiability—generally related to food and eating—and this is to be read as shameful and immoral. Messages of worthlessness, undesirability, shame and immorality combine to teach fat women that they are not sexual subjects deserving of pleasure—this maps specifically to the trauma fat people carry caused by fatphobia. Murray (2004) contends that the corporeality of a fat woman’s body in Western culture is such that she is encouraged to consistently reject her fatness, which works to enforce “disconnection from her body, and a refusal of herself as a sexual being” (p. 237). She goes on to explain that fatphobia shapes narratives around fat sex

in ways that imbue it with characteristics like excess, disgust, perversity, and fetishism—messages fat people internalize that reinforce their position outside of sexual subjectivity (Murray, 2004). For fat women, receiving confirmation and validation of their sexuality from others is one way to challenge this narrative. Heteropatriarchy ensures this validation is most valuable when it comes from men (hooks, 2002), fueling women's self-objectification and self-surveillance in attempts to shape themselves according to the desires of the male gaze (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975).

As we learned in chapter four, bashes are constructed as spaces where fat women are available for men and I explored how that dynamic fostered uncomfortable encounters for participants; however, participants also told me about how the sexually charged affective environment of bashes gave them access to attention, desire, and pleasure they do not generally experience in their day-to-day lives. Additionally, this form of appreciation allowed them to tap into their sexual subjectivity. These stories are important because representations of fat women's sexuality in the broader culture are rare. In media specifically, representation of the sexual viability of fat women is mostly nowhere to be found; instead, they are constructed as void of sexual agency and attractiveness (LeBesco, 2004; Pausé, 2015). This is the case because "body size is connected to the heteronormative system of meaning and value that establishes what it means to be masculine and feminine" (Gailey, 2015, p. 23). Why is this relevant? First, hegemonic masculinity delineates what men must aspire to in order to be deemed appropriately masculine, which includes guidelines for what they should find attractive in women; of course, they are encouraged to value thinness in women. Next, women feel pressure to adhere to these normative standards of emphasized femininity (Connell,

1987), furthering the reach and impact of hegemonic masculinity (Gailey, 2015). Fat bodies are then constructed as unattractive specifically because they defy these standards, symbolizing "domination or resistance to idealized femininity and overconsumption" (Gailey, 2012, p. 116). These circumstances shape beliefs about fat women's desirability and sexual viability. As we will see in the analysis presented in this section, bashes are spaces in which my participants had experiences that not only challenge these beliefs, but demonstrate the life-giving nature of being desired and having their sexual pleasure prioritized. Two sub-themes were identified in the interviews as illustrative of these phenomena:

1. Receiving affirming and empowering attraction-based attention from men and women.
2. Accessing sexual pleasure and learning about fat sex.

**License to Strut: Affirming and empowering attraction-based attention at bashes**

> *[Autoethnography Journal Entry]*
>
> *As I walked to the bar to grab another glass of wine, a friend grabbed my arm and pulled me over to introduce me to someone. She figured we would hit it off, and we did. She pushed me gently toward an attractive man who turned out to be sophisticated and charming. The chemistry was undeniable. We stepped away from the crowd to get to know each other a bit better. He said he had noticed me in the private bash Facebook group weeks ago and was looking forward to meeting me, then went on to explain that he thought I was beautiful and that I exude confidence. We spent the rest of the night catching each other's glances and finding ways to bump into each other.*

Being viewed as confident can be tricky in bash spaces. For instance, a well-connected friend from the BBW community once shared with me that a number of people have told her they are interested in talking to me, but that I intimidate them because I come across as exceptionally confident. For the record, I recognize this is not a me problem.

In reality, between my self-esteem issues and my experiences being used and feeling fetishized by men, I find myself defaulting to resenting men who are more aggressive about finding me attractive. One of the primary ways this manifests is that I convince myself that I should not take any pleasure in positive attention I receive from men specifically. I have been hurt and manipulated and I find it difficult to trust their advances. But in the last few years I have realized that I am allowed to like attention and I don't need to feel ashamed that it feels good when I receive it. It is uncommon for men to approach me and strike up conversation and flirt with me in my day-to-day life; however, at bashes, I have seemingly endless opportunity to flirt and be playful with men and, importantly, I see a direct correlation between attending bashes and my ability to lean into desire. I have spent a lifetime thinking I'm not "good enough" to be desired and I deserve experiences that help me revise that narrative. Moreover, I owe it to myself to make some space for taking some pleasure in knowing that men are too nervous to even speak to me.

The power of fatphobia to mark fat people as grotesque and unworthy of desire complicates fat people's relationship with desire. Because we generally do not experience things that non-fat people might consider "normal" indications of attraction, our scale for weighing appropriate and meaningful expressions of desire is off. For example, a conventionally attractive straight woman who has spent her life being approached by men interested in her might come to find men's attention annoying or even threatening, but for a fat woman who is interested in dating men and who is not used to receiving attraction-based attention from men, being hit on might feel thrilling and even validating. To talk about fat women's access to desire means to acknowledge

that wanting to be desired and thus presenting ourselves specifically for other people to consume illustrates our complicated relationship with desire. With respect to bashes, I acknowledge this reality: I can enter a bash space completely aware of how it is shaped by heteronormativity and completely aware the men in that space generally view fat women as easy lays while simultaneously being interested in flirting and potentially hooking up with men and presenting myself in ways that better allow me to accomplish these aims. And I can do this even if these practices and performances mirror some of the ways the gaze tries to define attractiveness in women. In chapter four, I asserted that preoccupation with appearance for the consumption of men at bashes exemplifies self-surveillance; however, that self-surveillance is also strongly impacted by a lifetime of fat women being taught they are not sexual subjects.

Participants recognized that at bashes they would be sharing space for three or four days with many people who would find them attractive. As we will see, this had revolutionary impact on participants' feelings of worth, attractiveness, and comfort in their bodies. We begin with Ava, who described the difference between how she experiences attraction in BBW bash spaces versus in her day-to-day life.

> Ava: Well, okay, the nice thing about being approached in BBW spaces is there is no question the man in the space is into your body. Because, and I know that sounds kind of weird, but you know why he's there. He's literally bought the ticket. Unfortunately, I feel like I still carry a bit of a chip on my shoulder if I'm approached outside of a BBW space. I'll wonder if he has six friends in a corner watching and laughing. But you're almost on guard. I've experienced it many times where I'm looking behind me and thinking okay, this is a little weird and it's odd for this man to be approaching me. This is a bold move. In BBW spaces, that's not a bold move. Instead, it's like you expect to be attacked by jackals, which is not the norm for me outside of BBW spaces. In a regular bar, it's a bolder move so you tend to be on guard and I think "Is this guy for real?" In a BBW space if someone comes up to me, I'm kind of like okay, he's already

> digging what he sees here and that helps me to feel more comfortable and present.

Ava captures the importance of being able to trust that someone who approaches her at a bash is actually into her physical appearance—it allows her to relax instead of question whether she is the focus of mocking and fat hate. This phenomenon is similar to Gailey's (2015) findings that fat women prefer finding partners through online platforms because the platforms offer a way of featuring their fat bodies so that if someone is not interested in fat women, they can pass on the profile. The similarity is in the comfort of a fat woman knowing that if someone approaches her on a dating site or at a BBW event, she can trust the person is attracted to her—in other words, these ways of meeting people for sex and/or romance take out some of the guess work and the risks associated with dating as fat women. Unfortunately, research shows that fat women's anxiety over the motives of men who approach them—especially in regular bar or club settings—is justified. For instance, Prohaska & Gailey (2009) map out a phenomenon called "hogging" that entails young men making a sport out of seeing who can successfully hit on, dance with, or even take home the fattest women in any given social setting. A similarly horrifying example is presented by Murray (2008b) who writes about a game called "rodeo" played by a cadet who lured a fat woman back to his hotel room where nine other cadets were hidden. He seduced her, blindfolded her, and asked her to get on all fours so he could tie her up. Convinced it was simply a kinky sex act, she went along with it. The cadet signaled to his friends, who then came out of their hiding spots and each took their turn jumping on the woman's back, riding her and kicking her as if they were in a rodeo. While I cannot claim that bad men do not attend bashes, I feel relatively confident fat women are safe from this level of fatphobic vitriol

and abuse at bashes. It is this relative safety that allows fat women to remain open to and excited about having the very human need for positive, desire-based attention met over the course of a bash weekend.

As a pansexual, infinifat Black woman, the intersections of homophobia, fatphobia, and racism make it more difficult for Sofia to experience positive, desire-based attention in her day-to-day life, but at bashes she has open and abundant access to this type of affirming energy. Sofia asserted that attention from people who are attracted to her significantly impacts her self-esteem.

> Sofia: But it is important to be wanted. It is important to be, like, you can't help but, I mean I guess I can only speak for myself. I find a boost in self-esteem when a bunch of guys are vying for my attention, a bunch of people are vying for my attention, not just men. But when a bunch of people are vying for your attention at a bash, you're like oh right, this is the way it always should be. And I definitely think it affects my self-esteem.

Sofia was the only Black woman who expressed interest in being interviewed and she told me that in many ways, she experiences the same sort of racial biases in bash spaces as she does in her everyday life (see chapter four for a discussion of how white supremacy shows up in bash spaces); however, she clarified that bashes are the only social spaces in which she has ever experienced any advantage as a result of her infinifat body size specifically. In an essay discussing sexuality at the intersection of fatness and Blackness, Ashleigh Nicole Tribble (2019) describes how it's easy for people to view themselves as sexual subjects when they see their bodies represented in or mirrored by the culture. She states that Black women have been "fighting for our right to sexuality and sexual autonomy" since Black women were kidnapped and taken to America on slave ships.

> “Bred like cattle, used for leisure, we have never been seen as people, let alone capable of being protected, cared for and loved. And for fat, Black women, there has always been an added layer of this misogynoir. We were used not only to breed the largest and strongest children on the plantation, but also as caretakers of everyone else’s children, inside and outside the house as The Mammy—an archetype that to this day follows us around in nearly every speck of representation we see.” (Tribble, 2019, ¶5)

Tribble contends that The Mammy is a racial archetype that continues to dictate how people value Black women.

> “We are usually seen as aggressive, difficult, and void of any desirability whatsoever. We purely exist to fulfill the needs of everyone around us and to remain subservient to a fault, even within our own community. We’re supposed to be raising everyone’s kids, solving everyone’s problems and putting ourselves last, and that extends to our sexuality. When the concept of being sexually desirable is brought up concerning fat, Black women, it is seen as a joke or an impossibility because of how we’ve been socialized to completely ignore our own capacity for sexual expression and everyone else has been socialized to either exploit or ignore it as well.” (Tribble, 2019, ¶6-7)

An important and current example of the way fat Black women’s bodies and sexuality continue to be diminished under the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the case of musician and performer extraordinaire Lizzo. In the last year or so Lizzo has dominated the music scene while simultaneously being publicly denigrated for her body. At the end of 2019, Lizzo was filmed twerking at a televised basketball game while wearing a thong and a dress with the butt area cut out. Social media blew up with responses. Lizzo’s actions were condemned as inappropriate with many responses raising concern over the basketball game being a “family friendly” event. The arguments hold little weight, of course, given that sports fans generally accept and appreciate scantily clad cheerleaders at sporting events who are, of course, always thin and often white. Lizzo was also the target of fat hatred couched in the language of health concern by Jillian Michaels, the fatphobic and abusive fitness instructor responsible for causing extreme harm to fat people’s emotional and physical health on the widely viewed reality

television show *The Biggest Loser*. The public contempt for Lizzo's body size littered across social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook[29] has resulted in important commentary demonstrating that the hate Lizzo receives is amplified because of the intersections of Blackness and fatness (Marie, 2019; Sydneysky G, 2019). A more important public response to Lizzo, however is that she is also celebrated as an icon of body positivity and an example of fat, Black excellence. Lizzo's Instagram (@lizzobeeating) has over eight million followers and is a space where she demonstrates her intelligence, talent, beauty and absolute sexiness via uplifting and affirming captions and stories, gorgeous selfies, videos of her singing and playing the flute, and, of course, totally mesmerizing videos of her twerking. Lizzo's music and social media presence exemplify and expound upon the themes of self-love and the desirability of fat, Black women, sending powerful messages to her fans (and her haters!). I presented this brief analysis of responses to Lizzo's body as a contemporary example of the complexity of how people engage with fat, Black women's bodies. In applying this to Sofia's experiences of her own sexuality as a queer, infinifat Black woman, it is likely they are haunted by the spectres of sizeism, racism and homophobia; however, as Sofia describes, bashes offer opportunity to access sincere desire.

As a BBW web model, Miriam's job exists because people fantasize about and desire fat women. In her analysis of participant observation and in-depth interviews with 23 BBW webcam models, Jones (2019) illustrates that fat women who do cam work

[29] To see examples of this contempt, simply search "Lizzo" (especially on Twitter). Search results display a variety of negative responses to Lizzo living her life as fat and Black while reaping the rewards of her hard work (I do not recommend actually doing this search). In fact, at the time of this writing (May 2020), it has been five months since Lizzo twerked at the Lakers game, and when I search "Lizzo Lakers" on Twitter, a number of the results returned are Tweets stating that the world has not been the same since she did so—some of which go as far as connecting the twerking event to the current SARS-CoV-2 global pandemic. Astounding.

report high levels of empowerment and improvement to self-concept connected to being paid to perform their sexuality for people who desire them. Miriam shared with me that despite the affirmation of desirability she experiences on the job, being appreciated for her appearance in person at bashes is also important because it positively impacts her self-confidence and allows her to feel connected to her body.

> Miriam: I think like, it was like having a physical and mental sort of affirmation that my body was ideal. That there was a place and people who would find my body and be like "Oh my god, that's exactly what I want," you know what I mean? So it's hard not to be like, I'm gonna reign in all the compliments and the attention. That feeling of being desired isn't there outside of these spaces, or it's hardly there. It's weird because like, if someone were to message me on OkCupid or PlentyOfFish[30] and be like "oh, you're really hot" or whatever and they looked like, even if they looked like my partner, I'd be like bullshit. I'd be like this is a scam, you're catfishing me, or you're going to prank me or this is some nonsense. But when I go to BBW spaces and that happens, it's like oh now I feel like queen of the world because this is the space where I'm the norm and now you're also giving me attention on top of that. So like not only do I feel normal, but now you're getting special attention and now I feel even more attractive. I feel even more, I don't know that I want to say empowered, but I feel like I have some power and now I can use this space and this situation where I am seen as an ideal and use that as like a power motivator kind of thing. Like now I can sort of have my choice and be picky, whereas outside of there you're scraping the bottom of the barrel looking for someone to give you attention it feels like. I found that, you know, that a lot of that attention would end up boosting how I felt about myself and my body. And I would feel more sexy and more desired there when I was getting that attention than when I was outside of that space and not getting the attention. And it's a huge confidence boost. And it's like yeah, I'll sway my hips a little more as I walk and it would absolutely change my demeanour and how I hold myself and all these other things. I mean I'm absolutely feeling myself in this moment. And part of it is because of all of the attention and the sort of knowing that someone is watching and they're watching for better reasons than wanting me to die or thinking that I'm going to die.

In this excerpt, Miriam talks about the power of desire to make her feel empowered and to help her recognize that she deserves positive attention and adoration that counters so much of the negative attention she receives from people who disparage and express

[30] OkCupid and PlentyOfFish are dating apps.

hate toward her when she is navigating her everyday life. Moreover, she echoes Ava's description of being unable to trust men's advances outside of bash spaces, which diminishes much of the pleasure potential of engaging in dating, sex, and romance.

Rose is a 45-year old white woman who describes her body as fat. She went to two Las Vegas bashes over 10 years ago. She shared with me that she was significantly less fat when she attended bashes and had been told by various people she was not fat enough to be desired, particularly in Las Vegas where bashes often draw some of the largest fat women in the BBW community. She described one experience when she was sitting topless next to a pool talking to a man who was clearly interested in her by the way he was looking at her.

> Rose: The topless sunbathing thing was completely revolutionary to me. The idea that I was not wearing clothes and I was in a public space, even beyond bathing suit, you know like that was crazy. And I was also receiving positive, like, I could see dudes looking at me, and they were not repulsed. I was even talking to one. He was sitting beside me and I had no top on and he was talking to me, and at one point he's talking to my boobs, and that like upset me a little bit, so I went to pull my top back up and he's like, "oh, you don't have to do that" and I was like, "uh, yeah." But still, the idea was really freeing to me.

Rose acknowledged eventually feeling uncomfortable with the desire-based interaction; however, she raised the point that it felt freeing for her to be able to be topless among men who looked at her in an appreciative way instead of being "repulsed."

In Julie's interview, she pointed to how men's appreciation of her appearance does not necessarily make her feel any different about or in her body because she recognizes that in bash spaces there is a hyper-focus on women's physical appearance, something she does not value as highly as character. She shared an experience she had with a man she met while at a bash in Las Vegas.

