

Bears In Space: Geographies of a Global Community of Big and Hairy Gay/Bi/Queer Men

Dr Nick McGlynn (School of Environment & Technology, University of Brighton, UK)

Abstract

Bears are a large global community of big and hairy gay, bisexual and queer (GBQ) men. Little sustained empirical scholarship has investigated Bears' lives and communities, and none from within geography. Three geographic lenses are used to demonstrate the significance of a geographic approach to Bears. First, rural and urban imaginaries are entwined with Bear masculinities and ideals of 'real men'. However a geographically-specific North American working class rural imaginary is particularly important. Second, the global trajectory of Bear begins in 1980s San Francisco and has since spread worldwide. The idea that Bear is fundamentally an American phenomenon is challenged by evidence of global variation in Bear identities, communities, and spaces. Third, the material and aesthetic production of Bear spaces relates to Bear masculinities and bodies, particularly fat bodies. Regarding more ephemeral Bear events, the 'Bearing' of space (including queer space) may provide a means of understanding these. The paper argues first that geography is crucial for understanding Bears and second that geographers of masculinities, sexualities, and fatness/bodies could productively engage with Bear identities, communities, and spaces.

Keywords

Bears, men, masculinities, gay, GBQ, sexualities, fatness

1. Introduction

Bears are a large and growing global community of (primarily) GBQ¹ men with bigger and hairier bodies, with which I often identify myself. Bear identities, identifications, and communities are widely recognised amongst non-Bear and 'mainstream' lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) communities, but are virtually unknown outside them. Despite the large and growing size and unique attributes of Bear communities, there is a notable lack of sustained or empirical scholarship (Quidley-Rodriguez & de Santis, 2019). And, aside from one exploratory

¹ In this paper I deliberately use GBQ (gay, bisexual, and queer), rather than other popular but less specific abbreviations such as LGBTQ+ which would give a false impression to readers unfamiliar with Bear communities. Bear communities are overwhelmingly composed of GBQ men, with both of these elements (sexual identity/orientation, and identification as a man) being central elements of Bear identities. However it should be noted that my use of the term 'GBQ' includes GBQ trans people; my use of the term 'men' includes trans men; my use of the term 'GBQ men' includes GBQ trans men; and my use of the term 'Bears' includes trans Bears.

chapter in a book of Bear histories (Papadopoulos, 2002), Bears have remained entirely unexamined within geography - including geographies of sexualities, of men/masculinities, and of fatness. In this paper I begin to address this gap. The paper has emerged from my review of academic, para-academic, activist and community-based scholarship about, and often by, Bears. This includes reflective personal and historical accounts, tongue-in-cheek in-group reflections, and a number of small academic studies. I am particularly indebted to Bear archivist Les Wright's collections of essays (1997a; 2001), and to anthologist Ron Suresha for his edited collection of interviews and discussions (2009). From my review of this scholarship I identify three crucial geographic lenses through which Bear identities, identifications, lives, cultures, communities, and spaces can be better understood. Consequently I argue first that geography and spatial nuance are of central importance for those wishing to understand Bears, and second that studying Bears could enhance geographic work in other, related, areas. For geographers of men and masculinities, Bears show how space and place can be fundamentally involved in the production of complex yet little-explored GBQ masculinities. For geographers of sexualities, Bears challenge monolithic accounts of queer and LGBTQ geographies and open up a world of unexplored sexualised spaces. And for geographers of fatness and bodies, Bears demonstrate how space and place can be utilised and actively made by communities aiming for bodily inclusion.

In the second section of this paper, 'What Is A Bear?', I introduce Bears to the reader and outline my own conceptual approach. The third section, 'Bear Geographies', presents the vital yet underexplored importance of space and place for Bears via three geographic lenses. First, I note that the urban origins and spaces of Bears are often at odds with a ruralised ideal of Bears as 'real' or 'natural' men. To this I add the significance of specifically North American working class rural imaginaries. Second, I discuss Bear's US origins and very rapid globalisation. I argue that these are not reducible to either a US-centric or a 'universal' global Bear culture. Third, I discuss 'Bear spaces' and examine how their production relates to Bear cultures and bodies. These three lenses, though assuredly not the only ways in which geography is relevant to Bears, are prominent in the historical and reflective Bear literature, and show how particular geographic imaginaries and relationships are key to understanding Bears - though I stress that the lack of contemporary empirical studies suggests the need for caution about universal attribution. I conclude the paper by calling for greater scholarly attention to Bears and their complex spatialities by geographers.

