

CHAPTER FOUR

The Class Menagerie: Working-class Appropriations and Bear Identity

1.0 Happy to be fat, glad to be hairy

Bear identity is primarily distinguished from other gay male identities by the physical attributes of being heavysset and hairy. As the slogan of Orsi Italiani (the primary bear organization in Italy) proclaims, “Happy to be fat, glad to be hairy, and proud to be gay”¹ The earliest known references to *bear* as an emergent identity category among gay men come from the newsletter of the Satyrs motorcycle club in Los Angeles in 1966, which mentions the formation of a bear club (Wright 1997: 21), although the actual nature of the club is unknown. In the early 1980s, some gay men (reportedly) began wearing small teddy bears in their back pockets as a way of rebelling against the normativity of the hanky code (Wright 1997a: 21, Hennen 2008: 97). As noted in chapter one, the clone hanky code involved different colored bandanas worn in one’s back pocket to index a desire to participate in specific types of sexual interaction. The use of the teddy bear instead of bandanas was meant to rebel against the lack of intimacy within the code and within clone culture more generally, marking an individual’s desire for kissing and cuddling rather than the impersonal and emotionally-detached sexual interactions typically associated with cruising for “tricks.” However, it is not known if this early use of these teddy bears actually involved either hairiness or weight as elements of bear identity. The solidification and dissemination of *bear* as an identity category occurred in the late 1980s.

Between 1987 and 1989, a number of different events lead to the emergence of shared bear identity in San Francisco and its spread to other parts of the United States. In 1987, a group of gay men in Berkeley and San Francisco began holding “play parties” (i.e. parties involving group sex) for men who were marginalized by other gay men because of their weight or age (Wright 1997a: 29-30). Also in 1987, *BEAR* magazine debuted in San Francisco (Wright 1997a: 31-2). A pornographic magazine that aimed to show men who were hairier, larger, and older than the men in “mainstream” gay pornography, *BEAR* emphasized working-class masculinity, with men typically appearing in clothing associated with “blue-collar” workers (such as truckers, mechanics or lumberjacks). The following year (1988), the Bears Mailing List (BML) was established as an internet mailing list specifically for bears. The BML quickly gained widespread popularity and played an important role in spreading bear identity beyond Northern California. Although the BML still exists, a plethora of bear websites now provide the sort of information and social networking opportunities that made the BML so popular in the early 1990s. In 1989, the Lone Star Saloon opened in San Francisco as the first bar marketed specifically to bears. Twenty years later, the Lone Star Saloon is still central to bear culture and many bears make “pilgrimages” to San Francisco specifically to visit the first true “bear bar.”

The emergence of bear identity is also tied to the historical context of the AIDS epidemic (see Wright 1997: 14-16). While the idealized clone in the 1970s typically displayed chest hair, the practice of shaving body hair became prevalent in the early 1980s (particularly in gay pornography). During the early years of the AIDS epidemic, body hair could potentially cover lesions caused by Kaposi syndrome, so that the display

of body hair might hide the physical signs of illness. Because of the physical wasting associated with those suffering from AIDS, being heavysset suggested that a man was perhaps less likely to be infected. The linking of body hair with being heavysset allowed early bears to draw upon the masculine associations with body hair privileged in clone culture without the suggestion that one might be using hair to cover Kaposi lesions.

In the years since *bear* first emerged as an identity category, bear subculture has spread both within the United States and internationally. The website *The Ultimate Bear Resource* (<http://ultimatebearlinks.pbworks.com>) lists bear clubs in forty-five of the fifty states, along with national organizations for Latino Bears, HIV-positive Bears, Deaf Bears, and Pagan Bears (some of whom may identify as radical faeries). There are also bear clubs throughout both Western and Eastern Europe and Latin America, as well as clubs in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Japan. There are now numerous bear bars around the world, including bars in Paris, Beirut, Seoul and Buenos Aires.

Bears are almost universally portrayed as attempting to assert hegemonic heteronormative masculinity, although critics disagree on whether or not bear masculinity subverts or reinforces heterosexual norms. The signs bears used to index masculinity are clearly grounded in ideologies of the relationship between gender, social class, and regional identity, as bear style consists of signs that are typically associated with rural (particularly Southern) working-class heterosexual men. However, in both socio-political ideologies and social practice, bears draw heavily on (second-wave) lesbian feminism. Bear discussions of the body and nature involve numerous appropriations from the work of prominent lesbian feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Mary Daly. Although bears typically participate in activities associated with working-class masculinity, such as

watching sports or camping, they are just as likely to participate in activities that are stereotypically associated with rural working-class femininity like sharing recipes at pot-luck dinners or demonstrating their crochet skills at bear craft fairs. Thus, bear identity involves the performative assertion of class and regional identities as much as it involves gendered identities.