> Julie: We met in the pool on the first day of the bash and then two days later, when I got into the pool, he said "I'm just letting you know, I may be talking to a lot of women, but you're absolutely the prettiest. You're the prettiest to look at but you're also the prettiest because you're just nice. I've talked to a lot of people and you're the prettiest." And I just remember in that moment thinking it's really not about my looks that you're complimenting me right now. But I sensed what he was getting at. He liked the person I was and I remember feeling like, "sweet, that's awesome." I felt good about myself.

Julie said she appreciates attention she receives at bashes when she can tell it is based on something deeper or, in her opinion, more significant than her appearance.

Annabelle shared with me that she has a history of sexual abuse that, for her entire life, has shaped her reactions to sexual advances and attention. She said that, in general, she still prefers not to be touched or noticed, but that bashes have also helped her to become more comfortable with attention and touching because she tends to feel safer in bash spaces.

> Annabelle: So I also think like, while I want men's attention and I want to be seen as attractive, again, since [the sexual abuse] happened in my life, I've always had that sense of I don't want attention on me. I don't want to draw attention. That being seen as sexual or attractive is a dangerous thing. So it's an interesting dichotomy. Because I want to be attractive and yet I don't want to be attractive, still even as an adult. But I think I'm now more comfortable as being seen as attractive or sexual. And I would say that in [bash spaces] with [other bash attendees], this is probably the most in my life that I've ever been around people who speak so freely about sexuality and about sexual interaction, or kind of frequently using sexual innuendo or even just touching each other. I have been touched by women way more in the last two years than I ever have in my whole life, unexpectedly usually. So you know, I worry about it sometimes because I feel like, okay, you know, I get that people are more comfortable with each other and more comfortable with their bodies, but I do worry sometimes that there is an ease with which people touch other's bodies, and I think okay, you need to be a bit more conscious about that. But I would say overall I'm less concerned about it. I get the sense that people are doing it without harmful intent toward somebody else.

For Annabelle, bashes have served as safer spaces for her to experience fatness and, as we will see later in this chapter, have revolutionized her relationship with her body.

Remarkably, as she explains above, they have also given her access to experiences of sexual attraction that have, in some ways, helped to rewire some of the trauma she carries as a survivor of sexual abuse. Slowly, she is learning to trust attraction, especially in bash spaces where, in her experience, people are affectionate with her with no intent to harm.

In chapter four, I revealed that while Brienne has come a long way in her attempts to heal her relationship with her body, she still struggles with wearing outfits that show her bare arms; however, she told me that she credits the desire and pleasure she experiences in bash spaces for helping her to become even slightly more comfortable in her fat body.

> Brienne: It's nice to go in and feel sexy and feel like I'm appreciated and my body's appreciated and I don't have to cover up or try to be smaller than I am. Like, there's some really good looking guys there that are very into thicker girls. A lot of my girlfriends will even comment that they're too small for the guys at bashes, and I've never been too small for anything. So it's kind of nice to be able to be, like, the desired target, or whatever you want to call it. I mean I know that a lot of those guys are looking for women my size. And that's not something that I can get at any normal bar or anywhere really. Also, being with somebody sexually that is size accepting makes you more confident, I believe. When somebody appreciates your whole body, yeah, I feel confident I think afterward because you feel like, okay yeah, I'm beautiful and I've turned someone on and my body is okay.

Brienne was quick to add that she sees a difference between appreciation of a fat woman's body and fetishization. She explained that she is not interested in being fetishized or being seen as a collection of parts and rolls because it makes her feel more like an object, like she is not being seen as a whole person, thus inhibiting her from enjoying herself. While fetishization can often be part of a healthy kink relationship, Brienne's discomfort with fetishization of her fatness specifically is reasonable. Saguy (2002) comments on the fetishization of fat stating that men's admiration of fat women

can potentially reinforce gender difference and a focus on body parts rather than the person as a whole, thus emphasizing gender inequality. In her study of women who attended a National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) conference, she found that more often than not, the attention fat women received from fat admirers was based in fetishism and objectification, ultimately playing on women's vulnerability.

Having attended 15 bashes, Sarai spoke at length about the remarkable ways bashes have affirmed her beauty and enhanced her self-confidence. Her story is explored in depth in the following pages. In recalling her experiences, Sarai focused more significantly on bashes she attended years ago in Philadelphia, PA, and reflected fondly on how they felt less like hook-up spaces (her evaluation of the current iteration of BBW bash culture) and more like community-building spaces. With that said, bashes are where Sarai first learned that she could be perceived as a sexual subject.

> Sarai: Even though I didn't go to these things for the purpose of finding someone to date, and honestly, even though the guys at bashes can be sleazy sharks, it was like going from an expectation of not being viewed as sexual at all because you're fat, to being so highly sexual you're fetishized. And that's an epiphany, right? You land in the middle, or at least hopefully you land in the middle. And even though it's really, really complicated, it had a very positive impact on me and how I perceive my body because it gave me license to strut. It gave me license to perceive myself as attractive and worthy of strutting, right? So that's what I took out into the world with me that translated into the confidence it took to do the whole Match.com thing. That's how I met [my partner]. I mean, I went on a gazillion dates. And honestly, the bashes had a big part in giving me the confidence to do that. If they said they were attracted to me, I believed they were attracted to me. And prior to that, you would have had to convince me. Like really? There's something wrong with that, right? So getting from that mindset of needing to be convinced someone is attracted to me, to really believing that I am attractive is priceless.

By experiencing desire at bashes, Sarai's self-esteem was so significantly impacted that she learned to better trust men's advances in her everyday dating life. She learned not

to question her desirability and, as a result, she was able to explore romance and dating, eventually meeting the man she would marry.

The cultural devaluation of fat women's bodies means that fat women rarely enter spaces and feel palpable appreciation for their appearance. When I asked Sarai to tell me about a time at a bash when she felt most connected to and positive about her body, she immediately knew the story she wanted to share.

> Sarai: There was a time when I got dolled up for one of the bash dances. And it wasn't like I was intentionally trying to make an entrance—I really was just entering the space—but I ended up feeling like I made an entrance where like, everyone that was around stopped, looked at me, and they all had a look of appreciation. And I was like, whoa, look at that! And so, there was a strutting component as far as how I felt about my body and how it was being perceived.

She continued by recounting how this recognition of her physical beauty impacted the flavour of what might normally be coded as practices of disciplinary femininity (Bartky, 2010).

> Sarai: There's been a secondary thing that comes under it, which, because my body type is appreciated in those spaces, there's been a self-consciousness but it's not really a good descriptor, because I think of self-conscious as a negative term. And I'm not trying to use it in a negative way here. Maybe I'm trying to say a consciousness about my body and how I'm presenting myself, that, you know, so whether I was going out to the pool or like going to a meal, the primping and priming that we talked about, you know, that it was more important and was more a thing because I was going to be noticed for being attractive. And so that came with some sort of responsibility in my mind to own it. And so that's a different way of feeling about yourself.

This analysis of "primping and priming" presented by Sarai carries a different weight in that, as a result of her experience at bashes, the motivation to use makeup and to pay attention to her physical presentation was less about trying to make up for her fatness and more rooted in actively taking pride in her appearance as an act of appreciation for herself.

Later in her interview, Sarai reflected on the impact of getting attention from multiple men at bashes as a supersize, disabled woman and clarified her position on how she is affected by these experiences even if men at bashes are motivated by a fetish for fat bodies.

> Sarai: There was one particular bash where, for right or wrong, it just felt like it was fun to be getting attention from multiple men. So I'd met one guy on the Thursday night who seemed really nice. We had a wonderful conversation and he seemed very nice, intelligent, whatever. So anyway, then came the Friday night and he was still coming around, as was another guy, who I ended up dating for a short period of time. And really, between the two of them, they were competing for my attention. I've never had that happen before. So in that space, it wasn't like I sat there feeling like oh, this is about my body. But at the same time, it's about overall perception of attractiveness. And I just had never navigated a situation where I had, you know, these two people competing for your affections. And to the point where other people were taking notice of it. And other women were hitting on them and they were blowing them off because they were working so hard to try to get my attention. And I just never had experienced that before. It was novel and I liked it.
>
> Crystal: Do you sometimes wonder about liking the attention, specifically when you know it's potentially coming from a place of fat fetishization?
>
> Sarai: Yeah, but I'm okay with liking it. Because I think there's some validation, like, I am awesome. They *should* have been competing for my attention. Why wouldn't they have been competing for my attention? Why aren't more people from the rest of my life competing for my attention? And the way that they were vying for my attention, none of it felt diminishing, or disrespectful, because honestly, I shut people down super fast if that's what they're like. So I'm going to say that I liked it and that I think it's okay to like it.

Sarai and I share a love for critically analyzing the world around us and bashes have been a rich source of data collection. In chapter four, I focused much of my discussion around objectification at bashes as dehumanizing and capable of pulling fat women out of their bodies so it is more difficult to experience themselves as subjects, further reinforcing the objectification that participants experience in their day-to-day lives at the hands of fatphobia. In the exchange above, I question Sarai about the potential fetishization behind the attention she received, not in the spirit of diminishing the

positive experience, but instead to determine if the drive behind the admiration needs to be taken into consideration at all given how great it felt for her to receive it. Sarai's focus was less on the potential fetishization and more on how it made her feel to be wanted, especially so publicly—not only does she like it, she wonders why other people in her life are not vying for her attention because she is, in fact, awesome. Sarai's story illustrates how having access to desire at bashes can help to heal or, perhaps, unstick some of the stickiness of affect and/or trauma associated with fatphobia.

In summary, it is now evident that many participants are able to hold space for two bash realities: their distaste for the objectification that takes place in bash settings *and* the ways in which their experiences with consensual appearance-based desire and appreciation heightened their self-esteem and overall feelings of connection to their bodies. It is significant to consider the impact that holding these tensions and contradictions might have. To do so, I want to think more about the "stickiness" of affect that Ahmed (2010a, 2014) uses to describe how connections between ideas, values, and objects are sustained, as well as how affect shapes bodies and boundaries. For many years I have maintained that it is sometimes difficult to navigate the BBW community because there are a number of instances I observe either in online spaces or at events that do not align with my feminist values nor any sort of liberatory politic; however, I remain part of the community because it offers me space to feel normal (a feeling my participants also reported and that I analyze later in this chapter). It is difficult to hold this tension. Emotions drummed up by negative bash experiences align with things I have experienced outside of bash spaces, whether it involves objectification, encountering diet culture, or overhearing racism, ableism, sexism, cissexism,

homophobia. My body holds traces of these experiences and they are reactivated in bash or BBW community spaces.

At the same time, bashes also offer opportunity for learning new ways of feeling. For instance, I learn how it feels to relax into my body in a bikini at a pool party filled with people who are there because they are fat, appreciate fatness, or were fat and can empathize with the struggle of navigating the world in a fat body. I am learning new ways of feeling when I show up at an event and do not have to be anxious about having access to secure seating. I am learning new ways of feeling when I am engaged in flirtatious conversation with someone and I do not have to be concerned they are making a mockery of me. Positive affects are also sticky. I imagine that the stickiness of affects like joy, comfort, ease, and excitement mobilize to 1) challenge the stickiness of negative affects associated with navigating the world as fat, and 2) create space for imagining new possibility and potential. This second point is vital to an understanding of how fat people can grow to imagine a future filled with joy in a fat body—to imagine fatness as life-giving. This is an important exercise in being able to challenge dominant messaging that positions fat bodies as miserable and fatness itself as life-taking and as a threat to futurity.

Perhaps bashes offer a preview of elements of fat utopia. In a fatphobic culture, I suggest that fat people occupy spaces of non-existence. We are not allowed to exist as fat in the present, so we are offered diets, exercises, and surgeries. We are told fat people did not exist in the past when internet trolls and media alike try to defend the overstated and scientifically unsupported idea that we are in the midst of an “obesity epidemic.” And we are told we have no future because we will surely die of our fatness.

The negative affects associated with experiencing what amounts to non-existence are challenged in bash spaces where fat people are not only seen, but celebrated, admired, adored, and sometimes loved. Bash experiences open up space to challenge negative affects like shame, fear, and disgust that we carry from our past. At bashes we are allowed to exist in the present as we are and to be admired and desired for it. And as I discuss later in this chapter, we can use these positive affects to build resilience and expectations of ourselves and of how others treat us when we eventually re-enter the "real" world.

### Hedonistic "Fuck-Fests": Exploring fat sex at bashes

> *[Autoethnography Journal Entry]*
>
> *Tonight I went to my first play party and I learned a bit about what I've been missing out on at bashes. The party featured a game that amounted to a variety of sexy dares. We sat in the best circle we could manage in such a small room and used a spinner to figure out who had to choose and complete their dare. I hadn't had enough wine so I was feeling fairly clear-headed and absolutely not uninhibited enough to join in on the fun, but it was enlightening to witness the playfulness that takes place between people who just want to enjoy each other's bodies. People shared kisses, very light BDSM, and simulated their favourite sex positions. I was continuously encouraged to join in, but I couldn't get out of my head enough to do so.*

I regret not working harder to be more in the moment that night. It is certain that some of the seeming uptightness I have in these situations is related to my history of internalizing the idea that my body size is undesirable and that I do not deserve license to explore erotic pleasure. In fact, research suggests that it may be *in my best interest* to explore alternative sexual lifestyles specifically for the positive impact it can have on self-worth and sexual empowerment (Gailey, 2015); however, it was also my first time ever being invited to a play party. I did not know what to expect and everyone around me seemed so comfortable. At this point, I remain unconvinced play parties are for me.

Choosing a journal entry to introduce this sub-theme was difficult. This dissertation in general is deeply personal and involves telling the stories of many people I love, but sharing my own personal experiences and their accompanying emotions makes me vulnerable in ways I have never had to be before, particularly because the dissertation itself eventually enters the public domain. What I do feel comfortable sharing here is that some of the most erotic, romantic, and illuminating moments of my personal life over the last four years have happened at bashes or with people I have met at bashes. In some cases, these people have identified as fat admirers. I have felt the full gamut of emotion that is tied to erotic intimacy at bashes as well, but in my experience each person I've shared this sort of intimacy with adored me and centered my pleasure in ways I have rarely experienced with people I have met outside of the bash circuit. And it is not that I think people who go to bashes are any more sexually capable, but it could be true that they are better attuned to and appreciative of the sexual nuances of fat women's bodies. Additionally, I can certainly say that being in an atmosphere filled with support and having access to people who are openly interested in me and appreciative of my body type helps me feel more connected to my body, deserving of desire, and comfortable asking for what I want—elements of healthy expression of human sexuality. Gailey's (2015) study of the impact of body acceptance on fat women's feelings of sexual empowerment found that fat women report increased levels of empowerment when they had sex with people who fully appreciated every aspect of their fat bodies. One of her interviewees specifically discusses having sex with someone she met at a BBW event and how she learned to find pleasure in her own body and to feel more

comfortable in her skin because her partner was unabashedly attracted to her (Gailey 2015).

Fat activist and blogger Margitte Kristjansson (2017) captures this feeling well in a blog post about her own experiences having sex with fat admirers.

> "For starters, it's not just your boobs or butt playing center stage during sexy time. It's your belly. Your thighs. Your upper arms. Your double chin! Things I had been taught to hate about myself for so long were suddenly being treated like the most precious and sensual parts of me.
>
> I was caressed and kissed and worshipped from head to toe. And it's not like that had never happened before — but it's a whole new world when a simple belly squeeze is enough to render your partner weak in the knees.
>
> Of course, I didn't need this experience to teach me that I was beautiful or worthy or sexy or good. I had known that about myself for a long time.
>
> But what I did learn, the stuff that truly changed how I experience sex now, is that it's not just my brain or socially acceptable erogenous zones that are sexual or experiences pleasure. *Turns out, my whole body is one big, fat erogenous zone.*
>
> Being fat is hot, y'all. The way my belly gently sways from side to side as I walk toward a partner is hot. Seeing someone look at my tummy, my arms, or my chubby fingers the way others look at my boobs is hot. Squeezing and jiggling and kissing my fattest parts is… you guessed it, hot. And it feels so. dang. good." (¶ 20-24)

She's right! Being fat is hot and having sex with people who find juicy, fat bodies sexually attractive is liberating. At this point, the reader may wonder how I can wax poetic about objectification and sexualisation of fat body parts by fat admirers in the previous chapter and then go on to celebrate hot, steamy, satisfying sex with fat admirers here. As I have maintained throughout this dissertation, bashes are complex and complicated spaces. The bifurcation of the two analysis chapters in this dissertation that separates participants' negative experiences of objectification and sexualisation in one chapter from more positive experiences of feeling like sexual subjects in the next makes sense. But it must be acknowledged that these experiences are part and parcel

of the same phenomena connected to the trauma of fatphobia. Accounts of participants being the target of unwanted objectification and sexualisation illustrate how the affective atmosphere of bashes has the power to reinforce the trauma of fatphobia. And as I have described above, the trauma of fatphobia includes messages that convince fat women they are not sexual subjects. Bashes *also* offer fat women a chance to work through the trauma of fatphobia related to sexuality by opening up space for having sex with people who are openly attracted to fat people. This is another area where my work aligns with Cvetkovich (2003) who examines Michigan Women's Music Festival as a temporary space in which women could work through the trauma of homophobia and sexual assault. Playing around with sexual attraction and being able to hook up is, in my and some of my participants' experience, a significant draw of bashes. These elements couple with the history of trauma that will always accompany and complicate the sex culture formed within BBW bash spaces.