2. What Is A Bear?

Bears could be loosely described as a global identity and community of bigger, hairier GBQ men, often skewing older and usually bearded, and with a masculine appearance and presentation (Mann, 2010; Quidley-Rodriguez & de Santis, 2019). Bear has its origins in late 1970s / early 1980s San Francisco, and Bear identities and communities are now widely recognised amongst LGBTQ communities. Bears create their own spaces including bars, pubs, clubs, social groups, and more temporally-limited events which can be found throughout North America, Europe, and Anglosphere Australasia (Suresha, 2009; Wright, 1997a; Wright, 2001), and Central and South America (Diniz, 2018; Huerta, 2009) with more limited presence

also found in the Middle East (Bear World Magazine, 2020; Moussawi, 2020; Sahin, 2001), East Asia (Bear World Magazine, 2020; Lin 2014; Suresha 2009: 301-318), and Africa (Bear World Magazine, 2018). Regional gatherings, such as Sitges Bear Week in Spain, can attract thousands of attendees (Gay Sitges Guide, 2020). Bear communities and identities are neither bounded or exclusive, with historical and ongoing overlaps and blurrings with mainstream GBQ men's communities as well as more specific ones such as Radical Faeries (Hennen, 2008; Suresha, 1997a), leather scenes (Hennen, 2008; Marks Ridinger 2001; Mass 2001:15), and Girth & Mirth (Brown 2001; Pyle & Klein 2011).

The purpose of this paper is not to expound on my own understanding of Bear identities or communities, but it will be useful to position my conceptual approach within the literature. An important mapping of Bear as a concept has recently been undertaken by Quidley-Rodriguez and de Santis (2019), drawing on a similar literature as I interrogate in this paper. They note a particular set of appearances and masculine attitudes as significant in Bear identities and identifications, and highlight particular jargons, social groups and events as key to Bear communities (ibid.). Their work is a useful introduction and aims to establish a 'clinically useful' definition of Bear for healthcare workers. Yet they acknowledge that Bears' own self-definitions are highly varied, and that the 'fluid nature of bear identity... creates a lack of a clear and consistent definition' (ibid.). For Quidley-Rodriguez and de Santis this is a 'limitation' of their work; for me it instead points to the complex empirical reality of Bear identities, identifications, cultures and communities, which cannot be captured in any static and boundable concept of Bear. Bear activist Eric Rofes argues that rigid definitions and sweeping generalisations from inside and outside Bear communities are not supportable when the geographic and temporal diversity of actual Bear bodies, lives, experiences, and spaces is encountered:

'I caution against a simplistic and singular reading of "Bear". This is the risk of cultural studies work, when people read texts and magazines and stories and then judge communities based on those stories. They don't have data of real people and real bodies and what's really going on among gay men'

Eric Rofes in Suresha, 2009, p.17

Rofes points to the importance of grounded, empirical approaches which are not inflected by cultural assumptions of what Bears are, nor normative ideals of what Bears should be; and which can attend to the flexibility and inconsistency of identification. In grappling with this empirical complexity my own conceptual approach is thus informed by queer poststructural scholarship, resisting the idea of Bear as an innate and unchanging essence (Fuss, 1989), or that there is a unifying (albeit socially constructed) definition (Epstein, 1994; Gamson, 1995). Rather, a poststructural queer approach attends to the multiple, shifting ways (Browne & Nash, 2010; Currah, 1997) in which Bears are defined and identified, always in the process of being re/constructed and never 'complete' (Butler, 1993; Sedgwick, 1994). This is not a 'merely theoretical' approach but one informed by and essential in explaining the empirical evidence, which simply does not support universal, static, or clearly-bounded definitions or identities for Bears. As I will show in this paper, attending to geography aids us in exploring these complexities.

