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Book Review : Fat Gay Men: Girth, Mirth and the Politics of Stigma

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Fat gay men: girth, mirth, and the politics of stigma

JASON WHITESEL, 2014

New York and London: New York University Press

192 pp., 978 0 8147 0838 5, hb £57.00; 978 0 8147 2412 5, pb £15.99

Over the past ten to fifteen years Fat Studies has developed apace within academia as a set of vibrant, exciting and necessary critiques of the contemporary (mis)treatment of fatness and fat people in society. However, to say the field is overwhelmingly concerned with fat *female* experience is something of an understatement. Though this is not a criticism per se it has meant that studies of fat men and moreso gay fat men have, so far, been few and far between, making Jason Whitesel's *Fat Gay Men* a welcome and much needed addition to the literature of the discipline.

Whitesel's study is based on three years of ethnographic research in which he participated in the activities of a local Girth and Mirth group. Established in the 1970s as a response to fatphobia within the wider gay community, Girth and Mirth is an international organization of social groups for self-defined 'big' gay men and their admirers, or 'chasers'. The first aim of Whitesel's work is to chart the injurious experiences of men who are both fat and gay. In doing this he successfully articulates how stigmas intersect for these men, particularly around their exclusion from and desexualization by mainstream gay culture, and makes a valuable contribution to expanding our knowledge of fat people's lives.

The greater aim of Whitesel's project, however, is to offer an account of Girth and Mirth as a site where big gay men find ways to reconfigure or transform stigma. Girth and Mirth seems an ideal locus for this investigation in that it allows Whitesel to explore ambiguities common to many 'fat positive' contexts. Specifically, he highlights the tensions between Girth and Mirth's social and political sides. It is at once a social group that, 'allows big men to experience normalcy in a size-conscious world' (p. 25), and it is inherently political because it resists the normalization of fat bodies through weight-loss and asserts the right to be fat (and mirthful), while offering multiple opportunities for the resignification of fat identity. It is thus the Girth and Mirthers' simultaneous desires to be normal and to change what 'normal' is, as well as Whitesel's refusal to reconcile this contradiction that makes the discussion of their activity so valuable.

Undoubtedly the highlights of *Fat Gay Men* are the rich and finely-observed accounts of the two Girth and Mirth conventions attended by Whitesel in the course of his research. The detailed descriptions of the settings, atmosphere and rituals of these events highlight the divergent and contradictory strategies the big gay men draw on in their attempts to overcome stigma. At the smaller

Super Weekend a campy, carnivalesque celebration of fat sexuality and excess reigns, 'creating disorder' as 'the big men trouble the codes of gay hierarchy' (p. 88-9). The larger and somewhat more sedate Convergence event, is characterized as offering status seeking activities to, 'elevate the big gay men's diminished status' (p. 91). Whitesel's deft identification of the classed aspect of these routes towards the reduction of fat stigma is sharp and persuasive. He also carefully (or depending on your reading, infuriatingly) avoids directly privileging one strategy over another as a 'better' means of transforming stigma, choosing instead to present the ambivalent nature of both events.

Despite the attention afforded to class in the analysis, particularly of the Convergence weekend, Whitesel's analysis has little to say about the ways the men's racial and ethnic identities co-construct their fat gayness or position them differently within the Girth and Mirth culture. There is, for example, a description of a 'shy Cherokee super-chub' at the Super Weekend whose friends, 'have taken to calling ... "Pocahontas"' (p. 67). Whitesel reports this, but doesn't comment further. Nor does he reflect on the implications of a young African-American man winning the 'chaser' talent contest at both the, presumably predominately white, events (p. 73/100).

The only other shortcoming of the book was that it opened up so many more interesting questions than it had space to answer. Questions around hierarchies of fatness within the Girth and Mirth group (p. 47-9), the seemingly complex relationship between the Girth and Mirthers and the Bear community (p. 50-2) and the behind-the-scenes organization of the weekend events (p. 80) would all have made fascinating topics for extended discussion. As would a deeper analysis of the gendered dynamics of fat gay identity. While Whitesel acknowledges that both fat men and gay men are feminized in society, there may have been more to say about the 'playful', campy performances of fat gay sexuality at the Super Weekend in terms of their attempt not to disavow femininity or the effeminate, as Bears seem to, but to resignify it as part of an active fat sexuality. When one of the Girth and Mirthers similarly comments that the group is a space where they, 'do not have to put on the "butch" act' (p. 135) this again raises questions of which gendered performances produce legible forms of fat gay subjectivity. Hopefully, these are questions which Jason Whitesel and others will return to in future work inspired by the excellence of *Fat Gay Men*.

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