While only six out of 12 participants went into some detail about their experiences with sexual expression at bashes (and while only three of those six told me about positive experiences), I wanted to include this section of the chapter because, as we will see, it illustrates the radical potential of bashes to be spaces for learning about fat sex and challenging the dominant narrative that fat people are not sexual subjects. When I asked Rose to define BBW bashes, her answer was pointed and concise.

> Rose: I think that they are fuck-fests where people who are fat go to have sex with the people who like fat people. And I think that it's a safe space for people to engage in the pursuit of sex and flirting and dating and that sort of thing.

There's no doubt Rose's evaluation is one of the reigning assumptions about BBW bashes. Bash organizers are often tasked with taming these assumptions, especially

when people who are curious about the BBW community and bash scene decide not to attend events because they have heard about the sexually charged environment of bashes. Given fat stigma's power to de-sexualize fat people, is there any wonder that in an environment where it is generally accepted that most people are attracted to fat people that casual sex and hook-ups are a significant component of socializing?

Three of my 12 participants were not on board with the seeming oversaturation of sexuality at bashes. It is difficult for some bashes to escape being thought of as "fuck-fests" because there are often many people who attend who are also part of "the lifestyle," a term used to describe people who navigate various types of open sexual and romantic relationships. Brienne and her husband are in the lifestyle and she explained that it is often kept quiet. People in the lifestyle simply know each other; however, Sarai felt differently, stating several times throughout her interview that she finds the current bashes are saturated with seediness that she feels is directly related to the high population of people in the lifestyle (also referred to as swingers) who attend. She described her first run-in with swingers at one of her first bashes.

> Sarai: That morning I was in the buffet line for the breakfast, and people were all walking around with these buttons that said "Fat Sex." So the people behind me in line were discussing the buttons and were like, "oh what's with this 'fat sex' button? Do I want a button? What does the button mean?" Well it turns out that the swingers who had participated the prior year had gotten in trouble with the hotel in the suites they had rented. So the bash organizers had made a new rule the year I was there that nobody could rent suites. And that was their way to avoid navigating that. So that meant that the group that participated in that particular extracurricular activity had to go up the road to the Hilton. And so that way these buttons were a way they could identify each other at the bash to know who was into going to the room up at the Hilton versus who was not. So then I overheard other people discussing the rules of attending said activities, and you know, here I am, early 20s, naïve as all get out, going like "okay, I'll just take some bagels and cream cheese!" Like what the hell did I get myself into? Although there were plenty of people who did have the buttons, there were way

> more people who didn't have the buttons. And in a lot of ways, I feel like that worked to be like, hey, if that's your thing, you can go do that thing and then come back or leave or whatever. But if it's not your thing, it's not in your face. It didn't feel seedy. It didn't feel like it took over the overall composition or percentage of the people who were there. Or that somehow if you weren't participating in that, there was something wrong with you.

In the above excerpt, Sarai is referring to bashes she attended many years ago. As she describes, swingers identified themselves using buttons and she did not feel any sort of pressure to participate herself. She explained later in her interview that as she continued attending bashes, the seedy atmosphere crept in to the point she feels it affected what she gets out of bashes.

Hailey also acknowledged that she is not necessarily interested in sex on offer at bashes because she is not comfortable having casual sex in general, but especially with someone who has been sexually active with other people attending the same party weekend.

> Hailey: If a person chooses to do that and that's what they're there for, good for them. But at the first bash that I attended I was totally taken aback. I was like, is this a swingers' party? I walked out in the stairwell because the elevator was taking so long, and they were having sex in the stairwell. I'm like, what the hell is going on? I'm thinking like, we're in a hotel, there's rooms everywhere! And you just happen to be in the stairwell?

While having sex in stairwells is not exclusive to swingers, it is understandable that the sort of encounter Hailey describes above might be alarming to anyone who is not prepared for it. Additionally, because of the overlap between the lifestyle community and the BBW community, Hailey's assumption that she had walked in on swingers is also understandable.

The third and final participant who took issue with how easy it is to hook up at bashes is Julie; however, her views are shaped by her experiences having casual sex

at these events. She talked to me about how bashes seem to give people license to throw away their morals for three or four days in order to hook up with as many people as possible.

> Julie: So after my first ever Vegas experience, it was probably the first time that I had been exposed to such promiscuity. So, a little history: I was born and raised in an evangelical Christian home. My mother had passed away a year before my first bash so the family dynamic totally changed. I was no longer going to church and no longer identifying as an evangelical Christian. And so when I said it was my first time being exposed to it, I was 30 years old, but I really had lived kind of more of a "go to church" kind of life. But when I started going to bashes, I gave in to the promiscuity. And when I left that bash, it kind of put me into a bit of a tailspin where I almost forgot who I was at the core. And I became exceptionally promiscuous for a time. And it was almost like, hey, I can do this, I can do that, I can do this, and I had to check that really quickly. So like the bash was in July and by September I had reeled it in. I was like wait a minute, I've lost myself in this idea of finding myself. I think I already knew who I was. It's sad because I felt like, good lord, I was denying people access to be my friends on Facebook but then I'd fuck with them. I recognized there was a problem because that just isn't who I am, ever.

One of the aims of this chapter is to explore how access to desire and pleasure helped my participants reconnect with their bodies which have been ravaged by fatphobia. But in Julie's case, this newfound access to a world where she could explore her sexuality actually damaged her relationship with her body because she felt she had let men use her. She told me this had a negative impact on her previously high self-confidence. As she explained, it only took a few months for her to recognize that engaging in casual sex with different men at bashes did not align with her values.

While Sarai, Hailey and Julie's stories illustrate that the sexualized environment of bashes is not necessarily appreciated and celebrated by all attendees, it is also true that expressions of fat sexuality fly in the face of a culture that teaches fat people they are not desirable nor deserving of sex and pleasure. The way fat women's sexuality is coded by the broader culture is reductive. Fat women are constructed as either

nonsexual *or* sexually insatiable—the former aligning with ideas that fat women are not deserving of sex, and the latter aligning with the idea that fat women are desperate (Murray, 2004; Prohaska & Gailey, 2009; Boero, 2012). Additionally, in her study of the impact of body acceptance on fat women's sexual empowerment, many of Gailey's (2015) participants reported feeling like they had to put aside their own sexual satisfaction and needs in order to prioritize the needs of the men they had sex with. As fat women, they feared that if they did not do so, the men would lose interest. Bashes offered the opportunity for some of my participants to explore their sexuality in a space where it might be safer to accept that people are genuinely physically attracted to them.

Ava made it clear that she does not go to bashes seeking out sex or romance; in fact, she questioned whether romance can even be found over the course of a whirlwind weekend of partying. But instead of defining the bash atmosphere as seedy, she described it as hedonistic.

> Ava: I think there's a reputation that bashes have as being a hook-up environment. It's kind of almost like, "yes, I can go there and I'm going to hook up with the dude or the big gal of my dreams." I think that it kind of ties into that sort of hedonistic party atmosphere. People are like "yes, let's go and have some fun, let's put our regular lives behind us and go hook up and have some sex." I don't think people are necessarily going there to find love.

In chapter four, Ava talked at length about how isolating and hurtful it can feel to not be hit on in bash spaces. Her self-esteem is often negatively impacted if she is hoping for some sort of connection at a bash and then it does not happen. She did, however, tell me about having casual sex at one of the bashes she attended and how it raised her self-esteem and helped her to feel more connected to her body because it was fun, exciting, and pleasurable—and it happened on her terms.

> Ava: You know for me it was fun and he was a good time. And yeah, it made me feel attractive. Of course, anybody who comes up to you and kind of pursues you in a way that you would like to be pursued even outside of that space, it's nice. I mean he was a nice man, mature, good looking. And it was very heat of the moment and the way I like things to happen. I don't like things to be too premeditated. A lot of people go to bashes with a hook up plan. I felt this was very organic and it was important to me that it was that way. And sex is fun. Body on body contact is fun. It definitely added an element of excitement to that weekend. I mean it's been a while, and because it was very heat of the moment and very passionate, I didn't think so much about my body size or how my body looked. I think it was just kind of nice to feel that someone was attracted to me because I don't really feel like I'm very attractive and I don't feel like a lot of men or women are that attracted to me. That being said, I think it had this sort of impact on me because I'm not somebody who hooks up regularly and as I'm getting older I find I don't get that sort of attention. So I feel like yeah, it helped me realize I'm still sexual.

We have learned thus far about Ava's struggle with her body image and feeling attractive as a 49-year old woman who feels her body type does not reflect what is most appreciated in bash spaces, so it is significant that by having access to sex that was passionate, fulfilling, and fun with a man she was attracted to, she was less self-conscious of her body and was instead focused on what was happening in the moment—this serves as mental and emotional relief for someone whose relationship with her body continues to be impacted not only by fatphobia, but by ageism.

In the previous chapter, I explained that Betty had hosted a queer sex party where, even while she was having sex with a woman in front of a small audience, she felt completely connected to her body and present in the moment because the gaze of the audience at the sex party was sympathetic instead of objectifying or judgemental. I was fascinated by Betty's story because she was the only participant who identified having sex at a bash as specifically affirming of her subjecthood. I asked her to tell me a bit about the sex party and she began by saying it was important to her to create an

atmosphere for the event that was welcoming to both curious and experienced people who were interested in being more sexually active with women.

> Betty: I started talking to some other women who were, like, some of them kind of had a lot of experience in full on relationships with both men and women and people of other genders, and some were mostly curious or had had a threesome with a man and a woman, but were interested in being more active in that. And so then I asked some friends who are very active in the BDSM scene for advice on how to organize a sex party when a whole bunch of my prospective attendees are more bi-curious than experienced. Like "help, how do I handle this!" Two of my friends agreed to help and we had a big gathering at the beginning of this party, with like food and stuff. And then the people that already felt comfortable went to a different room with me and we started playing, and the other people stayed with my friends who did like a "naming your desire and consent 101" kind of thing. It took like an hour or so of practicing what they wanted and they had to say "yes" and "no" to things that they did and didn't want, and then they came into the room with the rest of us. And so we had a room with a king bed and we were able to do one or two scenes at a time. Some people just wanted some impact play and some people wanted to be fucked or to fuck someone. And so we did a bunch of different things. And as the space kind of cleared out we'd say "okay, who wants to do something now?" And the people who practiced talking about what they did and didn't want sort of said "well, I want to try this." So we asked them if they knew who they wanted to do it with or whether we could find someone who wants to do it. So yeah, that was not like my experiences at other sex parties. It was a little more mediated than any party I've ever been to.

Betty shared that she and her two friends received positive feedback about the sex party and that one person referred to the education session held prior to playing as "life changing." Her queer sex party combined both education and experience to people curious about queer sex and BDSM and offered them the chance to learn and play in a safe environment, one she carefully cultivated. As a result of my own limited experience with sex parties at bashes, I told Betty that what she described sounded like a safer space because of the care she took to organize it as welcoming to queer people who were both curious and experienced, and because she included an educational component to help people feel more comfortable with communicating consent and desire. Knopp (2007) offers some insight into why Betty's queer sex party was so

seemingly successful. He argues that queers "find a certain amount of solace, safety and pleasure being in motion or nowhere at all. Social and sexual encounters with other queers can feel safer in such contexts—on the move, passing through, inhabiting a space for a short amount of time" (Knopp, 2007, p. 23). Moreover, in her study detailing the gender, sexuality, and body size dynamics at a BBW club called LargeLife in London, England, Colls (2012) describes these particular BBW events as an "ephemeral coming together of fat bodies and their admirers in a space positioned outside of the norms of fat phobia and one that harbours relations between bodies that may or may not exist beyond the night itself" (p. 33). Both of these authors use the concept of temporality to theorize spaces where queer people and fat people feel safe from the oppressive forces of homophobia and fatphobia. I suggest that BBW bashes offer this same escape—Betty's sex party was a space positioned outside of the norms of homophobia that took place at a bash, an event positioned outside of the norms of fatphobia.

Sofia is considered a fat sex expert at bashes and teaches a fat sex class open to anyone interested in learning about how to have better sex in their fat bodies and/or with fat people. When I asked her about the classes and the types of participants who attend, her response delighted me.

> Sofia: Oh it's a little bit of everything. There are people where it's their first time at a bash and they have a lot of questions about sex in their own fat body and haven't ever had a resource. So there's the eager-eyed. There's the looky-loos who just want to see what other people are doing in the bedroom. There are, the most touching thing are the couples that have sort of been together for a long time and even in some instances have gained weight over time, and their sex life is stagnant. And out of respect and politeness to each other, they've never pushed the envelope. So they see other bodies doing these things and they're like holy crap. I can't tell you how many couples with tears in their eyes have

> grabbed my hand, not after the class but after a few hours after the class and say "we did a thing that we didn't think was possible. Can I buy you a drink? Thank you so much." And then there are the freaks that come and they're like, "how come you're not talking about this? Have you ever done this? Put your legs on either side of a doorway for extended oral sex sessions." And I'm like "A doorway, huh? Now I'm going to have footprints around my doorway. I shouldn't be teaching this class, you should!" It takes all kinds. And it's amazing. I've never walked out without laughs and new knowledge, and people walk taller after that class, I swear.

When people are taught they cannot be or are not something—in this case, when fat people are taught they are not sexual subjects—it puts limits on their potential to seek out information and explore fat sexuality. While not every bash offers education sessions, Sofia's account of the fat sex classes she hosts demonstrates the potential bashes hold for educating fat people about how they can use their bodies or engage with other fat bodies in pleasurable ways, thus increasing the possibility that fat people might reconnect with their bodies and experience themselves as sexual subjects.

These accounts of engaging in casual sex at bashes and/or providing education around fat and queer sex at bashes illustrates what can be achieved in spaces where fat people are not only given the opportunity to have sex with people who are unabashedly attracted to them, but can also learn about the variety of ways to seek out sexual pleasure in and with fat bodies. In many respects, bashes as spaces of sexual education offer the opportunity for fat people to gain a greater understanding of their own sexuality and exist alongside a very limited few fat sex education resources offered by the broader culture[31]. I have also asserted that bash spaces feel particularly shaped

[31] In terms of fat sex education resources there are, at this time, few books in circulation about fat sex. Two among them include *Big Big Love: A Sex and Relationships Guide for People of Size (and Those Who Love Them)* and *Fat Sex: The Naked Truth*. The first acts more like a self-help book and the second is an exploration of fat sex between fat people and their admirers. Additionally, fat people interested in learning more about fat sexuality also have the option of hiring fat sex educators and therapists, though financial accessibility can be a barrier. See Pausé (2015) for more examples of fat sex resources.

by heteronormativity, but this absolutely exists in relationship with the reality that fatness, men's attraction to fat women, and fat women who have no problem attracting partners, are all threats to the heteronormative system (Gailey, 2015), suggesting that the events may in some ways serve as temporary sites of respite from the oppressive weight of heteronormativity.

## BBW Bashes as Spaces of Access to Fat Community

By and large, one of the most fulfilling elements of this research process has been reviewing interview data that speaks to the life-changing experience of finding fat community. Stigma in general operates to make people appear unacceptable to others, reduce their life chances, and leave them feeling isolated (Goffman, 1963; Schafer & Ferraro, 2011). Fat stigma in particular creates conditions in which fat people may even self-isolate in order to escape fat hatred. It also creates a day-to-day environment where fat people feel like they do not fit in, literally and figuratively. All of these elements combine and contribute to the trauma fat people feel as a result of fatphobia. Illustrating the significance of finding community where we can access feelings of support and safety, Van der Kolk (2014) contends that feeling safe with other people "is probably the single most important aspect of mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives," and that various studies show that "social support is the most powerful protection against becoming overwhelmed by stress and trauma" (p. 79). The following sub-themes presented themselves in the data on fat community and will be explored in depth in this section:

1. Heightened self-esteem
2. License to take risks with fat fashion

3. The power behind feeling normal
4. Carrying lessons learned at bashes into the real world

**Fat Community Fostering Heightened Self-Esteem**

> *[Autoethnography Journal Entry]*
>
> *One of the defining characteristics of bashes I've been to thus far is that I'm way too concerned with men's attention and I'm ultimately let down when that's my focus—not to mention I generally take a hit to my self-confidence by focusing too intensely on guys. Happily, I can say that this bash has been entirely different. So many of my close friends are here and I'm thankful for experiencing a bash in a more fulfilling way. We've focused intentionally on spending time together as a group going out to eat, playing games and going to the pool parties, hanging out in our hotel rooms with doors open so anyone can join—it's felt more fulfilling than other bashes. I've noticed that I feel more secure in myself, too. This could be for many reasons, but I'm convinced much of it is connected to the close community I have here. I'm not as shy or overwhelmed by social anxiety and it's helping me to connect with other people who I've never chatted with before.*

Truthfully, I started going to bashes at a point in my life when I already had a handle on my self-worth, so I am not sure that I have noticed an increase in self-confidence per se, but I definitely notice when my self-esteem dips as a result of bash experiences. In the excerpt above, I reflect on how differently I felt at that particular bash because I was more concerned with spending time with friends than I was with men's attention. Part of this was because I had so many friends at the bash (not always the case), but I think another element is that I was still only two months or so into recovery from surgery and I was too concerned with physical comfort to pay any extra attention to things that would not guarantee joy. Since that bash, I have intentionally attended a few bashes alone to explore how I feel in and about my body when I am not surrounded by close friends. Interestingly, I have noticed that my self-esteem is even stronger, which I attribute to branching out and creating connections with new people because I do not have the

safety blanket of a friend group—this also enhances my self-esteem because it provides me with proof that I have the ability to overcome my social anxiety.