This chapter examines the role of language in the emergence and solidification of bear subculture by analyzing discourse from the early years of the Bears Mailing List, the central site for the discursive construction of bear identity. The first part of the chapter examines the development of the ‘bear codes,’ a classification of physical and personality traits that served both to define bear identity in general and to allow individuals to position themselves in terms of their relationship to the emergent identity category. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the discourse of gender and class on BML, focusing on the appropriation and eroticization of class and regional identities. One specific genre of postings on BML, the *bear sighting*, served to normativize bear ideologies of desire around class stereotypes. As stereotypes of Southern working-class men became central to bear identity, contributors to BML began using nonstandard orthography typically associated with stereotyped representations of Southerners as hillbillies and rednecks. Although it is generally assumed that gay male identity is conveyed through non-normative indexical markers of gender, the use of Mock Hillbilly among bears demonstrates that the performative construction of sexual identity need not rely solely on gender, but may also involve markers of social class. Similarly, the importance of working-class signs in the construction of bear identity challenges dominant ideologies in which gay men are assumed to orient towards middle class identity.

2.0 Aspects of bear identity

2.1 The BML and the birth of beardom

When Steve Dyer and Brian Gollum established the BML in 1988, forms of computer-mediated communication were not particularly widespread. Because the number of individuals with access to e-mail was fairly limited at the time, early participants on BML were primarily men who work in the computer industry, government, academia and libraries. The number of librarians on the BML was particularly high and postings specific to librarians (such as discussions of the meetings of the American Library Association) were quite common. The subset of bears who were librarians even adopted the term *libearian* to refer to themselves as a distinct constituent within bear subculture. Because bear identity first emerged among middle-class men in northern California, a number of early bears worked in Silicon Valley and were familiar with new technologies. When the BML was founded, bear identity was still largely confined to the Bay Area and the BML played a central role in spreading the concept of bears as an identity category to other parts of the United States and, ultimately, the world.

The language analyzed in this chapter comes from the first eight years of the BML (1988-1996). It was during this period that the BML had its greatest influence, as the spread of the internet in the late 1990s lead to additional websites that eclipsed the BML as central social spaces for bear interactions. Data are presented in their original form, including spelling and typing errors. All data are from the electronic archive of the BML contain in the *Les Wright Papers and Bear History Project* files in the manuscript collection of the Cornell University Library.

In the first few years after its inception, the BML grew rapidly and bear clubs began to emerge throughout the United States. The editors of *A Bear's Life*, a bear lifestyle magazine, estimate that there were 1.4 million self-identified bears in the United States in 2008 (Hunt 2008). Organized gatherings for bears, known as *bear runs* began in 1995 with two primary events, Lazy Bear Weekend in Guerneville, California and the International Bear Rendezvous (IBR) in San Francisco. At present, there are bear runs in the United States almost every weekend of the year, as well as regular bear runs in Europe, Canada, Australia and Mexico. Although some bear runs last an entire week (like Bear Week in Provincetown, Massachusetts), bear runs usually last three or four days over a long weekend. There are both outdoor runs, typically held at campgrounds, and indoor runs held at hotels. Much like circuit parties (discussed in Chapter Five), bear runs are intended as ways of raising money for health and civil rights charities. The IBR (perhaps the most important bear run) hosts the annual International Bear competition in which bears compete for various titles including International Daddy Bear (for older bears), International Bear Cub (for younger bears), International Grizzly Bear (for larger bears) and the general title of International Mr. Bear. The main focus of bear runs is bear parties and other social events, particularly bear pool parties (or *bear soup* in bear slang). They may also include vendors selling products marketed to bears, video game competitions, shows involving comedians or musicians, sports competitions, outdoor activities (like mountain biking or rafting), art exhibits, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, craft displays, and Christian religious services.

Bears are particularly self-conscious about their identity as bears and there are numerous forms of cultural production that revolve around bear identity. A wide range of

artistic, literary, and musical works have been produced from the bear perspective, emphasizing the cultural distinctiveness of bears. The website Bear Café (<http://www.bearcafe.org/beararts.html>) list over sixty self-identified “bear artists” who produce works that portray the bear ideal of physical attractiveness or celebrate working-class men. The first bear novel, *Bear Like Me* by Jonathan Cohen was published in 2003 and the first bear film, *Cachorro* (*Bear Cub* in English) was released in 2004 by Spanish director Miguel Albaladejo. In keeping with the working-class and rural orientations of bear subculture, bear music is typically country, bluegrass or folk music. *Bearapalooza*, a large concert of bear musicians travels around the United States on tour every summer.

There are also numerous symbolic markers of bear identity that are marketed specifically to bear customers. The bear paw is the most common bear symbol and many bears wear tattoos of a bear paw to indicate their pride in being a bear. The bear flag (formally known as the International Bear Brotherhood Flag) was introduced in 1995 by Maryland designer Craig Byrnes. The flag has seven horizontal stripes in different colors intended to reflect the diversity in human hair and skin tones.² The flag has a large black bear paw in the upper left-hand corner.



Figure 4.1: International Bear Brotherhood Flag

The bear flag and the paw symbol are incorporated into a wide range of commercial products marketed as indicators of “bear pride.” In addition to the expected coffee cups,

t-shirts, baseball caps, bumper stickers, and refrigerator magnets, the products marketed to bear aprons, bear shirts for dogs, license plate covers, beard shampoos, wallets, watches, underwear and Christmas ornaments. Bear home décor is also quite common, including toilet paper holders, shower curtains, welcome mats, sheets and comforters, picture frames, throw rugs, lamps, dinnerware and table linens. Most of these products involve the colors from the bear flag, bear paws or bear slogans (e.g. “Not all bears like fish!”), but items that contain images of actual bears are also fairly common. These various cultural artifacts and products reinforce bear identity by allowing bears to surround themselves with symbolic markers of identity.