3. Bear Geographies

My contention in this paper is that geography plays a central role in Bear identities, cultures and communities. The significance of Bear spaces and geographies has been noted in the limited scholarly literature (e.g. Hennen, 2008; Edmonds & Zieff, 2015) and the reflective and historical Bear literature (e.g. Sahin, 2001; Suresha, 2009; Wright, 1997b). But geographers ourselves have not yet interrogated the spatialities of Bear lives, and the significance of spaces, places, and environments for Bear identities, identifications and experiences remains heavily under-researched and under-theorised. A key exception is a brief chapter by the urban geographer Alex G. Papadopoulos (2001), which draws on work by Pile and Thrift (1995) to advance a broadly poststructural concept of 'Bearspace' as a framework for understanding multifarious Bear spatialities. Aside from this, the Bear-shaped gap in geographic scholarship is jarring given the intense yet unexamined significance of space and place, and the appearance of complex Bear geographies, in most written accounts by and of Bears. In the rest of this paper my aim is to demonstrate the importance of these geographies for Bear cultures, communities and identities, and to advocate for further geographic research on Bears.

3.1 'Bear is the origin, how men really are' – Rural/Urban Imaginaries

Geographic imaginaries of the rural and the urban continue to be significant in structuring discourses, practices, politics and identities of sexualities (McGlynn, 2017). As with wider gay male and LGBTQ communities, and as outlined above, the original Bear communities in the USA emerge in the literature as intensely urban (e.g. Hennen, 2008, p. 101; Suresha, 1997b, p.44; Rofes, 1997), composed primarily of GBQ men living in urban areas and gathering in urban Bear spaces (Fritscher, 2001). Geographic imaginaries of the rural feature in much Bear writing, often juxtaposed with an oppositional urban imaginary – for example a desire to 'escape' from the city and instead be 'in nature' (Hennen, 2008, p. 7; see also Rofes, 1997; Suresha, 2009, p. 31). 'Nature' is often located in and as rural space, a 'pastoral fantasy' and symbolic '[retreat] to the wilderness' (Hennen, 2008, p. 98). In many ways these Bear geographies echo research on LGBTQ anti-urbanism and Arcadian pastoral fantasies (Bell, 2000; Herring, 2007), and the development of rural LGBTQ subjectivities (Abelson, 2016; Kazyak, 2011).

However there are specific features of Bear writing which draw on oppositional rural/urban discourses in ways more distinct from the LGBTQ 'mainstream'. While romanticised rurals and anti-urbanism are seen to be somewhat niche in the LGBTQ mainstream (Herring, 2007), they are widespread in the historical and reflective Bear literature and quite at odds with contemporaneous scholarship which posited LGBTQ lives in rural areas as intensely marginalised and even dangerous (Bell & Valentine 1995; Kramer 1995; Lindhorst 1997; Smith 1997), with urban areas as the implicit site of LGBTQ identity construction and community (Aldrich, 2004; Doderer, 2011). Reminiscent of geographic scholarship on rurality and naturalised manhood (Brandth & Haugen, 2005; Little, 2002), Bear writing often draws explicitly on rural imaginaries to advance concepts of 'nature' and what is 'natural' specifically for men (e.g. De Mey, 1997; Lopez, 2001, p. 120-121; Mauerman, 1997, p. 211; Suresha, 2009, p. 27-33). Important here is the figure of an archetypical 'Real Man' discussed, celebrated, desired and fetishised in much writing by and about Bears

(Greig, 2001; Mauerman, 1997, p. 207; Whitesel, 2014, p. 51; Wright, 1997c), and explicitly connected with 'nature' (Mauerman 1997, p. 211). Bear writing and representation often describes Bear masculinities as natural and authentic (Hennen, 2008, p. 97; Hill, 1997; Monaghan, 2005; Suresha, 2009, p. 26-27), and lacking artifice (Kelly & Kane, 2001; Toothman, 2001, p. 224). Importantly for geographers, this Real Man is heavily related by many Bears to the romanticised rural (Suresha, 2009, p. 27-33). Hennen has argued that the connection between bear as animal and Bear as identity facilitates a symbolic link between 'artificial' men and masculinities located in urban and suburban space, and 'real' men and masculinities located in rural areas and wilderness (Hennen, 2008, p. 118). Jeff Mann, writing a 'Bear 101' for the Gay and Lesbian Review, makes the geographic nature of this divide more explicit: 'The mainstream gay bars I most often frequented left me cold. The denizens seemed too effeminate, urbane, or sleek for me, and I was apparently too rough-edged, shy, countrified, and scruffy for them' (Mann, 2010). Mann and others (Rofes, 1997; Suresha, 2009 p. 299) suggest that rural GBQ men may feel more comfortable in Bear bars than 'mainstream' gay bars which are linked with both effeminacy and urbanity (see also Hennen, 2008, p. 97; Suresha, 2009, p. 27-33) – Suresha has described this as a 'common thread' in Bear self-understanding (Suresha, 1997a, p. 45). Conversely it is in rural areas that Mann identifies men who most clearly fit what he sees as Bear archetypes, e.g. masculine bodies and attitudes (Mann, 2010). These writers reveal the significance of urban/rural imaginaries as sites of (respectively) artificial or natural manhood and masculinity for Bears. Such imaginaries may relate to some exclusionary practices amongst Bears towards women, trans men, and femme men (Suresha, 2009, p. 276-278).