In the following discussion, I present participants' accounts of how bash experiences have positively influenced their self-esteem, but first I want to contextualize why I am using the concept of self-esteem in a dissertation that takes critiques of the normalizing and oppressive gaze as one of its analytical lenses. Self-esteem is counted among a variety of technologies of the self (Foucault, 1994) particularly because it involves engaging in self-judgement and self-assessment, putting all responsibility on the individual for raising self-esteem instead of making room for recognizing how power works to diminish self-respect. When we accept that it is our responsibility to raise our self-esteem, it ensures that we are governable from a distance. I acknowledge the problematic nature of "self-esteem," and the reason I decided to use the concept for this theme is because it reflects the language employed in the BBW community. In many of the online groups I have been in over the years, raising self-esteem is touted by group organizers and administrative staff as an important aim. For instance, Toledo BBW, which I consider my home group, runs a 12-step self-esteem challenge a few times each year that gives members the opportunity to create community in the Facebook group by sharing their self-esteem struggles week to week when they post about what they have done to work on each step in the challenge. We can witness other people's seeming growth, which seems to foster connection. While I use terms like self-esteem and self-worth interchangeably in this section, later in this chapter, I explore participants' stories of enhanced self-respect as a result of bash experiences, which is demonstrated by their increased ability to advocate for themselves out in the "real" world.

Brienne credits the bonds she has formed within the BBW community as playing a significant role in raising her self-worth. She talked to me about the friendships she has made in the two years she has been attending bashes, stating that even though she most often sees these friends in bash contexts, she considers the relationships life-giving and life-changing. She also expressed an interesting sentiment about how bashes bring people into contact with each other over "negativity"—in other words, the realities of being fat in a fatphobic world. Brienne's comments speak to the BBW community as a trauma culture (Cvetkovich, 2003). As a result of the way Brienne has adopted fat community via the BBW network, she now co-owns[32] her own BBW social group. The group hosts parties a few times a year and Brienne said that they are starting to branch out to other types of events that do not center around bars or clubs. She shared with me that she feels a responsibility to the community because of the impact it has had on her self-esteem and she wants to be a role model for other fat women who might still be struggling to develop a healthy relationship with their bodies. In her interview, Brienne shared several (intensely relatable!) examples that help to contextualize why it is so meaningful for fat women to find fat community.

> Brienne: My other friends are typically smaller and I always feel like I have to convince them that I am as big as I am. So one example would be when I went to a store with my girlfriend who is the nicest person in the world. Like, honestly, the sweetest girl. And we were walking through like, The Bay, and there were these big underwear. And she's like, "oh my god look at these big underwear." And so I looked at them and they did look big, and I mean, we had just been to Victoria Secret where she bought underwear that was like a bracelet for me, and so I mean that comparison was there. But those underwear she looked at were like a

[32] The details of group ownership in the BBW community vary. For Brienne, ownership of her group is tied to ensuring there are people who shape and moderate group spaces online, market and plan events, and have the authority to remove people from the events who are breaking rules. These details tend to be common across the groups. Brienne's group focuses on smaller events like one-night parties or socials, not bashes. She said that her group does not generally turn profits from events and any money made is put into future events. Brienne also clarified that groups that host bashes tend to turn much higher profits and run more like businesses.

> 2X and I would have bought a 3X. And so I remember saying to her "you know, just so you know, I can't fit into these." And she was shocked. Like literally I don't know how to explain it, but like she just legitimately saw those underwear and saw me and didn't understand that I wouldn't be able to wear them. Like to her, those were huge. And I couldn't blame her because she's like a size 6, so to her, huge is probably a size 14. So I think it's that kind of thing. Another example is I have a friend that's a nurse and she was making a comment about like, just like, you know it's hard to lift some of these people who are really big. It's hard for her to lift 250 pounds. And I just remember saying to her like, I weigh more than 250 pounds. And she didn't believe me. So she looked at herself and was like "I'm 130 pounds and there's no way you're double me." But in reality, I'm way more than double. So I think there's that kind of weirdness of like, smaller people don't understand what it's like to be big. They don't understand that I'm looking at that booth thinking I might not be able to fit in it. And they're saying "oh my god, of course you're going to fit!" until I don't. And then they're kind of looking at me, looking at the booth and thinking "why can't she fit?" I don't think they get it. I think about that often because it's like anything. Like at work people ask where we're going for lunch and they're willing to walk further than I'm capable of doing. So I think of that kind of stuff often. I don't want to be in positions where I have to admit my size, if that makes sense. And not because I'm uncomfortable with it. Because it's almost like other people are. Like when I have to explain to them that I don't know if I can do that walk, it becomes this weird like "oh, well how come?" Well, because I'm too fat—like I don't know! Like I just can't. I'm not in shape to do it. It's just a weird thing.

A particularly important point Brienne makes in the above excerpt is that she is not necessarily uncomfortable with the size of her body, but it seems like it affects other people in situations where Brienne's body size cannot be ignored—like choosing seating at a restaurant or choosing to go somewhere that is too far for Brienne to walk. Societal fatphobia works to make fat bodies hyper(in)visible (Gailey, 2014), which extends to situations when non-fat people see fat bodies in general as objects of disgust, but then come face-to-face with that prejudice when they are asked to hold space for the lived realities of people they know and love who are fat. This produces difficult feelings like those illustrated in Brienne's examples. Paradoxically, there seems to be a willingness to accept the messages churned out by society's fatphobia machine (i.e. the assemblage of "obesity") about fat people in general that exists alongside an

unwillingness to accept the reality of fatness at a more personal level. This phenomenon may hinge on the research conducted by Norman et al. (2014) who contend that the cultural work of emotions shapes discourse that produces fat bodies particularly as medicalized/pathologized, building on Fraser et al. (2010) who write about how emotions like concern, horror, fear, loathing, obsession and panic drive discourse around the "obesity" epidemic. The authors explain that what we come to regard as "truth" about fatness is really just an intensification of feeling and emotion because the "truth" constructed by fatphobic discourse is not supported by rational, scientific facts, but instead relies on the sticky feelings of "disgust, anxiety, fear and chaos that arise in relation to fat bodies" via "historically congealed embodied relations of differentiation," (Norman et al., 2014, p. 19). Fatphobic discourse circulates and intensifies through the assemblage of "obesity" (Rich et al., 2010) such that the threat of fatness is really the threat of the stickiness of disgust. I suggest that in situations where non-fat people are visibly uncomfortable when they are suddenly made aware of their fat prejudice, this illustrates their inability to reconcile the tension between the "truth" of fatness constructed by negative affects associated with fatphobia and the lived realities of their fat friends and loved ones.

Ava learned at a young age how her body defied boundaries of possibility and inspired discomfort and/or disgust in others. She shared with me that she remembers looking at fashion magazines and noticing her body did not match what was featured. She talked about always having a strong sense of her worth as a person, but that she spent many years trying to shrink her body and that part of the motivation was to make others more comfortable. After one particularly successful round of weight loss, she was

asked how she felt and the only word she could find to describe the feeling was "relieved"; specifically, she was relieved that she could finally exist without being the target of people's fatphobic remarks and actions. After spending so many years at war with her body, she found the BBW community and realized there was significant pleasure to be found in fatness.

> Ava: The reason I probably feel the way I do about my own body is because I've been told all my life that there's something wrong with it and it looks ugly. So the pleasure of just being able to just—I like to eat, I don't care, I like to eat, I love food and I don't trust people who don't love food—but the pleasure of just eating what you want, wearing what you want, experiencing your body, touching your belly. Just touching someone else's belly! I know it sounds crazy but I love feeling fat people. I love the way fat people feel. I like the way my body feels. I sometimes don't maybe visually like it. But there's a pleasure in being in a fat body and just liking yourself. At bashes, you're there, you're eating what you want, wearing what you want, laughing with people and touching and hugging people. It's just the pleasure of being in our body. Who cares if it's fat or not—I think that's kind of what I mean by being in and enjoying your body. We only get one. We're lucky if it takes us anywhere, you know what I mean? You only get one body and sometimes it fails us. But you only get one. And to hate it for so long, it's just nice that maybe in that weekend you can just suspend that and not hate your body and just feel the pleasure of being in a fat body.

In the history of how fatness came to be considered grotesque and associated with insatiability and overindulgence, we learn a key lesson—finding pleasure in our bodies is to be considered suspect and proof of loss of control (Farell, 2011). If we take the current capitalist notions of health and wellness into consideration, much of what we are taught about being healthy and well is rooted in denying ourselves pleasure. The messages are seemingly on loop: we should not eat too much; we should not eat things that taste too good; we need to wear restrictive undergarments so our bodies better approximate thin beauty ideals; we must exercise and if we are not exercising intensely devoting each day of the week to different muscle groups then we are not doing it correctly—no pain, no gain, right? When Ava talks about how the affective atmosphere

of bashes encourages her to find pleasure in eating, in touching and being touched by other fat bodies, and in wearing outfits she cannot freely wear in her day-to-day life without risking harassment, she is identifying the revolutionary elements of bashes that allow her to push back against dominant narratives that encourage denial of pleasure. Ava also told me that she loves being able to dance freely at bashes, engaging in joyful movement with other fat bodies facilitating touching and being touched. Colls (2012) discusses dancing she observed at the BBW club LargeLife, writing that dancing was a way for fat women to understand "their fat bodies and the fat bodies around them through a grounded visceral fleshy experience; a way to experience the fat on your body as exposed, dynamic, touching, pressing and moving rather than hidden and controlled" (p. 29). Additionally, other work in fat studies has similarly illustrated how dance—specifically fat burlesque—has allowed fat women to "use the performance space to present, define and defend their sexualities" (Asbill, 2009, p. 299).

At the time of her interview, Annabelle had been part of the BBW community for two years. In that time, she went from attending parties to becoming administrative staff for an American BBW group, a role that comes with responsibilities like moderating the Facebook group and supporting the planning and execution of parties and bashes. She explained that she sees the community as founded on the principles of size acceptance, but that many of the groups practice acceptance of all varieties—race, ethnicity, relationship styles, sexuality, gender expression, and ability. She explained that when she first found the online BBW community, she gravitated toward the groups that focused on helping members develop self-esteem. She acknowledged that the reason she accepted the administrative staff role is because she felt more comfortable with

herself overall and wanted to extend the same sort of help with self-esteem to others that she had received when she first entered the community. She told me that she used to be a social worker and has a wealth of experience working with people on self-love and self-acceptance, but that her involvement in the BBW community has done more for her in terms of developing her own self-confidence than a Master's in social work ever did.

> Annabelle: I had only known of the online BBW Facebook community for six months. And I had only been heavily involved for maybe four. But I think it was the difference of how I felt so quickly once I started participating in discussions online, and when I started to go to monthly parties and meeting people. I felt more confident, I felt more socially confident that I could talk to people. I could tell that even though I'm anxious in those situations, that what I was having as far as experience was so good that it was making me want to do it. It just motivated me to keep doing it. And I always grow from bashes and feel better afterwards. More positive about myself and about other people and how other people view and treat each other. I think in general there are more positives than there are negatives. And I think the more I go to them and talk to people and think about other types of adult activities I've done over the years, the more similar you realize everybody is. No matter what your concern, issues, or anxiety is in life, things are always more similar than they are different.

Annabelle openly discussed her struggles with social anxiety and how going to bashes and parties provided her with opportunity to challenge her anxiety and prove to herself that she has the capacity to overcome it.

Brienne also picked up on the impact of BBW bashes to liberate people from the constraints of social anxiety, even if it is only for a weekend, better allowing them to connect with their bodies.

> Brienne: Bashes offer a way for people to mingle and make friendships or find partners for dating or whatever, but honestly, I think most of it is about just trying to build up self-esteem. You know, like, the lingerie parties, the roaming room parties—I mean, all of that is kind of like ice-breakers for people that, and I hate to say it this way, but there's a lot of socially anxious and awkward people and this is the way for them to find a connection that is just not as easy for them in

> normal society because unfortunately there's barriers with weight. And so that's really, and I hate to say that people are socially awkward, but I think most of us that go are in some way, because we've not been accepted for who we were. So you can't help but take some of that with you over time. You know when you're the last kid to be picked for whatever in school every year, you don't overcome that just in adulthood. Like it's still there.

In this excerpt, Brienne speaks to the affective forces of fatphobia when she talks about how weight-based barriers to access—socially, in this case, but also medically, architecturally, politically etc.—are registered as everyday trauma (Cvetkovich, 2003) which is carried forward and impacts how we engage with our world in new situations. For Brienne, bashes give people who may be carrying around whole lifetimes of trauma from fatphobia the ability to experience what it is like to be embraced socially and to be able to test out social skills in a safer environment with people who understand weight-based oppression.

Hailey was also interested in how having access to fat community could help her to increase her self-confidence and heal some of the trauma she has endured as a fat woman. She talked to me about one of her current body image struggles. She said she has trouble accepting her legs because the skin sags after having lost weight. In chapter four, we learned that she recognizes there is deeper work to be done because she will always be able to find something about her body that she does not like. For Hailey, finding fat community meant being exposed to people she saw as role models who she could learn from in an effort to heal her relationship with her body.

> Hailey: And that was one of the main reasons that I joined the BBW groups was so, when I look and I see somebody, and I don't know how to say it, but when I'm able to look at somebody who's 400 pounds and they have on a bikini and they're struttin' their shit and they know they got it going on, I want some of that. I want to draw off of that. I want to be able to feel like that. Give me some of that confidence. Help me feel better about myself, let me get inside of there so I can

> see and I can feel that way. And that is one of the main reasons that I had joined the group because I felt so horrible about myself for so long.

I cannot help but view Hailey's desire to draw from the energy of women she perceives to be more confident than her as illustrative of the movement of affect between bodies. As a quick review, some affect theorists think about affect through the concept of intensity, defined as the hundreds of thousands of stimuli which our bodies infold and register daily (Shouse, 2005). Massumi (1995) cites intensity as the first step in the process of bodies infolding contexts, which simply means to experience something. He explains that our brains are marked by traces of experiences (similar to trauma theory which posits that trauma marks the brain and body after traumatic experiences), which are taken up differently in every new experience we have, impacting how we end up interpreting our world. The sticky residue of Hailey's history of trauma caused by fatphobia shapes her perception of the world and even the act of observing other women who carry themselves confidently challenged the narrative of fatness she has constructed and allowed her to, at the very least, see possibility for liberation from hating her own body. Hailey told me that since she has been coming to bashes, she has challenged herself to forego nylons when she is wearing dresses or skirts, something she could never do before because her nylons were a safety blanket that helped her feel better about the sagging skin on her legs.

In the world outside of bashes, body size is likely to be the first and easiest descriptor people will use to distinguish a fat person from other people (e.g. "Crystal is the bigger woman with the blonde hair."). In some ways, this actively denies fat people any sense of uniqueness, especially when fatness is stigmatized so intensely. Sarai

explained that at bashes she can “take off” this one particular marginalized identity and be seen for the multiple other characteristics that comprise her very being.

> Sarai: I really was on a natural high for, like, easily a month after I came home from that first bash. And what was behind that high was that for a weekend, I got to be Sarai, period, full stop, Sarai. Just Sarai. If someone like, I don’t know, noticed something about me, it was something that was unique about me that had nothing to do with being fat. If I was funny, it was just because I was funny. If I was pretty, it was just because I was pretty. My fatness was invisible in this space. There were people bigger than me, there were people smaller than me, and it was a non-descriptor. If someone had said “describe Sarai” and it was at the Philly bash, they couldn’t say “that fat girl.” Because you’re not going to get very far to know which fat girl. And so, that sense of community, of being with other fat people where the fatness becomes a secondary aspect to yourself, like it’s still there. It wasn’t like you weren’t fat, but that particular marginalization was removed for that weekend. I mean I’m eternally seeking out that high from those first years. In other words, finding the space that I get to take off that marginalized part of myself for a weekend, because that’s priceless. There’s not even a way you can describe how priceless that is.

In chapter four I discussed self-surveillance in depth as a phenomenon marginalized people experience as a result of objectification. Fat people are taught to be consistently aware of how they present to the world and to be particularly preoccupied with their body size. What does this take away from fat women? Well, for starters, the ability to see and experience themselves as more than just fat women. Sarai speaks to the way bashes allowed her to be recognized for the unique characteristics of her personality instead of simply being “that fat girl,” significantly impacting her ability to feel in her body and to know herself even better as a multi-faceted person. Instead of engaging in self-surveillance connected to managing perceptions of her body size, she could relax into herself and find comfort in knowing that other parts of her personality gained the recognition they deserved.