In addition to producing and consuming bear-oriented products, art, and music, bears are highly involved in documenting and theorizing their own culture. Historian Les Wright has been particularly active in the documentation of bear culture, founding the Bear History Project, archiving materials related to bear culture, and editing two volumes of bear history (Wright 1997, 2001). Ron Suresha has also written widely about bear culture and has edited a book of interviews with prominent bears (Suresh 2002a) and two collections of bear erotica (Suresha 2002b, 2004). Bear self-theorizing does not simply promote bear identity, but is quite reflexive in discussion a wide range of issues, including bear understandings of masculinity, the marginalized position of bears within gay communities, perceptions of bear bodies and self-image, and the appropriation of working-class signs within bear culture. There is also tongue-in-cheek “Bear Handbook” (Kampf 2000) that outlines stereotypes of bear identity while also providing information on bear clubs, bear runs, and bear bars. Like much bear writing, *The Bear Handbook* takes a humorous approach to imagining an essentialized bear identity, proposing a long-

standing historical bear tradition that includes attributes bear identity to historical figures (such as Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Pyotr Tchaikovsky) and mythological characters (such as Hercules, Paul Bunyan, and Santa Claus).

2.1 The bear codes and bear slang

As discussed in chapter one, the meaning of social identity categories is founded upon a set of attributes and interactional stances that members of a category are assumed to possess or display. Although any given individual may not display all of the attributes associated with the category, the degree to which an individual is seen as a prototypical member of an identity category depends on the degree to which the attributes apply to an individual. In the emergence of bear identity, the original triad of attributes (hairy, large and gay) eventually developed into a wide range of characteristics beyond physical appearance and sexual preference, including norms for social interaction, preferred forms of entertainment and leisure activities, and types of personal relationships. One early and important factor in the elaboration and normativization of bear identity was the emergence of the “bear codes” on the BML. Although originally intended as a humorous way of self-identification, the bear codes came to play a central role on the BML and eventually became a standard by which individuals were judged (see Wright 1991).

The bear codes were first introduced in 1989 by two astronomers who were members of the BML (Donahue and Stoner 1989, 1997). In keeping with the working-class associations in bear culture, legend has it that the decision to develop the code occurred at a Wendy’s hamburger restaurant where Donahue and Stoner were discussing the need for some way of categorizing individual bears. The code is based upon the classification system used by astronomers to categorize stars. Because technology at the

time was not capable of easily transmitting photographs electronically, the bear codes became a way for individuals to present a succinct self-description so that other bears might know not only what they looked like, but also their mannerisms and sexual behaviors. Although the “Natural Bears Classification System” was designed by Donahue and Stoner, it was intended to be adjusted and revised through discussions by members of the BML. Although the title of the code includes the word “natural,” the original code was introduced as “Version 1.0” similar to forms of computer software that are updated and changed on a regular basis. Based on suggestions from members of the BML, revised versions were sporadically introduced. After the bear code was introduced, many members of the BML used it in their e-mail signatures (often both on and off the list) to both convey the coded information to other bears and to index their identity as members of the bear community.

The first and most basic element of the bear codes describes the type of beard worn by the bear in question, indicated with a capital B, followed by a number between zero and nine indicating different beard types:

- 1) B0 – Little or no beard
 - B1 – Very slight beard
 - B2 – Slight beard
 - B3 – Thin beard
 - B4 – Mostly full beard
 - B5 – Full beard
 - B6 – Very full beard
 - B7 – Longish, bushy beards
 - B8 – Very long beards
 - B9 – Belt-buckle grazing long beards
- “The prototype is ZZ Top. Need we say more?”
(Donahue and Stoner 1997)

The majority of other elements in the bear code are marked with a series of lower-case letters followed by a scale from “- -” to “+ +” to indicate range below or above the degree

to which the “prototypical bear” would possess the trait in question. If a bear matches the prototype for a given trait, it is unmarked. As Donohue and Stoner explain:

It is not necessary to have a "grade" for each of these traits! For each there is a "neutral" value, which basically describes someone who is "average" or "unknown" within that trait. These "neutral" values are given below, but would not be reported --- treat them as either "default" or "assumed". (Donohue and Stoner 1996)

The way in which the range of values operates can be seen in the following example, which describes the range for “fur” (or hairiness):

- 2) **f - "The FUR factor"**. Some bears are particularly hairy about the rest of their bodies, others INCREDIBLY furry, yet others though rightfully bears, have little or no fur on their chests, arms, legs, back, butt, etc. So, one of the following may be added to better describe a bear's fur:

f++ WAY above average fur
 f+ above average fur
 f furry in a bearish sense
 (none) "neutral"
 (avg. fur from a sample population of both bears and non-bears)
 f- below average fur
 f-- WAY below average fur--"Nair-smooth to the max!"
 (Donahue and Stoner 1997: 151)