It is important to note here that I do not suggest a universal or singular Bear masculinity. The literature points to very diverse and geographically differentiated Bear masculinities. Some of these emphasise aggression (Lopez 2001: 120-121), rugged individuality (Mauerman 1997; De Mey 1997), and traditional Western heteromascularity (Manley et al 2007) which is explicitly not a reconstruction but a reclamation (Fritscher 2001; Hill 1997; Sullivan 2003). As stated by the founder of Mexico's first Bear club, Eduardo Chavez:

'I know lots of Bears that don't like effeminate people, especially femmy Bears. I think that's why Bears are so welcome in society, and why lots of people want to be considered Bears - because they "stay within the society's guidelines of macho-ness", yet they are gay.'

Suresha 2009, p. 311

Yet Chavez acknowledges that 'femmy Bears' do indeed exist, and that they are not universally rejected by other Bears. Assertions of unreconstructed Bear masculinities often neglect the many alternative articulations of Bear maleness and masculinity which emerge from the literature - as 'gentlemen' (Hill 1997, p. 80), 'nonconfrontational' (ibid. 82), 'affable (until provoked)' (Mauerman 1997, p. 212), and enjoying and partaking in camp and gay effeminacy (Kelly & Kane 2001: 339; Suresha 2009, p. 269, Suresha 2009, p. 278). Indeed numerous writers stress that their identification with and appreciation of Bears is due to their melding of masculinities with 'traditionally feminine' traits such as caring, nurturing, and gentle physical contact (Brown 2001, p. 51; Manley et al 2007; Suresha 2009, p.

273-283), and other writers laud the idea of Bears hybridising the masculine and the feminine (Mosher 2001, p. 186; Suresha 2009: 245-246). Thus while these kinds of rural masculinities are clearly significant themes in Bear writing, the wider literature belies its universal application and paints a more nuanced picture.

Bear rural imaginaries are further distinguished from those of wider LGBTQ anti-urbanism literatures with regard to geographies of socio-economic class. Scholars of gay men's cultures have noted a trend from the 1970s onwards of adopting elements of what were perceived as working class aesthetics (Bell, 2000; Bronski, 1984; Rofes, 1997; Suresha, 2009, p. 231), which Bears have also been linked with (McCann, 1997, p. 252; Sullivan, 2003; Whitesel, 2014, p. 51). But a geographically-sensitive eye reveals that much of the most popular and iconic Bear imagery and aesthetics draw on an idealised and highly specific working class masculinity – that of rural North America. While a variety of archetypical working class rural masculinities are associated with North America (e.g. the 'redneck', the 'hillbilly' etc – see Hennen, 2008, 97), it is the figure of the working class lumberjack that has emerged as a symbolic and erotic touchstone for Bear cultures (De May, 1997; Kampf, 2001; Mann, 2010; Wright, 1997c, p. 11-12; Wright, 2001, p. 3-4). The lumberjack is a figure leashing together North American rurality and class in the production of a masculinity heavily eroticised by some GBQ men (Hobbs, 2016), and particularly in reflective and historical Bear writing. It may also draw on mythologies of the North American rural frontier and associated settler colonial masculinities (e.g. Gahman, 2020; Gibson, 2013). Such archetypes may mask or displace classed inequalities and exploitative appropriation in Bear communities (Rofes, 1997, p. 93; Suresha, 2009, p. 299-304), primarily composed of middle-class men (Hennen, 2008, p. 113; Papadopoulos, 2001, p. 152; Suresha, 1997b, p. 45; Wright, 1997c, p. 5). Others counter that sometimes 'bear spaces are the only sites where [working class GBQ men] feel comfortable... [because] those sites look more like the places they came from' (Suresha 2009, p. 20; see also Mann, 2010; Rains, 1997). Even where this figure is not significantly represented in Bear communities, elements of other geographically-specific classed rural imaginaries fetishisation may still exist. De Mey (1997) describes how a specifically French working class rural masculinity can be taken up by French Bears, while Brown (2001) and Watson (2001) do the same for the UK – though interestingly the latter prioritises **upper** class masculinities. The turn towards local alternatives demonstrates the importance of a geographically nuanced approach to Bear masculinities, typified but by no means encapsulated by the North American lumberjack figure.