The experience of being seen, understood, and appreciated for exactly who she is at bashes was also identified by Sofia as remarkable and transformative.

> Sofia: Yeah, I think my first big bash I got dressed up to go to dinner. I think I was wearing some sort of formal get up and we were walking to our table and a woman just said “wow, you’re so beautiful.” And I didn’t remember in my adult life walking past somebody who said I was beautiful. And that becomes a common occurrence. It’s genuine compliments from people. And it’s not this conditional compliment, “oh, that dress suits you,” or “oh, that is so flattering,” or “oh, your makeup, you have such a pretty face.” It’s like a whole package, top to bottom “oh my gosh, you’re so beautiful.” And I also in recent years have like, used a mobility scooter at bashes, which is a big leap. That’s a whole different ball game. But it’s one of the few places where, you know, you’ll see somebody else in a scooter and scooter races happen, all sorts of hijinks happen on the scooter. And anywhere else I feel like it’s definitely something that people, literally I’ve overheard people go “oh, poor thing.” But there it’s just like recognizing that you don’t know why I’m in this. At bashes there’s like no judgements around it and that’s been really comforting.

Fat women are used to the conditional compliments Sofia described and, as we saw in the case of Sarai and Miriam, navigating the intersections of fatphobia and ableism in the world outside of bashes is exhausting because of how stigma shapes how fat disabled people are viewed. In the excerpt above, Sofia identified receiving genuine compliments on her appearance and feeling comfortable using her mobility aid as common experiences at bashes, illustrating what access to fat community provides—the ability to be recognized for her unique attributes and to feel safe from judgement when she is using a scooter. Both of these phenomena allowed Sofia to feel comfortable in her body. In the next section, I explore one of the products of heightened self-esteem in bash spaces—fat women’s desire to explore and play with fashion and wear outfits they would not wear in their everyday lives.

### BBW Babes in Bikinis: Bashes as spaces for taking fashion risks

> *[Autoethnography Journal Entry]*
>
> *M and I decided to go for a swim while the pool was empty. This hotel is set up so that people can sit on their balconies and see the pool. It is one of the coolest hotels I’ve seen, but I admit that I hesitated at the idea of wearing a bikini while also using a cane to get to the pool simply because the pool is so visible. It’s impossible to know who is looking. Once we were safely in the pool, however, I*

> *felt great. Bashes have been monumental in their role as spaces where I can feel comfortable as a 400-pound woman in a bikini. I think my body confidence is shaken a bit this weekend because of disability, but I still felt comfortable in my skin when two men stopped by the pool to talk to M and I. When they offered to help me out of the pool, to provide me with some stability, I took it and reveled in feeling cared for.*

I wear bikinis regularly now, but the confidence I have built up in order to do so has its roots in bash experiences. In the excerpt above, I describe what amounted to an hour of that bash weekend. When I reflect on the circumstances, what is remarkable about that moment is that, once I was able to breathe through anxiety connected to being disabled by my injured knee, I felt totally comfortable in my bikini while chatting to the two guys who had stopped by the pool. They are both, incidentally, quite attractive. I imagine a pre-BBW community me might have felt overwhelmingly self-conscious engaging with them in a dripping wet bikini while balancing against a cane. While I do not consider wearing a bikini a form of fashion risk-taking at this point, other outfits I have worn at bashes have pushed the boundaries of my comfort zone in ways that allowed me to feel joy and confidence in my body. One outfit that won rave reviews at a roaming room party included a sheer and flowing dress over barely-there underwear. I remember the physical feeling of slinky material draping over my body and the positive responses to my appearance combined to make me feel a certain type of sexy—a sexy specifically produced by feelings of connection to and comfort in my body. Circumstances matter, of course. Recall that in chapter four, I wrote about a lingerie party experience in which I felt completely disconnected from my body because the atmosphere was saturated with feelings of being on display for men's pleasure. It remains imperative to recognize that outside of bashes, there is no social space where I feel safe to play around with lingerie and cultivate this particular form of sexiness, which makes the experience—when it is

affirming and good—that much more important for learning about how I *can* feel in and about my body.

A significant element of bashes identified by participants that impacted their ability to feel comfortable in their bodies was fashion freedom, access to fat fashion and access to fashion advice. For several of my participants, being able to wear what they wanted and learning about where to find clothes that fit their bodies was transformative. While the fat fashion landscape has expanded in recent years, it is still the case that fat people have limited access to clothing that is affordable, fashionable and fits well. Moreover, the fatter you are, the more difficult it is to find clothing that fits at all. There are consequences to lack of access to clothing for fat people. Clothing helps people to express themselves and communicate identity (Cooper, 2016; Crane, 2000; Davis, 1992; Featherstone, 1990). In chapter four, I talked about the cultural devaluation of fat women, which happens to be reinforced by lack of access to clothing that fits (Degher & Hughes, 1999). Additionally, even if fat women find clothing that fits them properly, it is often the case that the clothing is designed to conceal fat women's "imperfections" (Colls, 2004). This is all to say that it takes a lot of time and creativity (and often money) for fat women to express themselves through fashion. Significantly, it cannot be left unsaid that white supremacy can also be found in lack of access to clothing for fat people given that clothing is often manufactured with white body types in mind and the ideal white body is not fat. Additionally, in her exploration of Caribbean women's relationships to their "thick" bodies, Gentles-Peart (2018) found that her participants—all of them Black women—reported having difficulty finding clothing that fit their curves appropriately and professionally, even when women reported needing sizes as low as

size 2 or 6. It appears that the curvature of Black women's bodies, regardless of size, is not taken into account by the fashion industry, which has significant implications for Black women's social mobility similar to how having access to clothing that fits at all has implications for fat women's social mobility.

In chapter four, Betty marveled at fat women's fashion choices at bashes, appreciating the time and effort it takes for them to step out in truly fantastic outfits. The overwhelming sentiment expressed by participants is that bashes gave them license to wear things they have always wanted to wear but were not brave enough to do so in their everyday lives. Sofia described her relationship to fashion at bashes as a form of reclamation.

> Sofia: I mean the best part about bashes is they're the place to wear the thing you'd never dare wear anywhere else. Like have you always dreamed of wearing fishnet pants? Well here's your chance. I feel fantastic in my body at bashes and fashion plays into this. I've worn a Catwoman costume, lace-up dresses. I've come to the party in just a bikini, like, you know, like it is the place to be as bold and as daring as you possibly can. And that is a joy, like real deep joy. Bashes were often themed, and that's sort of not in vogue anymore, but it was the opportunity to do a series of Halloween costumes that I wasn't bold enough to do on the street. It was an opportunity to wear the like, super form fitting dress. And often the last night of the bashes used to be formal nights, and not for me because I went to all my proms, but it was an opportunity for all the people that were late bloomers in high school or did not have prom dates to stand there in the full gown with somebody on their arm, you know? And feel like they have reclaimed that thing.

In the excerpt above, Sofia captures the essence of fashion in bash spaces by describing outfits she has proudly and joyfully worn that defy several of the bogus fashion rules fat women are encouraged to follow.

Brienne talked to me about a time when one of her close friends gave her two dresses to wear that Brienne felt were outside of her fashion comfort zone because they

made her butt look big, which made her feel self-conscious. She identified the supportive nature of other women at bashes as the reason she decided to wear one of the dresses out for lunch.

> Brienne: So I think for me it's just that some of the girls at bashes are just really confident and very beautiful. And I found that when I was around them, I kind of felt more confident and beautiful too. So it's addictive, that feeling. And I think it was with their help of you know, "Why don't you try this dress? Why don't you do your make up like this? Why don't you try this or wear this bathing suit?" So when I finally wore that dress and was walking through the lobby, every other person was like "Oh my god, cute dress! Where did you get that? It's so cute." And I thought oh my god, is this dress cute? And I acted like I was owning it, like "oh thanks!" you know? But in my head, I'm like oh my god, am I cute in this dress?

Brienne wore the dress because she knew that she was in the safest space to do so. She told me she received such positive feedback from other bash attendees that she decided to wear the other dress her friend gave her at another point that weekend.

Ava shared with me that she is particularly self-conscious of her belly, stating that she thinks it makes her look "too round." Outside of bashes, Ava generally will not wear clothing that accentuates her belly; however, at bashes she feels free to be less concerned about her stomach showing in a tighter fitting dress. Ava's accounts of receiving positive feedback on more daring fashion choices at bashes align with Brienne's.

> Ava: I mean, I suppose I like to wear less at bashes, yeah. I think if you get positive feedback from your peers that's also good, too. So as much as I want to look in the mirror and go "Whoa, you look rockin' today!" I sometimes need a little bit of outside cheerleading. I guess if I wear something particularly short or revealing, but I think if I receive positive feedback on what I'm wearing, I mean, it means something. Especially when you're not really used to that type of attention. I think that that makes me feel comfortable if I get that validation.

Not only does Ava capture the importance of affirmation in bash spaces, she also speaks to how bashes are spaces where she can entertain the side of her that wants to

play around with fashion and dress in more revealing clothing without feeling unsafe or at risk of being harassed with fatphobic remarks.

As a superfat woman, it is a novel and comforting feeling for Miriam to be able to wear a bikini or a dress and simply carry on with her day without being concerned about what others are thinking—an experience bashes offer her.

> Miriam: For the most part I can walk up and down the hallway [at bashes] in swimwear and a maxi dress and just be like yeah, cool, whatever, and I don't feel like nervous to walk past anybody. I'm just saying hi, I'm more comfortable, I feel like I can be myself. And it even boosts my energy in a way because I'm so comfortable, now I'm going to go out of my way to talk to people I don't even know. I'm going to dress the way I want to dress and like, I'm going to sort of perform my own version of myself in a better way. I don't necessarily feel like I *have* to cake on the makeup, I'm doing it for fun now. Because my work plays into that a bit, too. But I want to put on makeup because I'm wearing this really cute outfit and it completes it and looks awesome together as opposed to I'm doing this because I know I'll get treated better.

Miriam shared with me that one of her favourite pre-bash rituals is planning her outfits because she knows that she can safely wear things in bash spaces that she would never wear in her day-to-day life simply because the bash community not only accepts her for who she is, but celebrates her. In the excerpt above, Miriam specifically identifies feeling more comfortable, more social, and being able to be herself at bashes—which includes wearing exactly what she wants to wear—thus illustrating the powerful impact of fat community and the fashion freedom it fosters to help fat women develop a more liberatory fat embodiment.

When I asked Alyssa to tell me about a time at a bash when she felt particularly good in her body, she immediately started talking about a night when she wore a glamourous, form-fitting red dress.

> Alyssa: My dress, shoes, hair, makeup, the way I walked into the room—I just felt so confident. People complimented me, and though I didn't need outside compliments to make me feel good, it did feel good to hear them. I just love dressing up. I think dressing up, it's like being a princess for a day. A lot of us don't have the opportunity to do so and I just rock it. I just go all out. I think those are like, the experiences where I love my body and I'm like, I'm not thinking about my belly or my arms.

Rose attended two bashes years before the proliferation of fat fashion online stores and prior to her taking up sewing to supplement her wardrobe with clothing pieces that captured her unique style. She explained that having access to fat fashion was the best part of her bash experiences.

> Rose: When I went there was like a vendor fair where there was just a whole host of people selling clothes that actually fit me. And because online shopping wasn't quite as robust as it is now, that was really one of the biggest draws for me. I could actually go and try on beautiful clothes and that was impossible to do in my city. I can't even begin how to tell you how exciting it was. It was so exciting because, I wasn't sewing yet. Well I was sewing pants, but that's the only thing. I wasn't really sewing so I wasn't really fully immersed in what my style is and what I think of as you know, I had maybe like two outfits in my entire wardrobe that were successful and made me feel good and made me feel attractive and made me feel creative, because that's what I use fashion for generally. And then when I went to this place, the bashes, my god, there were racks of clothes that all fit me and were not so badly priced if I remember correctly. It was affordable too. This doesn't exist in the world. So it was a mind-blowing experience. I bought a lot of clothes for work and for everyday, but I also bought a lot of sex stuff. I bought a lot of lingerie. I bought, like, corsets and things. I did buy a lot of sexy things. That's the other thing that I could never find was like, stuff that made you feel sexually viable. Oh my god it was amazing. Yeah, it was amazing. I just really felt, you know, and if that's the one thing that I take away from those bashes that's positive, that feeling of the clothes, that's actually enough for me.

Rose started crying when she talked to me about having access to fat fashion at bashes specifically because she had always wanted to be able to use fashion as a creative outlet. Having limited access to affordable clothing that fit not only stifled Rose's ability to express herself, but in the case of her sexuality, it added to the multiple other societal

phenomena that held her back from being able to see herself as sexually viable as a fat woman.

Finally, I would be remiss if, in a section about fat fashion at bashes, I did not discuss participants' accounts of feeling free to wear bikinis. It is not uncommon for bash pool parties to be well-attended by fat women in bikinis, a beautiful sight that defies messages fat women receive from broader society about covering their bodies. Fatphobia creates an environment where almost all women are taught to fear swimsuit shopping. Self-deprecating jokes abound that indicate the experience can be anything from funny to traumatic. In high school, I remember every January I would promise myself that if I could stick to a weight loss diet until summer, then I could buy a bikini from the Sears catalogue—I wanted nothing more than to wear a bikini. Ironically, I wear them comfortably now at my highest weight and I owe much of that comfort to my participation in BBW social events. At some point in their interviews, 11 out of my 12 participants talked to me about bashes offering them the freedom to wear bikinis comfortably. Sofia's description of the atmosphere at her first bash—and how bikinis factored into it—is noteworthy.

> Sofia: It's the only place where I can, you know, there's definitely body size hierarchy and body shape hierarchy at the bash, but it's the only place where I can go and lay out in my bikini and get a tan and not end up in several people's "what I did on my summer vacation" pictures. It's like, it's a safe space. I mean I guess that's it. It's still with it's problems, you know, and some of them are tedious things you have to contend with at the bashes, but it is still a safe space to be fat. I saw, when I first crested the hill, my first party was a pool party. I came in late at night and I crested this hill and there was a DJ playing and 400-pound women in bikinis, dancing. There were 100 people in the pool and balls flying through the air. And there was a giant woman diving off of a scooter into the deep end of the water in a string bikini. And there were all sorts of people just being normal, right? This looked like the best party I've ever been to, and I was like, I don't care what it takes, I want in. I want to be a part of this thing.

This colourful description captures so much of the liberatory potential of bash experiences. Other noteworthy bikini-related experiences reported by participants include the following: Georgia bought her first bikini to wear at the one bash she attended and then felt comfortable enough to wear it outside of bashes. Miriam identified bashes as being a space in which she can wear a bikini, feel hot, and "not have people take photos of me and laugh with their families," an unfortunate experience she had on vacation at a resort in Mexico. She told me one of her favourite bash memories includes a time when she went to a bash pool party in a flamingo print bikini and did a sexy saunter into the pool to the beat of the music pumping from the DJ's speakers. Rose talked about how prior to the first bash she attended, she had not worn a bathing suit in years and that being able to do so in the company of people who appreciated and celebrated fat bodies was freeing. Alyssa revealed that seeing other fat women in bikinis gave her the confidence to wear one herself. And Ava, who also had not worn a swimsuit for over a decade prior to finding the BBW community, told me that she considers bashes the perfect space for testing out how it feels to wear a bikini and feel free in her skin. The findings in this section align with those reported by Jill Andrew (2018) in her doctoral dissertation that examined Black women's body stories in relation to, among other things, fatshion. Andrew's (2018) participants demonstrated that access to clothing that fits well and reflects personal style plays a significant role in how they feel about and perceive their bodies. Next, I examine how bash spaces, with their ability to nurture heightened self-esteem and encourage the freedom to experiment with fashion, create an atmosphere in which my participants report feeling "normal"—a feeling they rarely, if ever, access in their day-to-day lives.

**Feeling Normal: Bashes and their capacity to normalize the fat body**

> *[Autoethnography Journal Entry]*
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> *At today's pool party, despite feeling self-conscious of how shaky I was getting into the pool, I recognized how comfortable I felt in my bikini while surrounded by other fat bodies enjoying the water. The only other times I feel even remotely close to that comfortable in a bikini is when my friends and I go to the beach—and even then, I'm more self-conscious because of non-fat beach-goers. A friend helped me into and out of the pool because the stairs don't have a railing. I even needed to use my crutches for extra support. It was liberating to swim for the first time this summer and to feel sun on so much of my skin. I played with people tossing a beach ball around and flirted with a guy who'd caught my attention earlier that weekend and simply let my body feel weightless and free from pain in the water.*

I have been to several bash pool parties over the last four years and they are always spaces where I feel free in my body. They are also always experiences that make me think about how great it would be if I could go to any pool party and feel that comfortable in my body. One of the most fascinating elements of bashes is how they work to normalize fat bodies as a result of exposure to other fat bodies experiencing freedom and joy. I am not concerned about whether I am going break a chair. I am not concerned that I am being judged for my food choices when I'm out with bash friends having dinner before that night's dance. I am not hyper-aware of being winded after taking stairs. I can assume that if someone is showing interest in me, it is genuine. In these important ways, I am able to relax into my body and get a glimpse of what it is like for non-fat people navigating their day-to-day lives.