This same basic pattern is repeated for a series of traits as follows:

- 3) f = FUR
 t = TALLNESS
 w = WEIGHT
 c = CUB
 d = DADDY
 g = GROPE (likes to be “pawed”)
 k = KINKY
 s = SEX/SLUT
 m = MUSCLE
 e = ENDOWMENT
 h = “behr” factor (mustache, no beard)
 r = RUGGED/OUTDOOR
 p = PECULIAR
 q = “the Q factor” (Donahue and Stoner 1997: 151-5)

In addition to physical characteristics, the code includes sexual behavior (e.g. how kinky or “slutty” a given bear might be or how much they are willing to be groped by other bears). Some elements of the code are not supposed to ever be given negative values, such as muscles and endowment (penis size), so that there may be e++, but one shouldn’t use e--. The final three elements (r, p, and q) refer to mannerisms or preferred pastimes. The “r” value refers to how much a bear enjoys outdoor activities like hiking or camping, while “p” reflects the view that bears are, in general, peculiar compared to non-bears. The “Q factor” refers to “queen” and indicates how effeminate a bear is. Although “r” is defined as “rugged,” it is not meant to be in opposition to “q,” as a bear may enjoy outdoor activities and still be “queeny.”

Although the *cub* and *daddy* elements of the code are generally associated with age, they actually refer to a set of characteristics that may be independent of the actual age of the bear in question. In addition to potentially being relatively young among bears, one might identify as a cub because they are new to the bear scene, because they are searching for a nurturing partner, or even because they are a bottom (the receptive partner in anal intercourse). Similarly, a daddy may simply be nurturing, a long-time bear, or a top (the insertive partner in anal intercourse) so that identifying as a daddy does not mean that one is necessarily older than those who identify as cubs. Thus, it is possible for there to be a daddy/cub couple in which the cub is actually older than the daddy. Because of these various meanings of *cub* and *daddy*, it is possible for a bear to identify as both a *daddy* and a *cub* and as the bear codes evolved, hybrid *cub/daddy* identities were included:

- 4) Note there are now also HYBRID classes "cd" and "dc":
 cd A cub with "daddy tendencies"... Sort of like a "grown up cub".
 dc A daddy with cub-like tendencies/features.
 dc- More daddy than cub
 d+c REAL daddyish and also VERY cubbish
 (Donahue and Stoner 1997: 152-3)

Finally, these basic letters with +/- modifications may also be marked with additional information or punctuation as below:

- 5) v = variable, not rigid for individual behavior
 ! = prototypical degree of attribute (f+!)
 () = dependent on situational context
 ? = unknown, unobserved, or unrevealed
 : = evidentiary support, but unknown
 (Donahue and Stoner 1997: 155-6)

In presenting the bear codes, Donahue and Stoner offered their own codes as an example of what a complete bear code would look like:

- 6) Bob Donahue B5 c+ f w s-: t- r k?
 Jeff Stoner B6 f+ w sv r+ k(+?)
 (Donahue and Stoner 1997: 156)

The bear codes became a very important marker of bear identity and although their use has declined with the rise of internet dating sites (and the ability to post photographs), they are recognized as an important part of bear history. There are t-shirts marketed to bears with elements of the code that refer to sexual practices and social identities (e.g. c++, d++, k++, or s++).

The authors of the bear codes emphasize that there are no negative traits in the code. This is the reason that the codes for traits like muscles and endowment do not have negative values. Although bears are often assumed to be obsessed with masculinity, the code authors note that being "queeny" is also a positive trait:

- 7) ...Yes, Virginia, "q" is a GOOD thing just like "t-- and t++ are GOOD things", "w-- and w++ are GOOD things"; nothing negative should be

associated with the *labels* pertaining to classification (Donahue and Stoner 1997:155).

The bear codes suggest an attempt to define bear identity in an egalitarian manner that avoids references to social categories that are typically associated with forms of prejudice in the gay community (or society in general). There are no codes to indicate race, ethnicity, social class, profession, religion, or age (although *cub/daddy* may have meanings unassociated with age). However, as bear slang developed, terms referring to ethnicity and age entered into the bear lexicon. Like much bear slang, these terms build upon the bear metaphor, such as *black bear* to refer to African American bears, *brown bears* to refer to Middle Eastern and South Asian bears, *pandas* to refer to Asian bears, and *osos* (Spanish for “bears”) to refer to Latino bears. Similarly, older bears (with white hair) are referred to as *polar bears*.