3.2 'Are Bears a US Thing?' – Globalising Trajectories

Bear communities are generally agreed to emerge in and around San Francisco in the early-1970s to mid-1980s (De Mey, 1997; Marks Ridinger, 1997, p. 86; Suresha, 1997a; Suresha, 1997b; Wright, 1997c). One particular SF gay men's bar, the Lone Star Saloon which opened in 1989, is also widely noted as a 'birthplace of the Bear movement' (Hennen, 2008, p. 3; see also Kampf, 2000, p. 97; Mauerman, 1997; Suresha, 2009, p. 13; Suresha, 2009, p. 233) and likely the first identified 'Bear bar' (Suresha, 2009, p. 97-109). Thus Bear emerges not ex nihilo but in a geographically and historically specific US context. Given this origin, and the North American classed rural masculinities detailed above, it is understandable that Bears and others have asked, 'Are Bears a US thing?' (De May, 1997). Certainly the vast

majority of writing and scholarship on Bears has focused on US Bear lives. Bear communities exist across the world, but travel to the US and experiencing its Bear communities is a common feature of non-US Bears, where writers report learning that Bears exist, developing an identification as a Bear, and subsequently starting Bear social groups in their own countries on return (e.g. Hay, 1997; Sahin, 2001; Webster, 1997). Consequently Papadopoulos has argued that Bear spatialities are inherently 'defined by, and contained within, the US middle-class gay project' (2001, p. 149), with similar statements made by others (Fritscher, 2001; Suresha, 2001; Suresha, 2009, p. 25-40; Suresha, 2009, p. 48). Such assertions evoke the spectre of the 'global Bear' (Wright, 1997d, p. 38), echoing concerns that the globalisation of gay identities results in homogenising Westernisation and Americanisation (Altman, 1997; Povinelli & Chauncey, 1999). But just as ideas of a homogeneous 'global gay' have been critiqued for inattention to spatial differentiation and complex hybridities (Manalansan, 2003; Patton & Sánchez-Eppler, 2000), manifestations of Bear are neither interchangeable nor internally homogenous, and substantial geographic variations occur. In particular the Bear literature points to significant differences between US Bear lives, communities, identities, identifications, and bodies, and those in other countries and regions of the world.

Watson argues that the spread of Bear 'has inspired those outside of the United States to look for their own symbols, specific to their nationality, which have bearlike characteristics' (Watson, 2001, p. 263). This does not deny the intensely American origins of Bear, but it suggests that Bear can be actively constructed and re-worked in and according to different places. In Les Wright's first edited collection of Bear writing (Wright, 1997), evidence for this can be seen in chapters on European countries (particularly France and Germany), Australia, and New Zealand. The second edited collection (Wright, 2001) adds further chapters on Australia as well as Britain and Turkey, and includes reflections from US-based Bears of non-White racial and ethnic heritages, some of which present different ways in which Bear can manifest other than the overwhelmingly White imagery and population of most Bear spaces (Brown 2001, p. 53; Hennen 2008, p. 114; Manley et al 2007; Papadopoulos 2001, p. 153). Bear communities of the global West at the very least mirror the racist exclusions (Lopez 2001, p. 122; Siriprakorn, 2019; Suresha 2009, p. 253), and fetishisations (McCormick 2011; Hill 1997; Suresha 2009, p. 258) of similarly situated mainstream LGBTQ spaces (Clark 2001; Moskowitz et al 2013; Suresha 2009, p. 242-245). Writers in Wright's book challenging the whiteness of Bear spaces include Ali Lopez (2001) on Puerto Rican Bears, Jason Clark (2001) on Black Bears, and Dave Gan (2001) on 'Asian Bears'. Suresha's collection of interviews (2009) includes a chapter with Bear participants from Mexico, Australia, Spain, Argentina, South Africa, Turkey, Japan, and Wales (Suresha, 2009, p. 301-318). These writers and interviewees draw out geographic variations in Bear communities, cultures, identifications, bodies, and spaces. It should also be noted that here I draw only on English-language Bear writing, and a significant body of Spanish- and Portuguese-language Bear scholarship has emerged in Central and South America (Diniz, 2018; Huerta, 2009).