While most of my participants hinted at the way bashes normalized their bodies, five of them actually named that normalization and explained what it meant to them to have access to it as a result of finding fat community. For people who inhabit marginalized identities, "normal" is not an everyday feeling. It is necessary to outline the difference between how my participants used the term "normal" and how that differs

from the concept of normalization that I have used to frame the various gazes participants experience in bash spaces. Throughout this dissertation, I have drawn from Foucault's (1979) conceptualization of the normalizing gaze, which is an oppressive gaze. Normalization is a form of disciplinary power that conditions a population to work toward meeting idealized norms of social conduct. It is a form of social control. Particularly in chapter four, I presented how normalizing gazes work to make my participants feel less at ease in their bodies at BBW bashes; however, in this section, when my participants use the word "normal" to describe a positive feeling in bash spaces, it is clear they are drawing on feelings of belonging and safety that accompany normality. And as we will see, this sense of belonging allows my participants to remain connected to their bodies.

For some activists, especially queer activists and radical fat activists, subverting cultural definitions of normal is more important than assimilating; however, as Saguy & Ward (2011) examine in their article on addressing fat stigma by "coming out" as fat, some fat people see incredible value in not being considered exceptional for doing things like wearing a bikini to a pool party. Another example of this analysis is the current wave of fat influencers and activists on social media who push back against the comments they get from people who call them "brave" or "confident" for daring to wear or do certain things publicly as fat people, claiming that there should be nothing exceptional about a fat person engaging in activities considered normal for non-fat people. In any case, fat people are reminded daily that their body size makes them abnormal. These messages may come from family and friends, the medical establishment, the fashion industry, the diet and beauty industry, and the built

environment, and they fuel fat people's self-surveillance that I discuss in chapter four. Ava talked at length about bashes offering her the chance to feel normal after a lifetime of learning otherwise. She began by sharing a bit of her history navigating friendships and family life as a fat woman.

> Ava: The bash community is important to me because when I was growing up I didn't have a lot of people around me that shared my experience, so I wasn't surrounded by a lot of plus-size people. I didn't have a lot of plus-size friends and I felt very alone. So even though I did have a great group of friends that were, you know, thin or average sized, nobody could really relate to my story. And you know, when you grow up as a fat person, it comes with a lot of challenges and unfortunately, it was hard for my thin friends to see those challenges, to see why maybe I didn't want to go to something. To see why I was a little bit embarrassed. To see why I was maybe like, "No, I'm not going to go this time." That sort of thing. Even when it came down to clothing choices. Not only that, but like, selection or even being able to buy clothes. I just saw the ease with which they moved around and you know, I felt left out quite often especially when it came to guys and stuff like that. I was always "the fat friend" who they all loved and adored. Unfortunately, that wasn't very popular when I was growing up in the 70s and 80s, and so I was considered like, that fat friend. I felt often left out and I didn't have anyone to talk to. I also came from a family that focused a lot on weight loss. I know they loved me dearly, but my mother used to say to me "I'd love you if you were 500 pounds. I just want you to be happy." But even my own mother was, you know, she was a bit of a fitness guru. My father, my brother, they were always dieting and stuff like that. So I really felt like I had nobody to talk to. I had no allies, I had no group. There was nobody to go to. So now, later in life, and I didn't really meet these types of groups or people until after 40, that's really important to me to surround myself with people who understand. Who understand what it's like to be in a fat body. Who understand the pain of being in a fat body, but who also understand the pleasure of being in a fat body and want to experience the pleasure of being in a fat body. So it's kind of just having that support. That support is so important to me. And when I'm around people like this, not only do I feel supported and loved, I feel normal. I've never been able to feel normal. I feel like in these spaces and with who I choose to surround myself with, I feel normal. I just feel normal. It normalizes because it is normal. It's just our society has always told us otherwise.

Next, Ava talked to me about how bashes offer fat people the chance to try new things while in the company of other people who might also be anxious about navigating new experiences because of accessibility needs. She described how being able to access

"strength in numbers" helps her to feel more normal because she is surrounded by people who understand her concerns.

> Ava: Sometimes there's a lot of strength in numbers, too. So a lot of people are kind of a little bit nervous to try new things like restaurants or attractions, but when you go with a group that you feel safe in, or with people you are similar in size with, when you're all together you can experience these things as well. And I think there is a lot of positivity. You can meet a lot of really incredible people at these things that have had similar journeys to yours. There's a real comfort in being surrounded by different people of different sizes and different ages, just having fun together. There's a real freedom in that. I feel like it kind of makes you feel normal. I feel like it's hard sometimes when you're plus-size, when you go to do things with mixed groups, it's hard because you always kind of feel like an outsider or a bit ostracized. And I think this normalizes everyday activities and things people do every day. I feel like we're reluctant to do that in everyday life because we're scared the space won't fit us, we're going to be made fun of, we're going to be left out. I think it's a place we can feel included, for the most part.

Ava explained that bashes have introduced her to a world of meaningful connections with other women and she gets excited to see them at other bashes. She shared that the community and the feeling of normalization is what keeps her going back to bashes because it is "addictive."

Rose commented on the notion of bashes offering her the opportunity to simply forget about her body.

> Rose: There was a certain sense of forgetting about your body and just existing in a space without that everybody watching you thing. I guess that's how normal people feel all of the time. So you could just exist in that space without thinking oh my god is my roll showing, is my, you know what I mean. Is the bathing suit showing off everything and people are disgusted with me?

I wondered about this idea of forgetting about the body as an element of subjecthood. I have asserted thus far that when fat people find themselves in a position of subjecthood, they can be connected to and feel *in* their bodies because they are not allowing an observer's gaze to control the body narrative. When fat people feel

objectified and respond via self-surveillance, they are engaging in a process of disconnecting from their bodies. But the way Rose employs this idea of forgetting about her body is reminiscent of Sarai's description of bashes offering her the chance to "take off" the body size-based marginalization she feels. In essence, then, perhaps connecting to and feeling comfortable in one's body includes simply not thinking about it at all sometimes—this may qualify as an enhanced level of relief from ongoing self-surveillance and aligns with a new turn in body politics referred to as body neutrality. Body neutrality formed in the wake of mainstream body positivity being co-opted by class privileged, thin, white women that further marginalized fat, disabled, poor and racialized people. Body neutrality posits that we do not need to love our bodies to find peace with/in them and that for many people, it is difficult to cultivate love for bodies that seem to betray them. Feminist beauty critic Autumn Whitefield-Madrano writes that her issue with body love is that, not only does it set a high standard for self-acceptance, it also requires women to regulate their emotions in addition to their bodies.

> "I don't see the pressure on women really easing up, and then you're supposed to have this bulletproof self-esteem on top of all that. It's not something we can really live up to. Body love keeps the focus on the body. *The times I'm happiest are when I'm not thinking about my body at all* [emphasis added]" (Meltzer, 2017).

Brienne and her friends are well known in the BBW community and attend many of the bashes that take place year to year. She said that sometimes she decides to go to a bash specifically because someone has reached out to her for help to cultivate self-esteem. She told me a bit about the impact of spending three or four days around hundreds of other fat people with a specific focus on how it feels to return to reality after a bash.

> Brienne: It's like you get on the bash circuit, like we do travel to bashes more than anyone else, and it's almost like you come into work on Monday and it's like boom, here I am. Like, I know I'm a 10. But then you're like, wait a minute. Nope I'm not actually. So it's hard. It's definitely hard because you do build that high of confidence because you're surrounded by people that are your size. And it becomes almost a more normal space. And honestly you don't get that in your general life. Like no one's office is full of plus size people.

In the above excerpt, Brienne points to how she carries the affective experiences she has at bashes into her daily life until reality sets in and she is reminded of her marginalized position. The popular term in the BBW community that is used to describe the come-down after a bash is "bash blues," which captures what amounts to being jolted back to reality where you no longer feel safe and supported as a fat person. Brienne identified that it is simply not normal for fat people to be surrounded by people who understand body size-based marginalization in their everyday lives. In fact, I asked each participant to tell me about other places or spaces where they felt similarly about their bodies as they do at bashes, and the overwhelming response was there is no other social space where they feel as normal and safe in their bodies as they do at bashes.

Miriam is one of a few participants who identified as superfat. In the following excerpt of her interview, she talked at length about the complex emotions she experiences in and about her body both in and outside of bash spaces. She talked to me about how being in fat-specific spaces with people who "get it" makes her feel better about her body. Miriam explained that even though she has non-fat people in her life who support, love, and do their best to understand her, it does not compare to being around other people who share similar lived realities.

> Miriam: If I say things at a table full of fat people and it's fat related, I'm going to get at least six people who would be like "oh my god, me too!" And it's like oh, I'm one of you. I'm accepted, I'm part of this thing. People get me. I'm not this abnormality of society in this moment. I am the norm in this moment. And so my

> comfort level and my esteem level boost because it's like, I'm not having to explain it because they get it because it's normal to them. So that makes me feel more normal and that makes me feel better. There's also just being able to be, or feel the way thin people feel when they hangout anywhere. Whereas this is the only place I'm ever going to feel like that. You know what I mean? Sort of that level of "yeah, of course I look like this, why wouldn't I?" You don't get to feel that necessarily in a lot of other spaces because you're hyperaware of your size.

Miriam said that in her day-to-day life, she is never sure how she will be received by the public. When she attends bashes, she feels like she is treated the way she deserves to be treated and that for a weekend, she is given license to expect respect. Unfortunately, as Miriam explains below, once a bash ends, the reality of living in a fatphobic world sets back in.

> Miriam: When the weekend is over, it's like coming down off a high. And that's exactly what it is. Because I just spent three or four days or whatever, feeling like everyone else in the world feels, and now I have to go back to not? Like it's hard! It's a hard crash to go from feeling like king of the world to like, oh now I'm othered again. I went from being normal and considered potentially special back to other. And that is night and day, and like, I didn't get the hard-core blues like I used to after this last bash, and I think that's because I went home with my partner. So it was not like I went home to isolation, but I used to. I used to go back to complete isolation. I would go home and I'd be by myself because I lived alone. It was borderline full on depressive episodes because I went back to being othered. It's crushing.

So far I have identified the trauma of fatphobia as a general phrase pointing to how fat people are affected by an environment that consistently tells them they do not belong. For superfat and infinifat people, fatphobic culture is even more traumatizing. Complex trauma is defined as "prolonged, repeated experience of interpersonal trauma in a context in which the individual has little or no chance of escape" (Cortman & Walden, 2018). There are very few spaces where superfat and infinifat people can access feelings of normalcy. Sofia outlined in her interview that once a person reaches infinifat body size in particular, it becomes trickier to find vehicles and seating that accommodates comfortably. In the above excerpt, Miriam speaks to the one sure way

superfat and infinifat people can escape the fatphobic culture—self-isolation; however, isolation comes with its own traumatic impact and can feel particularly emotionally debilitating after spending a weekend in a safer space surrounded by fat community.

Sofia was the only participant who used infinifat as a body size descriptor, and, much like Miriam, she identified bash spaces as the only spaces (aside from her home) where she has ever felt normal.

> Sofia: I think when I first got to bashes, I'm a person that does a sideways shuffle through most rooms for most of my life. From high school on my hips have been more than 60 inches. There's never been a time that I've been able to navigate a restaurant. When you start putting bodies into spaces, I'm too wide for all those spaces. I remember walking into my very first event and the first thing I remember was being able to walk straight ahead between rows of chairs and not have to turn sideways. I'd never had that experience. It made me feel normal and I've never felt normal. I've taken tablecloths off tables at restaurants. And it was the first time that I saw a target, I walked straight ahead, and I thought wow, this is so simple. I think yeah, living in this body sometimes it feels like you're a burden on all public space. You know it's just like, nothing is going to work for me. So to walk into a space where somebody has thought about your needs, where there's just a comfortable seat. Like, that's half the battle of leaving your house as a superfat person—will there be a space to accommodate me when I get there? That's often why I go to bashes because I know it's guaranteed that if there's something there that doesn't work for me, that I can talk to an organizer and say "Hey, there should be a chair halfway down the hallway and these are super long hallways and I'm too fat to make it to the end of the hallway," and then it's just done. It's just done. It is the only place still, and I live in a world with fat friends, I live in a fat friendly house with accommodations for people of every size. We go to pool parties that are filled with fat people. The bash is still the only place where you can walk into a room full of 200 or 300 people that look like you, that I can say "Oh my god, Crystal I love that shirt where did you get it?" and it's relevant to me.

I did not set out doing this research with any plan to be able to come to conclusions, but one conclusion made itself abundantly clear: participants who identified as superfat or infinifat were far more likely to reinforce the idea that bashes are safer spaces. This is specifically because the world outside of bashes is mostly and sometimes entirely inaccessible to their bodies—there is no space outside of bashes where they can simply

relax into their bodies and feel normal. Navigating spaces in their day-to-day lives is often physically and emotionally exhausting.

How is affect being mobilized in these circumstances? In Ahmed's (2014) work on the cultural politics of emotions, she explores how "emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies" asserting that "bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others" (p. 1). These ideas exemplify how bodies "become" as they move through their worlds. As I discuss in depth in chapter two, our bodies collect experiences that produce certain affects that then leave traces of intensity behind. Those traces are reactivated by new experiences and this process or cycle continues as it informs who we are in relation to our world (Massumi, 1987). The emotions that flavour these encounters play an active role in shaping us. My participants' experiences of feeling normal in bash spaces is particularly interesting to think about using this lens. They specify that there is nowhere else in their lives where they feel as normal or as comfortable in their bodies as they do at bashes. It seems that the emotions associated with uncomfortable and sometimes traumatic anti-fat encounters my participants have outside of bashes work to shape their individual bodies such that they are oriented toward spaces that offer access to safety. These spaces could be at home, in fat friend groups, in radical fat activist spaces like NOLOSE, or at BBW events. This also illustrates how emotions shape the collective body of the bash community—hundreds of people that come together as a result of their desire to access safer spaces for their bodies to simply exist.

In the next section, I explore participants' accounts of how empowering lessons learned at bashes have helped them build resilience, aiding them in their ability to push

back against the stigma and inaccessibility that shapes the experience of living as a fat person in a fatphobic society.

**Bash Education: Creating community and lessons in self-advocacy**

> *[Autoethnography Journal Entry]*
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> *Hosting the Woman's Hour session at this bash was an illuminating experience in building community around fat embodiment. Having been to a few other Woman's Hour sessions at other bashes, I wanted to mix things up by creating discussion prompts that would allow us to think about the more empowering ways we inhabit space as fat people. I asked participants to think about the ways they connect with their bodies, what prevents them from establishing that connection, and how they address roadblocks to enacting body positivity in their lives. The resulting conversation was rich with information about how we all develop relationships with our bodies (or don't) and it wasn't as "empowering" as I had hoped it would be, but I realize now that the fact there were 12 of us in a room even having these conversations was radical in and of itself. Creating that connection and shaping discussion in a more critical way was important. We began by talking about barriers to literally fitting into the world and everyone knew what it was like emotionally to experience having to squeeze into spaces and seating that doesn't fit fat bodies. We talked about what it takes out of us to advocate for ourselves and demand accommodations. The discussion then turned to experiences with medical professionals. Again, the stories shared seemed to be familiar to everyone in the room. These connections and reflections happened via shared knowledge of fat embodiment. Each of us entered the space with our own histories of fat hatred and found comfort and connection in recognizing that so many other people truly understood the struggle.*

I hosted that session on the Friday afternoon of the bash and for the rest of the weekend women came up to me to tell me how much they enjoyed the session or to tell me they were not able to attend but had heard it was incredible. I remember feeling like it had not gone as well as it could have, but when I started receiving feedback it occurred to me that the participants made the session into exactly what they needed. In chapter four, I revealed that I had overheard some of the women talking about their weight loss surgery experiences as ultimately beneficial to their health. Overhearing this discussion left me feeling frustrated personally, but I also recognize that their ability to

connect with other people around the struggles of choosing to have surgery and the complications they have faced afterward was important for their own relationships with their bodies and each other. Bashes are complicated spaces and they are not for everyone. There are far more politically radical fat spaces that exist, such as NOLOSE, Abundia, and the fat studies and weight stigma conferences (all of which have their own barriers to access for many fat people), but one of the greatest lessons I have learned from attending BBW bashes is that while I am free to politically rage against diet culture and intentional weight loss, cultivating compassion for other fat people and their histories of struggle is truly radical. In my four years attending bashes, I have gone from hard resentment of many bash attendees for what I (wrongly) perceived to be weak body politics to a soft and freely given compassion for everyone I meet, choosing to learn from these connections when people reveal themselves to me instead of judging.

For several of my participants, accessing fat community via bashes left lasting positive impressions they carried with them into the real world, influencing the vim and vigour with which they navigate fatphobic society and spaces. Earlier, I talked about Brienne's experience receiving validation of her choice to wear dresses she was not entirely comfortable wearing at a bash.