Other bear slang terms either use puns involving “bear” or extensions of the bear metaphor. Examples of bear slang puns include the following:

husbear – partner or husband
neighbear – neighbor
cybear/cybearspace – cyber/cyberspace
libearian – librarian
bear-b-que – bar-b-que
bear-a-oke - karaoke
furgasm – orgasm

Terms that build on the bear metaphor include:

trapper – bear chaser
den – bedroom, home
ursine – has bear characteristics
Goldilocks – woman with bear friends (a bear ‘fag hag’)
bruin – a bear athlete (based on the UCLA mascot)
maul – the vendor market at a bear run (a pun on *mall*)

The other primary subset of bear slang involves terms referring to other animals (or specific subspecies of bears):

- otter – a bear that is skinnier than average
- grizzly – a bear that is exceptionally large
- wolf – a bear that is muscular and/or a sexually-aggressive top
- badger – a sexually-aggressive bottom

The only bear slang term that doesn't fit into these categories is *woof*, which is a greeting that indicates that the speaker finds the addressee sexually attractive. The term *woof* may be used as a verb (as in “that guy was *woofing* me”) or an adjective *woofy* (meaning someone attractive enough to merit being *woofed*) but is most typically used as a greeting. Like the bear codes, the term *woof* is a very prevalent marker of bear identity and t-shirts, baseball caps and belt buckles that say “woof” are common bear accessories.

The bear metaphor is sometimes evoked through including actual animal noises in one's speech. Occasionally, contributors to the BML would use orthography to represent growling, as in the following post from 1991 encouraging readers to attend the Bear Expo in Toronto:

- 8) GGGRRRRReetings, yer BeaRRRRishnesses EveRRRRywherRRRe!!
 <later in the same posting>
 What about the idea that the BML should keep a list of those attending. Then, an updated list of names could be included in each mailing. C'mon beaRRRRS! Let's get everybody we can out to this thing! Won't it be a great day when the whole "bear movement" is as wide-spread as, say, the leather stuff, or anything like that? Cuz it's events like this that are gonna help it grow, so we need all the bears we can get. (I know I can never get enough! GGRR!!). See y'all in SF!!

WWWaRRRm and WWWWoofie BeaRRRR-Hugs!

Contrary to the representation of bears in John Waters' *A Dirty Shame* (2004), bears do not generally growl in everyday speech. However, growling noises may be used to

indicate sexual attraction or as a form of vocalization during sexual interactions, particularly in bear pornography.

The various extensions of the bear metaphor contribute to the construction of an essentialist view of bear identity by linking bear masculinity with bears in nature. The possibility of metaphorically invoking both actual bears in nature and popular images of bears such as teddy bears or Care Bears allow for the metaphor to index seemingly competing understandings of masculinity. Bears may be rugged, independent outdoorsmen (like actual bears) while also being soft, cuddly, and non-threatening (like teddy bears). Although bears are stereotyped as appropriating heteronormative markers of masculinity without questioning or challenging hegemonic norms, bear masculinity is actually highly contested and regularly debated both on the BML and in self-theorizing by bear academics.

2.3 Bear gender ideology

Because bears draw heavily on working-class masculinity, particularly in terms of style (such as dress), the idea that bear culture is “about” masculinity often goes unquestioned (e.g. Hennen 2008, Sullivan 2008, Harris 1997). Bear masculinity is often viewed as natural and unassuming in ways that could be seen as non-performative, particularly in writing by those outside of (or on the periphery of) bear culture. In an article about Bear Week in Provincetown, Massachusetts, for example, Andrew Sullivan portrays bears as a positive shift from the “caricature” of masculinity found in leathermen and circuit boys:

But their masculinity is of a casual, unstrained type. One of the least reported but significant cultural shifts among gay men in recent years has been a greater ease with the notion of being men and a refusal to acquiesce in the notion that gayness is somehow in conflict with masculinity. In the

past, gay manifestations of masculinity have taken a somewhat extreme or caricatured form -- from the leathermen to the huge bodybuilders. Bears, to my mind, represent a welcome calming down of this trend. They are unabashedly masculine but undemonstrative about it. (Sullivan 2008)

Sullivan sees bear masculinity as “undemonstrative” and “casual,” suggesting that bear masculinity contrasts sharply with the more self-conscious construction of masculinity in other subcultures like leathermen or circuit boys. The rejection of self-conscious gender display and the view that bear masculinity is ‘natural’ and unaffected are basic elements of bear gender ideology. Les Wright, for example, discusses the emphasis of ‘naturalness’ in bear culture:

The ‘naturalness’ of bears expresses a position in a complex web: bears are ‘naturally’ men (and not women or queens), bears are ‘natural’ (as opposed to the ritual and artifices of leathersex or gym-buffed ‘twinks’). Bears are engaged in staking their claim in the social hierarchy of the gay community-at-large. (Wright 1997b:11)

For Wright, bears are not essentially natural, but rather performatively assert ‘naturalness’ as a crucial component of masculinity as a way of positioning themselves within the gay community. Viewing themselves as ‘natural’ compared to other forms of gay male masculinity, allows bears to present an alternative to forms of gay masculinity that typically marginalize men who are heavysset or hairy. Critics of bear culture have argued that this socially-constructed ‘naturalness’ is just as much a form of ‘drag’ as the types of masculinity found in other gay male subcultures:

If the bear movement is inspired by perfectly reasonable frustrations over the prevalence in the gay community of a single prescriptive body type, its hirsute ideal of rugged masculinity is ultimately as contrived as the aesthetic of the designer queen. While bears pretend to oppose the ‘unnatural’ look of urban gay men, nothing could be more unnatural, urban, and middle class than the pastoral fantasy of the smelly mountaineer in long johns, a costume drama that many homosexuals are now acting out as self-consciously as Marie Antionette and her entourage dressed up as shepherds and shepherdesses. (Harris: 1997: 107)