Notable in the list of countries and regions covered above is that writing on Bears outside of Europe and the Americas is exceptionally limited. Yet the existing work is immensely valuable in explaining how 'Bear' comes to be shaped by, for example, Chinese (Lin, 2014) and Japanese (Suresha, 2009, p. 301-318) contexts. Lin, for

example, argues that Chinese Bear bodies, subjectivities, experiences and desires are shaped by a conformist Chinese context, suggesting that Bear is not always simply American. Similarly Woody Shimko's discussion of Japanese Bears and Bear communities (Suresha 2009: 307-308) dispels the idea of Bear as a homogeneous global culture, noting the geographically- and culturally-specific Bear identities, bodies and communities in Japan. For example, he describes Japanese Bears as less hairy but argues that their communities are more appreciative of effeminacy and camp than the USA. Other scholars have noted the intersections of geography, class, and racialised Bear bodies and masculinities in Lebanon (McCormick 2011; Moussawi 2020), describing how muscularity, body hair and working class masculinities are mobilised in Bear advertising and tourism. Together, these writers indicate that the significance attached to markers of Bear identity varies where differently racialised body types, different forms of masculinity, and different cultural norms dominate. Sahin's discussion of Bear histories in Turkey (Sahin, 2001) similarly contests the idea that Bear is 'an American thing'. He notes a tradition of Ottoman poetry praising older same-sex male lovers' 'masculinity, body hair, and body size' (255) which, while it cannot be described as simply 'Bear', nevertheless shows that queer desires of body types and attitudes often associated with Bear existed before the 80s and outside of the USA. Indeed Sahin pointedly notes that while he discovered the term 'Bear' on English-language websites (ibid. 258), he has never been outside of Turkey and does not see himself as importing Bear from the USA (ibid. 260). He argues that the 'Americanization' of middle- and upper-class Turkish men provides a convenient avenue for the promotion of Bear communities, but that though 'at first look it may seem like an American notion... [the men] will find, as we have before them, many aspects of beardom that come from within themselves' (ibid. 261). This could be interpreted as a call to essentialist notions of Bears as 'real men' (see Section 2). But coming as it does after a discussion of historical Turko-Ottoman homoeroticism, and Sahin's note that Turkish men tend to be hairier and thus have a 'natural' 'bearish look' (ibid. 260), Sahin seems to challenge the idea of that Bears are always and only 'an American thing'. Certainly they are not entirely a Turkish thing either, however - Sahin's insightful contextualisation within the 'Americanization' of urban upper- and middle-class Turkish culture points not to singular national manifestations of Bear, but rather to complex geographic hybridities of national cultures, urbanities, classes, masculinities, and racial and ethnic heritages. Together these non-Western writers show how differently racialised bodies and gender presentations may be valorised and included in these respective Bear contexts, in ways at odds with how US Bear writers present their own Bear communities and subjectivities.

Additionally, it is not the case that these are identical in regions sharing a degree of cultural similarity. Geographic variations of and within Bear can occur even when this is the case (see De May, 1997 and McCann, 1997 on European variations; and Hay, 1997 and Webster, 1997 on Australasian variations). Regarding differences between the US and the UK, Watson (2001) discusses attempts to construct British identifications and symbols for Bears, since unlike in the USA the actual animal has not lived here for over a millennium. There is also evidence that Bear bodies, and the bodies present in Bear spaces, may differ between the US and UK contexts - some suggest that fat bodies may be more prevalent and 'included' in UK than US Bear spaces (Brown, 2001; Manley et al., 2007). This may be due to the lack of a 'Girth & Mirth' community, widespread and organised in the USA and creating

spaces for fat GBQ men and those who desire them (Whitesel, 2014). But it does not appear to exist in the contemporary UK, and Bears spaces may fill this gap (Brown, 2001). Finally the UK has its own national geographies – Watson’s work is specifically with regard to **English** Bear identifications, but Suresha suggests that ‘The U.K. Bear scene as a whole... is very different to the Bear scene in Wales’ (Suresha 2009: 303). Even attempts to understand Bears at the level of the country or nation must attend to nuanced and variable internal geographies.