> Brienne: Being surrounded by so much positivity about wearing dresses I wouldn't normally wear changes your perspective so that when I went home, I'm like, well all those people unknowingly said how cute I looked. So I am going to wear this because people think that, the group vote is that I look cute in it. So who cares. I'm going to wear it somewhere else. So I'd say that does change you after a bash, stuff like that.

This sort of positivity and support is characteristic of bashes and for Brienne, the compliments she received on her outfits gave her license to wear the dresses outside of bash spaces to further her work on feeling comfortable and safe in her body in her day-

to-day life. Georgia was hard-pressed to find much good in her one bash experience, but, like Brienne, was able to take lessons away from the bash about how to feel more comfortable in her body when she wears clothing that is outside of her comfort zone.

> Georgia: I wore shorts for the first time at the bash and that's carried through now I've been wearing a lot of dresses throughout the summer. I feel like it helped normalize my legs for myself, like begin the process of doing that. And I have worn my bikini in public again but I have continued to feel tense about it for different reasons.

Georgia shared with me that when she attended the bash, she was at a point in her life where she was more concerned with finding fat community and that the bash simply felt overwhelmingly focused on sex and hooking up. She specified that she did find some community and appreciated the time she spent with some of the people she met. Unfortunately, her perception of the bash as a sexualized space coloured her experience, so that she took anything positive away from it at all is meaningful.

At two years into her BBW community involvement, Annabelle has learned various lessons about her body that she carries forward into her everyday life. She talked to me about how the confidence she has gained to wear certain types of clothing at bashes has spilled over into other areas of her life.

> Annabelle: There are times in bash spaces I feel way more confident and comfortable. I will dress differently. I will wear more revealing clothing. I will wear sizes that actually fit me instead of wearing sizes that are too big to cover things up. I'll wear two-piece bathing suits. I haven't worn a two-piece bathing suit since I was 12 until I went to my first bash. And when I was 12 and years after that, I was a very thin person. I never liked body attention. So it was more just, I didn't want to attract any attention. So I'd wear a one-piece, cover more, wear something that's less attractive. So now I own several two-piece bathing suits and have no problem wearing them. I have been in situations, like I was on a cruise that was just a general open-to-public cruise, and we were in another country. I thought to myself, I hesitated for a moment taking off my cover up like, oh I'm in a two-piece because I hadn't stopped to think about it. I had been wearing it at BBW stuff so I didn't pause, and then once I was there I thought "oh

> crap!" I'm in front of all these non-fat people that are not here because they are accepting of fat people. So I did it, but it did give me pause. But now I will do it even if I hesitate, whereas before, if I had thought of it before I left the hotel room, I'd have been like no, I don't want to do that. So I'm much more likely to wear what I want to wear and feel sexy and not care as much about what somebody else might think as I would have before.

Here, Annabelle picks up the idea of forgetting her body when she talks about wearing a two-piece swimsuit without stopping to think about it. This is something I identify as indicative of subjecthood because self-surveillance associated with objectification was not automatically controlling her swimsuit decision. Her ability to access fat community at bashes has facilitated this sense of freedom.

An interesting lesson Ava learned by finding the BBW community was to more closely examine her internalized fatphobia. As she explains below, she thought that her smaller fat body would be more appreciated than bigger bodies in the BBW community because smaller bodies more closely approximate societal beauty ideals. She was wrong and she was grateful for the lesson.

> Ava: Now I always say it's survival of the fattest at bashes and I mean that in the best sort of way. I think exposing somebody like me who has had a lot of internalized fatphobia, not only to obviously my group of friends here in [city where Ava lives], but also to different ages and sizes of bodies I never thought I'd see up close and personal. Wow, it did me such a world of good because there is no space in your head for that type of thinking, honestly. I know it seems kind of weird how a bash or how a party could do that for me, but I still had a lot of internalized fatphobia and I didn't know I did. It was more directed towards me, but just being surrounded by women of all different shapes and sizes and ages, whether it be anywhere from 150 pounds up to 750 pounds, just being surrounded by all of these magnificent, wonderful, powerful women and seeing so much diversity in bodies, made it all very normal to me. It made it very, very normal to me.

Ava touches on an incredibly important element of normalization—exposure. What is normalized in our culture is shaped by the ideas that we are exposed to most often. For example, we learn so much about our world through media depictions of what we are

asked to process as reality. Positive associations of fatness are not normalized. In fact, the assemblage of “obesity” (Rich et al., 2010) works to actively mark fatness as abject and abnormal, so for Ava, entering bash spaces where she was exposed not only to many fat bodies, but all varieties of shapes and sizes of fat bodies, altered her worldview. She became aware of the harmful beliefs about fat people that she had internalized and, as a result, changed her mindset.

One of my favourite ways Sarai described the impact of bashes on her confidence was her various references to “strutting.” In the excerpt below, she talks about how her bash experiences helped to heal some of the trauma of fatphobia that had influenced her ability to be comfortable in her body well into early adulthood.

> Sarai: Generally, outside of bashes, I think I was self-conscious in the true definition of the phrase self-conscious, where I often would be trying to minimize the noticeability of my body. And again, I would say as a result of the positive experiences I had at the Philly bash, the strutting factor oozed out into the rest of the world. So I don’t necessarily strut on my way to work or whatever, but the confidence that comes along with that impacted how I perceived my body, how I perceived others perceiving my body, in good ways. And I mean there’s still times where, you know, like at work, I’m going to dress professionally or conservatively. I’m not going to be wearing tight clothes, or whatever. But in my down time or on weekends or whatever, wearing a sleeveless shirt, shorts, I want to wear what I want. Compared to, I remember in high school, it was like 90 damn degrees and I was taking tennis lessons and I wore fucking jeans to my tennis lessons because I didn't want to show my legs. So I’m about as far as you can get from that young girl who wore jeans in 90-degree weather to her tennis lessons as a result of those positive strutting experiences.

Additionally, Sarai talked to me about how access to fat community taught her how to advocate for herself in situations where spaces are not accessible.

> Sarai: I think I learned from the Philly bash spaces to expect chairs I was comfortable in. So, you know, I don’t know when it happened, but somewhere along the line, if I go to a restaurant now, and it’s a chair that has arms I’m not going to be comfortable in, you know my immediate response is “can you find a chair that would work for me?” Right? Not trying to sit in it, or perch in it, or being

> uncomfortable in it. And the first spaces that I experienced that it was okay to have that expectation and that it was more than just okay, like, there's something wrong with the fact that there are people who don't feel comfortable, that it could ever be perceived as wrong to expect to have a chair at a restaurant that you can be comfortable in was problematic—the first place that I encountered that was at a bash. And I mean other fat women basically schooling me on what I should be entitled to expect for myself, right? Mostly kindly, sometimes sarcastically, but seeing that modeled by other people.

Sarai touches on one of the most significant effects of marginalization—the affected person struggles through pain and discomfort because they do not think they have the right to expect the world to accommodate them. For Sarai, seeing other fat women advocate for themselves and learning what it is like to navigate bash spaces free from worries about accessibility made it clear to her that she deserves to be accommodated in her day-to-day life.

Sofia, my bash veteran, also spoke to me about "strutting" through life after going to bashes.

> Sofia: I know that after our first bashes, none of us took our bracelets off because we felt like we were in this magic world and it was symbolic of the memories. But yeah, I think that there's a sort of, I think because your body is normalized for the first time, right? Even if you don't, or you're not aware of it, and like I guess I'm speaking just for myself, there's this sort of self-esteem strut that happens after the bash. You know, it's like normally if I'm loading my car and bent over at the waist doing something in the trunk, I'm aware of who's around. But like all those things just sort of drop off after a week of being immersed with your people. Walking through the airport you don't think twice about eating something. Sitting on my scooter and eating something was a hard thing. I could feel people thinking "Look at you, you're fueling this problem you have." But like, those things all become an afterthought after the bash. You're just like "oh, I can do this." Like you're already doing it before you second guess yourself.

In the excerpt above, Sofia specifically identifies how her bash experiences help to free her from self-surveillance. In chapter four, I featured an excerpt of her interview where, as an infinifat Black woman who is aware of the attention her body commands, she told me she is comfortable in her body in public. Sofia's bash experiences have given her

the lessons and the tools for navigating a fatphobic, racist world in ways that make it slightly less emotionally draining. She does not question her worth. In fact, one of the most significant results of her involvement in the BBW community and bashes has been creating a life outside of bashes that mimics the access to fat community and accessibility that she has at bashes.

> Sofia: I mean in my case I've cultivated a life with other fat people. Like I'm in a house right now where I think all the women here are over 500 pounds. Our chairs are oversized, and our pool has sturdy handrails and big steps. Like I actively chose to surround myself with people that sort of get me, affirm my choices, and I met most of them at bashes. So in this home and wherever we go—and we go out to karaoke and restaurants in big groups of alarmingly large people—I feel good. I feel fine in those spaces, but that's actively cultivated. Without these bashes I would have never found these people. And we've migrated across the country. We've lived on the east coast. We've all migrated to the west coast. And we brought new people into the fold. And we found other people. You find other fat people randomly. If you have a health problem, you can say here's how I dealt with that. You find other people who need a mobility aid, and it's like well here's my transition into it and if you come out with me I can show you how to get around. I'll show you how to go to concerts. If you get on your scooter, here is how you navigate concert spaces. So I think by being in the community and being visible—we also get questions. Like if somebody has a problem in the bedroom, a health problem, if somebody can't fit into a car. Fat network activates. That bash network still activates. What are you driving? How long have you had it? Does this work for you? Can you measure this for me? How did somebody find the seat? How tall is the seat? Is it portable? The community aspect definitely spills over into everyday life.

Sofia's bash experiences extending into and shaping her personal life illustrate the power of fat community and of being able to actively create for herself what fatphobic society refuses to give her.

In summary, the stories shared in this section illustrate that bashes provide attendees with ample opportunity to learn lessons about their bodies and other fat bodies that contribute to an ultimate belief that they are as deserving of respect and comfortable access to all spaces as non-fat people. Through their bash experiences, my

participants have learned how to appreciate their bodies and advocate for themselves, recognizing their full humanity outside of bash spaces in the face of anti-fat attitudes and atmospheres.

## Discussion: BBW community as fat activism?

Fat activism as a movement emerged in the late 1960s in America and the 1970s in Canada in response to anti-fat health discourses, "social experiences, cultural norms, and media messages about the body" that proliferated in the twentieth century when "the body and the 'self' became the focus of medical, government, and commercial interest" (Ellison, 2020, p. 4). I did not set out with the aim of determining how the BBW community is a form of fat activism; however, the stories I share in this chapter make it particularly clear that I would be remiss if I did not write a section ascertaining how the BBW community demonstrates tenets of fat activism. As I have mentioned, Charlotte Cooper (2016) refers to the BBW community as a key site of fat activism in the West. It is also an understudied community. My survey of academic literature containing the term BBW produced only a handful of articles and most of them mentioned the acronym without any in-depth discussion or study of the community itself. Right now, there is only one journal article that focuses specifically on a brief study of a BBW group in the UK.[33] Given that this dissertation is the first in-depth academic exploration of the BBW community, and given that I am a fat activist and proud member of that community, it is important that I look at how these worlds collide. To do so, I will explore how the themes and sub-themes in this chapter align with four categories of fat activism outlined in Cooper's (2016) pivotal text *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*: fat activism as

[33] Colls, R. (2012). Big Girls Having Fun: Reflections on a 'fat accepting space". Somatechnics, 2(1), 18-37.

community-building, fat activism as cultural work, micro fat activism and ambiguous fat activism.

### Fat Activism as Community-Building

First, community-building constitutes fat activism because "it enables fat people to develop social capital" (Cooper, 2016, p. 60). The most robust theme to emerge from my data focuses on the impact of having access to fat community—to people who just get it.

> "Building community, simply getting together, is a project of generating social capital, developing connections that enable people to exercise power, become agentic and visible, and be legitimised. Through community, fat activists perform the alchemical work of converting abjection into asset." (Cooper, 2016, p. 60-61).

The boost in agency reported by my participants is rooted in the support that they receive as members of the BBW community. This support helped to increase participants' self-esteem and positive feelings in and about their own and other fat bodies. It also resulted in participants carrying lessons in self-advocacy and self-worth forward into their daily lives. Accounts of things like wearing dresses in public in their day-to-day lives after gaining the confidence to do so while at a bash, or asking for appropriate seating options at restaurants without hesitation because they recognize they are as deserving of comfortable seating as non-fat people illustrate the idea that community-building enables people to exercise power and agency. Additionally, feeling a sense of belonging to a community is "psychologically important in claiming a strong self-identity, relinquishing loneliness, and finding people with whom to share experiences" (Cooper, 2016, p. 63). Being able to dance, swim, go out to eat with friends, flirt and hook up, and simply feel normal demonstrate the importance of bashes

as a space of respite from the loneliness and isolation some participants report feeling in their day-to-day lives.

Of course, fat community-building in BBW spaces is not without its issues. As Cooper's (2016) research revealed, "negotiating community can be complicated and uncomfortable...community is networks where there are shared interests as well as differences" (p. 65-66). Within the BBW community there are certainly in- and out-group conflicts and differences in opinion around how to best serve the members. This is illustrated throughout my research, particularly with respect to the circulation of diet culture in BBW bash spaces as well as the overlap of BBW community with the lifestyle community, both of which were identified by some of my participants as complicated dynamics to negotiate at the bashes they attend. A good example of how BBW group organizers try to address rifts is the creation of the Unity Bash hosted each summer by the Toledo, OH BBW group. Several years ago, Toledo BBW started the Unity Bash in an attempt to mend rifts between various Michigan BBW groups under a shared understanding that despite differences in opinion, unity among the groups is important in an effort to make space for building the self-esteem of people who struggle with body image in a fatphobic society. The values held by the Toledo BBW organizers shine at the Unity Bash, so much so that I feel a palpable difference in the affective atmosphere of that bash compared to others. For instance, in 2019 I decided to attend two Toledo BBW bashes alone—something I would never do at other bashes. I felt comfortable doing so specifically because the administrative team works hard to maintain an atmosphere of inclusivity and respect in and outside of bash events, including in the Toledo BBW Facebook group, which is an important site of connection in the down time

between in-person events. Their efforts pay off because even when I attend their events alone, I still feel comfortable creating connections with people I do not know. I feel safe to do so because I do not sense that I will be judged. Significantly, some of my most cherished close friendships are currently with people I have met through Toledo BBW events.

While there continue to be tensions among community members and organizers, these steps toward acknowledging difference and working to come together instead of creating deeper divisions demonstrate a commitment to community-building. As Cooper (2016) writes, community-building provides the opportunity to "recognise oneself and others, to commit to a relationship" and that this "is a political act in a context where one's humanity is repeatedly diminished in the wider culture" (p. 67).

**Fat Activism as Cultural Work**

In her exploration of forms of fat activism, Cooper (2016) identifies cultural work as another way fat activism is performed. She defines cultural work as "the act of making things: art, objects, events, still and moving images, digital artefacts, texts, spaces, places and so on" (p. 68). There are two types of cultural work highlighted in Cooper's (2016) research that are demonstrated in my participants' accounts of bash experiences that helped them reconnect with and experience their bodies in a positive manner.

She identifies one form of fat activist cultural expression as emerging from "sex as an available and pre-existing resource" (Cooper, 2016, p. 74), specifically pointing to one of her interviewees' accounts of a queer fat play party as constitutive of fat activism. This connects with my sometimes revolutionary experiences of exploring my own fat

sexuality in bash spaces or with people I have met through the BBW community as well as Betty's account of hosting her own queer play party at one of the bashes she attended and feeling specifically embodied in that space. In describing the importance of spaces where fat sexuality can be explored, Cooper (2016) writes, "Fat activist culture-making here takes the form of exposure to and participation in forbidden forms of fat embodiment mediated through desire" (p. 74). As the first half of this chapter reveals, participants valued bashes not only for increasing their access to exploring their sexuality, but also for giving them a sense of ownership over their desirability and a chance to experience being respectfully desired and appreciated, often by multiple people.

In what Cooper (2016) refers to as new cultural forms—specifically, tactics for community-building and accruing cultural capital that are specific to fat activism—she refers to fat swims, fatshion, and clothing swaps as forms of fat activism. In my experience, bash pool parties are one of the most fun events of bash weekends. At these parties, I feel free to don a bikini and play in the pool or lie in the sun, surrounded by other fat babes in bikinis and our admirers. While the context is different—fat swims were started in the San Francisco Bay Area by lesbian fat activists in the '80s (Cooper, 2016)—it is true that this constitutes another act of engaging in what is often considered by the larger culture to be a less acceptable form of fat embodiment. Cooper (2016) refers to fat swims as heterotopic, a term created by Foucault[34] that describes "places that disrupt normative concepts of space and time to create windows of possibility in

[34] Michel Foucault (translated by Jay Miskowiec), "Of Other Spaces," Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité (http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf)

which other ways of being that cannot normally be tolerated have opportunities to thrive" (Cooper, 2016, p. 76). BBW bash pool parties allow fat people to enjoy socializing in a safer space and to feel normal—an important feeling explored in one of the sub-themes in this chapter. These pool parties can certainly be life-giving.