Harris' critique of bear masculinity as contrived fails to consider that bears themselves often question the meaning of 'naturalness' in bear gender ideology and that bears recognize that they are not simply mimicking heterosexual gender norms. In this sense, Harris' derision of bear culture is quite similar to Sullivan's abundant praise for bears, which also assumes that bear masculinity is "indistinguishable" from heteronormative masculinity:

Bears, after all, are the straight guys in gay culture. Their very ordinariness makes them both more at ease with regular straight guys; but their very ordinariness in some ways is also extremely culturally subversive. Drag queens, after all, are hardly the cutting edge any more. Straight people love their gay people flaming, or easily cordoned off from the straight experience. Bears reveal how increasingly difficult this is. Their masculinity is indistinguishable in many ways from straight male masculinity -- which accounts, in some ways, for their broader invisibility in the culture. They are both more integrated; and yet, by their very equation of regular masculinity with gayness, one of the more radical and transformative gay phenomena out there right now. (Sullivan 2008)

Both Sullivan and Harris assume that bear identity is modeled almost entirely upon heteronormative masculinity, although the two disagree on whether or not this is 'naturally natural' or simply a performance of 'natural' straight masculinity. However, the idea of 'naturalness' within bear culture is grounded less in assumptions about heterosexual men than in lesbian feminist writing about the hegemonic understandings of beauty and body image. As marginalization due to physical size was a crucial factor driving the emergence of bear identity, it is not particularly surprising that bears would turn to the extensive theorizing and activism of feminists who have a long tradition of dealing with these very same issues. As Wright notes:

Going 'natural' is also taken directly from the feminist work of Andrea Dworkin, Mary Daly, and others. It is a transformative action on the part of the oppressed to reject being dominated by the beauty myth, to direct

our anger at our oppressors, not ourselves, and to build community with like-minded fellows. In this sense, bears address the issue of class strictures based on looks-ism and fat discrimination. Heavy, unattractive people are discriminated against in our society, which often has direct economic consequences – being forced to take lower-end jobs, being shunned professionally and socially, being dismissed as asexual or unworthy of intimate affection. (Wright 1997b: 13)

Writers (like Harris and Sullivan) who assume that bear masculinity is bound up with heterosexual masculinity fail to recognize the full complexity of bear gender ideology in which gay male effeminacy is not viewed negatively (as with the presentation of the “q factor” in the bear codes). Views like those of Harris and Sullivan also entirely erase the extremely important role that feminist theory has played in the emergence of bear understandings of gender, placing heterosexual men at the center of bear identity, a position that is in direct opposition to a bear gender ideology in which activities such as cooking, knitting, and interior decorating are just as important as camping, hiking or watching football.

The emphasis on naturalness in bear culture contributes to the essentialization of bear identity. The idea that one is naturally a bear is regularly evoked in bear discourse and bears commonly argue that they felt ostracized and uncomfortable in gay male social settings until they discovered bear subculture. Similarly, claims to having a long-standing and natural attraction to larger hairy men are fairly common, as in the following example from the BML. In this posting, introducing himself to other member of the list in 1990, a contributor notes that his attraction to bears goes back to his youth, using the bear code as shorthand to describe his first crush on a bear:

- 9) ...When I was in my teen years I recall being very attracted to this beary guy (A definite B6 w+). We worked together every week outside. His shirt was off alot, displaying a layer of fur that I wanted to explore.

The idea that one is naturally a bear (or is naturally attracted to bears) is, to an extent, independent of gender ideology and does not necessarily imply that bear masculinity is innate. Bears are certainly open to varied gender display and are much more open to gay male effeminacy than other masculinist subcultures like leathermen or circuit boys. While leathermen and circuit boys both tend to avoid association with drag queens (who are seen as the epitome of effeminate behavior), drag performances are widely appreciated among bears and are a common occurrence at bear runs. At the 2009 Lazy Bear Weekend, for example, a play in which drag queens performed episodes of television program *The Golden Girls* was one of the main entertainment events. Similarly, at the annual International Bear Rendezvous in San Francisco, one of the main events is a bingo tournament to raise money for charity run entirely by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group of drag queens who wear nuns' habits combined with outrageous exaggerated hairstyles and make-up (see Chapter Three). The ideological importance of naturalness in bear culture means that individuals should be accepted for who they are and should be themselves, even if that means being effeminate. As sociologist Eric Rofes has argued, bears are not always masculine in behavior despite the stereotype of bears as mimicking heteronormative masculinity:

Bears as a group are simultaneously both gender-conforming and gender-nonconforming, or gender radicals. At any big gathering of Bears, there are men who are very comfortable looking like big gruff hairy bearded lumberjacks, all the while being total queens – silly and light and fun and warm – characteristics which men are not supposed to share with other men. (Suresha 2002: 15-6)

Thus, although bears typically dress in ways that typically index working-class heterosexual masculinity, bear culture is particularly open to gender variation. In the documentary *Bear Run*, a transgender bear name Mikhael who worked most of his life as

a truck driver and maintains a heterosexual relationship with his lesbian partner argues that he has always been a bear despite being born female and being attracted to women:

I've always been a bear. I don't know what's up with that. I was a bear before *I* knew I was a bear, that kind of ugly duckling effect or something. You know, the swan that didn't know it was a swan till it grew and everybody thought it was just an ugly duck. That's me. (Hunt 2008).