3.3 ‘A place where I could be comfortable to be the man I am’ – Bear Spaces

The third geographic lens I attend to in this paper is spaces actively produced and identified as ‘Bear spaces’, primarily (though not exclusively) bars, pubs and clubs, as well as temporary Bear events, and social group meetings e.g. at restaurants and homes (Webster, 1997, p. 245; Kampf, 2000, p. 78-85), and hotels (Hay, 1997). Hennen highlights ‘the importance of place’ (Hennen, 2008, p. 18) for Bears (see also Edmonds & Zieff, 2015), using Brekhus’ (2003) formulation of particular spaces as amplifiers for identity. I diverge somewhat from Hennen’s approach, in that I follow geographers of sexualities who argue that space and place do not merely amplify but are co-constitutive of sexualities and sexual identities (Brown, Browne & Lim, 2007). The importance of Bear spaces emerges heavily in the literature. In a rare empirical study, Gough and Flanders’ (2009) respondents describe Bear communities and spaces as crucial places of ‘salvation’, ‘belonging’ and ‘contentment’ (242-3). The reflective and historical writing captured by Wright (1997; 2001) and Suresha (2009) is replete with statements such as ‘I’ve found my place to belong’ (Clark, 2001, p. 126), and that Bear spaces are where the men can ‘be themselves’ (Yoakam, 2001, p. 141; see also Manley et al., 2007), and men can travel considerable distances to access Bear spaces (Hennen, 2008, p. 18), particularly from rural and non-urbanised areas (Hay, 1997, p. 236). In this section I will argue that Bear spaces are crucial in re/producing Bear identities, identifications, and communities.

Spaces can be actively produced as specifically Bear spaces in a variety of ways including decoration, architecture, and staff incorporating Bear symbols and aesthetic cues. Studies exploring the physical construction and aesthetic of Bear spaces appear non-existent, though there are intriguing descriptions in the historical and reflective literature – Kampf’s *Bear Handbook* provides a tongue-in-cheek discussion of Bear bar aesthetics, suggesting military, Country & Western and industrial looks, ‘wood and metal’ décor, and sexual paraphernalia and double-endreeds (Kampf, 2000, p. 97). While not serious imperatives, these point to a set of aesthetic associations familiar to Bears. More specifically, Suresha has provided some description of the early Lone Star Saloon:

‘a non-descript building with no sign and a double door that opened onto a short landing and several steps down to the barroom floor. Whenever some hapless person would enter the bar in the late afternoon... [the sun] would blind the bartender and patrons, causing everyone to yell out in unison, “Close the fuckin’ door!”’

Suresha, 1997b, p. 220

He notes that it has existed at two separate sites, and describes their shared decor as 'a mix of rustic and industrial elements' (ibid.; see also Suresha, 2009, p. 107). Mauerman similarly stresses masculine aesthetic associations at the offices of BEAR magazine - 'A creaky, wooden building with the ghosts of firemen-past soaking the place with a strange smell - definitely augmented by the beer from the punkish straight bar on the main floor' (Mauerman, 1997, p. 208). Thus the aesthetic and physical construction of the spaces relates to the production of Bear masculinities via 'rustic' and 'industrial' motifs, and references to the smells of firemen and beer. But Bear spaces are not uniform, and others emphasise the comfort and accessibility of Bear spaces. Hay describes the first 'den' of the Ozbears group in Sydney as 'a two-storied office building of a disused bitumen factory' (Hay, 1997, p. 229), but while he recalls the factory as 'an exciting backroom of Gothic proportions' (ibid.) and notes its use for sex, he also stresses the comforts of the office - 'well lit, furnished with plenty of soft chairs and sofas, and [with] basic kitchen facilities' which were well-used (ibid.). Whitesel (2014) describes a Bear bar used by the Girth & Mirth community in similar ways, heavily emphasising its distinctiveness from other gay bars regarding fat men. He notes an 'oversized door frame', the 'wide-open space' inside with a 'comfy seating area with an enormous couch and chairs... and study metal stools', a 'roomy' and 'king-sized' bathroom, and a rear patio with 'a study wooden bar, easy-to-move bistro tables, and a variety of seating, amounting to a gay big man's haven, which, instead of humiliating, welcomes him' (Whitesel, 2014, p. 55). Thus in addition to the physical construction and design of Bear spaces re/producing particular Bear masculinities, they can also be designed and used as spaces of comfort, particularly for fat men. Bear music journalist Larry Flick highlights this sense of comfort, describing Bear spaces as '*a place where I could be comfortable to be the man I am, without having to suck in my stomach or wear certain types of clothes*' (Suresha, 2009, p.144). The aesthetic and materiality of Bear spaces can then be understood as part of why fat men in particular find 'safety' (Marks Ridinger, 2001) in them, not only in providing physical comfort and accessibility but in producing an atmosphere of inclusion. Studying Bear spaces could contribute powerfully to geographers' calls for more work on how fat bodies are physically and affectively included or excluded from particular spaces (Colls, 2012; Hopkins, 2008; Longhurst, 2005; Pritchard, 2014)