Finally, as my participants outline in the section on fat fashion—or fatshion—bashes are safer spaces for fat women to explore fatshion, share knowledge, and build self-esteem through giving and receiving support. The importance of access to plus-size fashion cannot be overstated. Andrew (2016) writes:

> "Our clothing is a second skin, our social epidermis. Our chosen threads are by far one of the most powerful tools we use to convey our social selves, our feelings, beliefs, and our aspirations. Clothing can be rebellious, resistant; it can signify aggression and authority as well as it can embody assimilation and passivity. Intriguingly, that the same garment has the capacity of being all of these or none at all in different spaces and at different times. There is power in our clothes, how we perceive ourselves in them, and how others perceive us." (¶ 3)

All of this considered, the increased availability of plus-size clothing options is significant to the development of fat people's identity and self-expression. The online fatshion community has grown from its roots on LiveJournal and Tumblr to more contemporary social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. As Cooper (2016) writes, "fatshion encourages fat people's creative participation in spaces where they are usually excluded" (p. 76). My participants reported that not only feeling free to wear what they want, but also having *access* to fashion (like at bash vendor fairs) has been revolutionary in their ability to build identity and feel better in and about their bodies. Additionally, every bash I have attended thus far has included a clothing swap event, opening up space for fat women to revamp their wardrobes without the limits of financial accessibility.

### Micro Fat Activism

Another form of fat activism Cooper (2016) identifies is micro fat activism. She defines it as fat activism that "takes place in everyday spaces…and happens in small, understated moments" (p. 78). She asserts that this type of activism is not necessarily recognized as activism proper. It does not require collective action and is not often public. It can be performed by one or two people, even in isolation. Micro fat activism also has the added benefit of providing instant gratification in the sense that it happens in the moment. It can be as simple (yet revolutionary!) as "bringing fat consciousness to other conversations" (Cooper, 2016, p. 79), often serving as moments of drawing attention to different forms of oppression and constituting the beginning of community-building. As my participants report, so many of the ways in which they experienced boosts in self-confidence and revisions to how they view their own and others' fat bodies are rooted in the conversations they have at bashes, or in witnessing the actions of others at bashes. In my own experience, I have had a number of people—men and women—in the BBW community who have shared with me how they value my feminist perspectives and how their own views have changed as a result of what I share. I consider it a testament to the impact I have had on the community that I have not only been asked specifically to share my perspectives at Woman's Hour events, but to also host two of them in the last two years.

### Ambiguous Fat Activism

The final form of fat activism I will briefly explore is what Cooper (2016) refers to as ambiguous fat activism, a category she includes in her analysis to capture her participants' accounts of fat activist activity that did not fit into other categories. What

struck me as most useful here is her exploration of how having fun is generative of feelings of “liberation, social cohesion” and that it “basically makes people happy” (Cooper, 2016, p. 90). Activism proper is often associated with acts and events that can lead to burnout. In this way, conversations about the mobilizing feelings of joy and pleasure may get lost, but they are important. Bashes, if anything, are spaces of fun and joy. From official bash events like pool parties, room roams, themed dances, and group dinners, to more private events hosted by attendees like Betty’s queer sex party, there are a number of opportunities for fat people to experience joy—both in their own bodies and with other fat bodies.

When I initially read Cooper’s (2016) text four years ago and noted that she considered the BBW community to be a form of fat activism, I was skeptical. My brand of fat activism is heavily rooted in feminist thinking and, at the time, I felt there was little evidence that BBW events and community were feminist. I felt this way because I paid a lot of attention to the gendered dynamics of parties and bashes and was consumed by my distaste for what I perceived to be sexual objectification of fat women as well as the circulation of diet culture in these supposed size accepting spaces. This dissertation research has confirmed these elements circulate bash spaces and shape fat women’s experiences in and of their bodies, but the research has also demonstrated the numerous experiences and encounters to be had in bash spaces that constitute community-building, cultural work, micro fat activism, and ambiguous fat activism. In other words, this research changed my mind. And as Cooper (2016) aptly states, “fat activism is a multifaceted affair” and “unity is not as important as it might seem or

suggest" (p. 52). What constitutes fat activism is varied and messy—but messy in an effective and very human way, much like bashes themselves.

## Conclusion

At the second BBW party I attended in Toronto back in September 2011, a woman introduced herself to me and mentioned she had read some of the posts I made in a Facebook group dedicated to the Toronto BBW community. That was her first party and she said that based on my posts, she knew she wanted to meet me. By that point in the night I'd had several glasses of wine, but by some miracle we exchanged contact information and one week later we met for dinner to get to know each other better. Unbeknownst to either of us at the time, that party was the beginning of a close friendship that remains one of my strongest and most fulfilling relationships to date. Over the next nine years, I would continue to meet an assortment of other politicized fat (and fat-allied) feminists through the BBW community, my fat activism, and my fat studies academic endeavours. I now refer to them as my village. Some of us belong to a group chat that gives us the opportunity to connect every day, even if we cannot see each other often. We throw parties, enjoy food together, discuss details of our dream commune (which feels more like potential reality after hearing Sofia's stories about her fat community), share and create knowledge, and provide unwavering support for each other through life's challenges and triumphs. The village has played a significant part in my ability to persist in the face of sudden and extreme mental and physical health issues and they are the reason I can celebrate over 10 years free from dieting and intentional weight loss, all of which has very likely saved my life. We are committed to

growth and accountability and I am thankful every day for being lucky enough to be part of this community.

When I returned to Toronto in June 2018 after spending two months in Windsor recovering from knee surgery in the care of my parents, I went to a birthday party for one of the villagers. I didn't feel like my normal self. I was quieter than usual because I was still in pain. To manage the pain, I wore comfortable clothing, so that night I was braless in a baggy black lounge dress—not a typical feature of my party outfit repertoire. And as I sat in the corner of my friend's sectional couch, perched five floors above the Distillery District in Toronto, my soft and large belly protruding, I noticed that no part of my body felt tense—a novel experience for someone with generalized anxiety. This moment was remarkable. Nowhere else in my social and public life have I ever felt so safe to be myself and so comfortable in my superfat body, and it was specifically because I was surrounded by people who care for me and hold space for all parts of me, especially when I am unable to muster up any compassion for myself. In this moment, I was totally embodied and so thankful for my surroundings. This is what fat community means. This is what fat community *does*.

In this chapter, I explored the various experiences participants reported having at bashes that allowed them to feel safer in and more connected to their bodies. It's not all rainbows and butterflies, of course. As Colls (2012) notes of her experience interviewing and observing people at BBW club nights in the UK, while these fat-specific social spaces do offer fat women the opportunity to lean into their sexuality, these particular sexualized subjectivities become visible only within those spaces and only in the presence of a largely male fat admirer audience. Additionally, bashes are organized

around the principles of size acceptance, otherwise they are not politicized spaces—in fact, many BBW groups actively promote leaving politics out of discussions in their private Facebook groups. As I covered in chapter four, access to fat community at bashes means meeting a variety of people along the body politics spectrum. Attending bashes as a politicized, radical, anti-diet and anti-intentional weight loss superfat queer woman has required a fair degree of emotion management and, quite frankly, I am willing to do it in order to have access to a space that makes it safer for me to socialize and spend three or four days feeling normal.

Experiences documented in this chapter include participants feeling desired and learning about/engaging in fat sex, as well as having access to and building fat community. In chapter two, I pointed to Audre Lorde's (1984) theorizing of "the erotic," which she asserted as a conceptual tool that allows women of colour to distance themselves from ideals set by the state's racist, homophobic, and patriarchal norms, and instead listen to their bodies to determine what is pleasurable and sensual. In examining the way my participants and I engaged with elements of bashes that allowed us to feel like embodied subjects, I suggest a twist on Lorde's concept for application to the lives of fat women—the fat erotic—that captures how we are able to listen to our bodies to determine what is pleasurable when we are empowered by a sense of desirability and surrounded by fat community. From finding pleasure and joy while eating in public with friends, to expressing ourselves through fashion we cannot safely wear in our everyday lives, to being able to trust when people express unabashed desire for us and learning that we deserve to be wanted, my and my participants' bash experiences exemplify the possibilities and potentials for fat women's subjectivities and

demonstrate a form of pushing back against a fatphobic, misogynistic culture that has told us we are not worthy of pleasure, safety, or comfort.

# Chapter Six: Conclusion

My relationship with the BBW community has changed significantly since I chose the topic of this dissertation three years ago. In 2009 when I was working on my Master's research on the representation of fat women on reality television, I stumbled upon the online fat acceptance and activist spaces that had started popping up on Tumblr. Finding online fat community that taught me I could learn to simply accept—and maybe even love—my fat body was a defining point in my life. By the time I started attending BBW parties, I had rejected diet culture and was on the road to recovering from disordered eating and exercising. Exploring the world of online fat activism also carried me deeper into my blossoming feminist politics. These politics created tension between my desire to be desired by men and how I observed men's expression of their interest in fat women both in BBW spaces and in things like dating ads or on dating websites. I remember feeling totally confused by the tension between my observations of how misogyny and sexism (which is about as far as I went in critical analysis at that time) circulated the BBW community while still readily supporting the party scene because I loved going out dancing with friends in a safer environment and meeting men who were attracted to me.

I learned quickly that women far outnumber men at parties (and bashes), creating the perfect conditions for competition, making it sometimes overwhelmingly difficult to build community with women. I learned that my body was scrutinized and categorized along a hierarchy of shape and size. I learned that it was not necessarily emotionally safe to let myself truly relish attention from men because I was almost certainly one of several women they were pursuing (this is not a problem for everyone,

but it was for me at the time). And most shocking of all (though it should not have been, I suppose) I learned that fatness was still demonized in the community, that weight loss surgery and fad diets were popular, and that the good fatty/bad fatty false dichotomy persisted.

As this dissertation illustrates, these things have not really changed. What has changed over the last three years—and in large part owing to my experience interviewing such badass women—is my ability to have compassion for people in general and for my BBW community in particular. I did not expect to find community the way that I have. I figured that, at most, I would have easy access to a dating pool of fat admirers and I would have a comfortable and fun night out every few months; however, as I discuss in depth in chapter five, almost every person I currently consider a close friend is someone I met through the BBW community over the last nine years. They are fiercely strong feminists—the sort 26-year old me dreamed of befriending. I can easily say I would go through all of the heartache, drama, and fetishization I have experienced while navigating the BBW community ten times over if it meant I would find these women again. And it should be said that many of them have cut ties with the BBW community proper at this point. The negative experiences started to outweigh the positive. But as one friend puts it, she only stayed in the community because she hoped it would lead her to her us—and it has.

The overarching question guiding my research asked how the affective environment of BBW bashes impacts fat women's embodiment. In this dissertation I illustrated that fat women felt least safe in their bodies and able to perceive themselves as subjects when they felt objectified. These experiences of objectification find

themselves expressed in various ways throughout the participants' stories. For instance, participants talked about bash advertising communicating a specific message about fat women as objects for men's consumption. They also shared experiences related to being looked at, gestured at, and touched by men at bashes in ways that felt uncomfortable and unsafe. One participant even names the bash environment as one saturated by rape culture. Participants also discussed how the hierarchy of attractiveness—a hierarchy informed by white supremacist beauty standards—flavours the bash atmosphere, cultivating insecurity, shame, and competition among women. In addition to these brushes with objectification, participants also reported feeling discomfort and dis-embodiment in bash spaces when they were forced to engage with expressions of diet culture—specifically, other bash attendees discussing their weight loss diets and/or their weight loss surgeries. I identified these experiences as those that have the power to reinforce the trauma of fatphobia.

Fortunately, participants were also able to share many life-giving bash experiences that I analyzed to demonstrate how the affective atmosphere of bashes also offers opportunities for fat women to feel like embodied subjects and to feel safe in their bodies. The stories shared illustrated that my participants felt a sense of agency in and connection to their bodies in various ways. For example, they talked about the affirming nature of desire when it was consensual, welcomed, and expressed in an appreciative rather than objectifying way. Participants also shared experiences of bashes as spaces for exploring sexuality and sexual pleasure in their fat bodies. These phenomena are particularly important in the face of a fatphobic culture that reinforces messaging around fat women as undesirable and void of sexuality/sex appeal.

Participants also found incredible joy and affirmation in fat community at bashes. They shared stories about bashes and their ability to nurture a feeling of heightened self-esteem. Additionally, participants found license to play with fat fashion in ways they feel they cannot in their day-to-day lives—a significant finding given the importance of fashion to identity building and creative self-expression. Participants also named having access to feeling "normal" for a few days—to having space to breathe and be fat—as important to their ability to feel connected to and safe in their bodies. And finally, participants talked at length about the lessons in self-advocacy they learn while at bashes that they then take with them into their regular lives. I suggest that in addressing the trauma of fatphobia carried by those of us who navigate our worlds as fat people, these bash experiences with desire and community gave my participants significant opportunity to build resilience against ongoing societal fatphobia.

As this dissertation makes evident, bashes provide attendees with infinite affective experiences that rub up against their histories of body shame and carry the potential for transforming how they interpret their world—for worse sometimes, and also for better.

## Recommendations to BBW Community Organizers

In light of the information presented in this dissertation, I have compiled a few recommendations for bash organizers and for the BBW community as a whole:

1. Prioritize education. My small sample of bash attendees made it clear that opportunities for education at bashes are meaningful. Bash organizers should continue to take care to create space for education sessions that empower fat

people in the bodies they have now. Additionally, BBW community organizers and members must continue to strive to create increasingly safer spaces both online and in person by opening up space to talk about oppression and by providing resources that educate about sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, fatphobia, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism. Be ever vigilant about addressing oppression and discrimination to illustrate to community members that their safety is of utmost importance.

2. Consult with people whose lived realities can offer insight into how spaces can be made safer and more accessible. Safety and accessibility includes the built environment and the emotional environment.
3. Enact the tenets of fat acceptance in online and in-person spaces. Those who take to it will benefit from it.

In providing this list, I want to acknowledge that some bash organizers and administrative teams for certain BBW groups already do these things and are committed to continuously learning and doing better. To these people, I say bravo and thank you. I also want to acknowledge that I understand the success of a bash relies on its ability to attract paying attendees and part of the reason we do not see as heavy of a push toward radicalizing BBW community spaces is so that they appeal to a greater number of people. It is a delicate balance, but the question I urge BBW community and bash organizers to keep in mind as they continue their important work is: who is most at risk of harm and whose safety matters most?

## Opportunities for Future Research

In my exploration of how fat women's embodiment is influenced by the affective environment of bashes, six other areas of inquiry presented themselves as opportunities for future research. First, it is important to examine how race and racism operate in BBW social spaces. Of my 12 participants, one woman was Black, one was Latina, and the rest were white. In my experience at bashes and in discussions with other BBW community members, it has been observed that racial demographics of most bashes are largely comprised of white women and Black men. This phenomenon warrants further exploration for its ties not only to racial stereotypes, but also gender and class stereotypes that shape perceptions of relationships between Black men and white women. Additionally, further examination of fat BIPOC experiences at bashes is warranted.

Next, one of my assumptions going into this research is that my participants would be largely straight, cisgender women simply because of how significantly heteronormativity seems to shape bash spaces; however, several of my interviewees were queer-identified leading me to believe there is likely a significant number of queer folks who attend BBW bashes, meriting further research on the experiences of fat queer people in what are largely heteronormative social spaces.

Another interesting point of research to be explored are the experiences of fat admirers of all gender identifications who attend bashes. In my dissertation, participants specifically identify fat admirers who are men as contributing significantly to an atmosphere that does not feel safe. Learning the perspectives of fat admirers of all genders would add nuance to the research I have conducted.

Next, it would be interesting to explore the experiences of fat men at bashes. The BBW community tends to organize around the celebration (and sexualisation) of fat women which has left me wondering how fat men navigate these spaces.

As my participants identified, and as Colls (2012) found in her study of the UK-based BBW group LargeLife, a number of people in the BBW community have had weight loss surgery and this can be a point of contention for other members of the community. Research that examines the experiences of people who have had weight loss surgery who also go to events that focus on big, beautiful women would further illuminate the complexity of BBW spaces.

Finally, a deeper dive into expressions of fat sexuality at bashes is called for, especially given that participants identified having access to desire and pleasure at bashes as a site of full embodiment—of feeling good in their skin.

The suggested explorations outlined above are not only warranted in and of themselves, but specifically because the BBW community is an understudied community that, as I illustrate in chapter five, is a strong site of fat activism. Additionally, further research on the BBW community will contribute to the project of bringing the fat body out of the margins, effectively and necessarily disturbing other seemingly solidified identities along the way (Hester & Walters, 2016; Kent, 2001).

Stories matter. I feel fortunate that I was able to conduct this research and put this information out into the world. Twelve women shared experiences and insights with me that have enhanced what is now on record about the lived realities of fat people. As

the fat archive continues to grow, research conducted about fat people by fat people remains invaluable in our quest toward fat liberation.

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