In the film, Mikhael's bear friends are particularly careful about accepting and supporting both him as both transgender and bear. In one scene they discuss their concern that their common use of feminine pronouns to refer to one another might be offensive to Mikhael. Although they regularly refer to one another as *she/her* or *girlfriend*, they worry that calling Mikhael *girlfriend* might imply that they do not fully accept him as a man because he was born female. They are, however, quite careful to ensure that Mikhael realizes that they in no way question the validity of his bear identity.

Thus, despite writers (like Sullivan) who see bears as subversive specifically because they are indistinguishable from heterosexual men, bear culture often involves gender variance that reflects fairly conventional gay male forms of gender resistance, including the acceptance of men who might be viewed as effeminate. Rather than being either a form of working-class masculine drag or a natural and unassuming (but heteronormative) masculinity, bear gender ideology is highly reflexive and carefully considered.

Discussions about gendered behavior were quite common on the BML, sometimes sparked by postings that mocked effeminate behavior. The following example on "bear elocution" occurred as part of a long joke about how becoming a bear meant losing the effeminacy stereotypically associated with gay men:

- 10) Becoming a better bear means gaining some things and losing others. The first workshop will be devoted to the topic of Bearspeak. Our elocution lessons will teach you how to reduce your phonemic inventory and converse more effectively with your bear buddies. In two short days we'll purge your vocabulary of phrases like "Oh, you hateful bitch!" and "Puh-leeeeeze!" No more "Mary" this and "Mary" that. Say goodbye to sibilant speech. Soon your every utterance will be punctuated with "Bear" this and "Grrrr" that.

In addition to the flagrant misuse of linguistic terminology, this posting reinforces the stereotyped view that bears are thoroughly and unquestioningly masculine. However, entries of this sort, particularly criticisms of gay men who are effeminate, were typically met with anger over displays of prejudice that are counter to the bear ideology of acceptance. An extended thread in 1993, for example, debated the inclusion of “q” in the bear codes, and the fact that the codes did not allow for modifying “q” with pluses or minuses. In the following post, the contributor argues that if bears are truly accepting of all gendered behavior, modifying the “q-factor” should not be issue, suggesting that restricting the range of gendered behavior within the code conflicts with bear ideologies that stress accepting individuals for who they are:

- 11) I don't understand what all the fuss is about the q in NBCS. I don't think I've ever met a bear who really rates a q, at least not yet. Now if there were to be a modifier on the q, instead (say from q—being the most Butch redneck in the world to q++ being someone who sounds like they should be in La Cage Aux Folles), then maybe I would have ratings for people (and myself). As it is, I've already gotten in trouble once by saying to someone "you are really a q--," not realizing that no modifier was possible! (yes, that *was* you Dave.) Personally, I don't understand all the fuss on the postings here either. One of the things which most attracts me to the bear culture is that bears (at least as far as I've seen!) accept almost anything.

The extended discussion of effeminacy in 1993 regularly returned to the idea of acceptance and tolerance. Even contributors who attempted to assert their own masculine identity ran the risk of having their contributions to the list interpreted as potentially

alienating more effeminate bears. In the following interaction the first contributor raises the issue of distinguishing between effeminate behavior and participation in pastimes stereotypically associated with femininity. While the second contributor agrees with the idea that fears of being perceived as “feminine” prevent many men from learning useful skills (such as sewing or cooking), he criticizes the first author for using language that could be perceived as denigrating more effeminate bears:

12) <first posting> On the subject of the "q" classification, let's not confuse the "conventionally feminine" interests with "conventionally effeminate" behavior. [...] I've been sewing and cooking for most of my life. My partner, who fits most bear qualifications except for size, recently took an interest in sewing and is now producing beautiful shirts from unusual fabrics. We are both talking about trying more quilting. But neither of us is prone to "chiffon talk" or mincing about.

13) <response> I substantially agree with this: certainly American men are socialized out of most self-supporting skills necessary in an even rudimentary society: darning a sock, replacing a button, preparing meals, that sort of thing; as for arts finer than whittling (not to belittle whittling, of course), forget it. Except . . . well, terms like "chiffon-talk" and "mincing about" are both vague and contemptuous. People most often talk and move in ways that are comfortable to them (these are things you have to do every waking moment). It's unfair in a very basic way to speak about this sort of thing as if it were a character flaw.