Bear spaces can also be more temporary and ephemeral. Papadopoulos describes the BearPride '98 event in Chicago:

'[It] queered Chicago's downtown Marriot all the way to the miniature spaces of its elevators. Bear habitation, cruising, and the temporary usage of that conventionally heterosexed businessperson's environment for the purposes of erotic display, seduction, and sex, turned the Marriot into a bearspace for the period of five days'

Papadopoulos, 2001, p. 151

Ron Suresha and Bear comedian Danny Williams also discuss this same event, describing Bears 'accosting straight men in the lobby and the elevators, having sex in the hotel pool' and 'going down on someone in the lobby' (Suresha, 2009, p. 218). Papadopoulos' (2001) poststructural approach to 'bearspace', as well as the poststructural geographies of Massey (2005) and Murdoch (2006), facilitates an understanding of how these spaces of the hotel - those occupied by a critical mass of big and hairy GBQ men and not just the 'official' spaces of the event such as

conference halls, restaurants, etc – could be studied as Bear spaces. Papadopoulos suggests this temporarily ‘queered’ heterosexual space (see Browne, 2006; 2007), but the presence of specific bodies at BearPride and similar events can be quite distinct from other ephemeral spaces labelled as queer or LGBTQ spaces too. This could include the weight-based damage to hotel elevators (Suresha 2009, p. 218), the social confusion caused by assumptions that big and bearded straight men of the hotel were there for BearPride (ibid.), and the predominance of big and fat bodies (Edmonds & Zieff 2015) – as well as the distaste non-Bear GBQ men can express about such bodies when Bears temporarily take over non-Bear LGBTQ space (Pyle and Klein, 2011: 84). Ephemeral Bear spaces can also include specific Bear practices and cultural markers which further distinguish them from more generic queer/LGBTQ space. These can include the expectation of ‘Bear soup’ hot-tub parties (Mass 2001, p. 30; Suresha 2009, p. 217) and large dinners and the provision of food during events (Gan 2001, p. 130; Hay 1997; Hennen 2008), as well as the marking of bodies and spaces with Bear paraphernalia, symbols and iconographies like the Bear flag and bear paw logo (Kampf 2000, p. 16; Suresha 2009, p. 14-15), and the use of Bear jargons (Hennen 2008, p. 3). Thus it may be more useful to consider how space – including queer space – can be ‘Beared’.

4. Conclusion

This paper has introduced Bears to academic geographers, and argued for the central importance of geography for understanding these through three geographic lenses. First, with regard to rural/urban imaginaries, I have shown that Bears have often related these to ideals of masculinity and the figure of the ‘Real Man’, who is to be found in natural rural areas. Specifically, it is North American working class rural imaginaries which have most strongly resonated with Bear cultures and communities – though I have also suggested the need for caution given the overwhelmingly North American origins of most Bear writing. Second, with regard to the globalisation of Bear, I have outlined Bear’s historical and geographic origins, and its subsequent spread. Without denying the ongoing influence of North America (and particularly the United States), my review points to significant geographic variation which is not reducible to a universal ‘Global Bear’ culture. For the UK in particular, I suggest that the inclusion of fat men may be a crucial variable here. Third, regarding spaces by and for Bears, I have discussed how the production of such spaces can relate to significant issues and features of Bear lives, and suggested that future geographic work could engage with the ‘Bearing’ of both straight and queer space. Thus I have shown that geography helps us understand Bears, and that studying Bears can be useful for geographers of masculinities, of sexualities, and of bodies/fatness. These are by no means the only possible geographic engagements with Bears, and I hope that more geographers will begin to grapple with the spatial complexities of this large and growing global community. Consequently I call for more and sustained empirical investigations into the lived material and discursive realities of Bear spaces, which in this paper I have shown to be an immensely fruitful area of geographic research.

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