Discussions of gender on the BML are often quite sophisticated in terms of their recognition of feminist and queer theory, which is often evoked to support the view of bear identity as a form of resistance. Contributors often refer to the performative nature of gender and the potential subversive character of gender non-conformity. In addition to challenging contributors for their lack of tolerance with respect to effeminate behavior, a failure to appreciate gay male effeminacy is seen as counter to bear subculture's potential to challenge forms of social dominance that are seen as oppressive to gay men in general and bears in

particular. In the following posting from the 1993 discussion on gender, the contributor argues that bear culture is founded in resistant to dominant forms of culture:

- 14) The purported logic of bear culture is in its claim of aesthetic resistance: it exists in opposition to dominant representations of gay desire in pornography, advertising, or any image that valorizes smoothness, sculpted muscles and perpetual youth. For individuals, bear identity-as-resistance has its origins in the personal. It may be traced to a moment of dramatic rejection: a scowl or harsh words in a bar, bookstore or sex club. Or the hurt endured from a discouraging frown in reaction to a cruisy stare on a subway platform. Or the brutal memory of being barred from a club for being too old or too heavy. These instances of rejection and resistance inform the perception of being at odds with the desires of the dominant culture.

The contributor goes on to argue that the “model of inclusion” that lead many men to find bear culture as a place of acceptance is continually challenged by diversity within bear culture that leads some men to feel marginalized by other bears either because of gender expression, class, or ethnicity. He concludes that effeminate bears should be embraced and that the normative character emerging in bear culture must be continually challenged:

- 15) What do I suggest? Aside from burning copies of Bear magazine, I would say bring on the Barbie bears, beauty bears, glam bears, and each and every china-collecting queen. Fortunately for us, they are already here; unfortunately, their presence is a point of contention for many self-identified bears. So instead of revising bear self-identity, perhaps we should playfully question the erotic codes deployed by the bear cultural regime.

These examples from the BML suggest that bears are not blindly mimicking heterosexual masculinity. The ‘naturalness’ of bear masculinity is consciously performed, widely discussed, and regularly challenged by members of the bear community. While bears may index masculinity through dress and body type, there are definitely bears who simultaneously challenge hegemonic understandings of masculinity through the use of

camp style and stereotypically gay mannerisms that are in opposition to heteronormative masculinity.

2.4 Bear sightings and citations of desire

BML differed from other mailing lists of the late 1980s and early 1990s in terms of the typical genres represented in list postings. For example, flames (postings that are hostile, insulting or aggressive) were rare on BML. This is not surprising, given that displays of aggression conflict with bear ideologies of masculinity. In addition to genres like introductions, queries, and discussions, BML regular included a genre known as “bear sightings” in which contributors described seeing men they found attractive who exemplified the bear physical ideal. The men described are usually straight and do not self-identity as bears, but merit “woofing” because of their attractiveness. Bear sightings fell into two broad categories: those describing media figures or celebrities and those describing everyday men seen in public settings.

Bear sightings of men in everyday contexts typically describe the physical size and body hair of the potential bear in detail, so that their bearishness is clear to other readers. In the following example from 1990, the contributor emphasizes the hairiness of a man in front of him at the grocery store checkout counter:

16) I wound up in line behind this WOOFERFUL Bear... Jet black hair and beard, furry legs (he was wearing shorts) and furry arms, fuzz coming over the collar of his t-shirt. He looked to be at least partially from the Middle Eastern gene-pool -- Turkish, Arab, Persian, Armenian, &c. -- with that dark skin and almost blue-black hair. Rowr!

What set me off into fantasyland was that on top of his handsome, furry face and husky bod was the fact that the t-shirt he was wearing bore an image of a teddy bear and the words “I’m Huggable” -- AND the fact he was buying [among other things] a box of MAXX condoms. In case you're not familiar with 'em, they're designed with extra... er.... “headroom” for those guys who are particularly well endowed. GROWF!

The author refers to the man's facial or body hair six times in the posting, also noting that he has a husky bod. The description of the man's t-shirt also serves in the construction of bear identity. The phrase "I'm huggable" indexically associates the potential bear with bear sociality, particularly the importance of physical touch in casual (non-sexual) interactions. That is, bears enjoy touching one another, hugging one another, and holding one another.

Other bear sightings evoke the working-class orientation of bear culture by focusing on working class men. These posts may also describe physical spaces where bears may be sighted in large numbers. In the following post (also from 1990), the contributor describes places where working-class "bears" may be seen on the campus of the University of Georgia (UGA):

17) First place to go to is by our main library where they have the construction going on. I've spotted 3 HOT bears there. One operates the crane (is that how you call that long thick *ahem* thing where it lifts heavy weights and brings it from one place to another?) and he's by far my number WOOF target. Maybe the phallic machine that he's operating has something to do with it? :)

Second place to go is around the pharmacy building and school of forestry. Not only is there another road construction going on, but yummy looking guys from forestry schools also frequent those roads.

Third place is any UGA physical plant pick-up trucks. As the now-gone bear friend here said once that UGA "makes masculinity a requirement in hiring people in the physical plant." WOOF! My knee wobbled at more than one WOOFIE bear in those trucks.

These bear sightings reinforce the connections between physical types, social class and interactional norms associated with emergent bear identity.

Bear sightings involving public figures also reinforce similar working-class associations. Although a few celebrity bear sightings simply listed various men that the

contributor found attractive, most focused on a single man. The typical structure of a bear sighting involves introducing the “bear” and where he was seen, describing him (or simply noting that he is attractive) and telling other readers of the list where the man in question can be found. The following example from 1995 (BML 40) appeared after a number of bear sightings involving performers seen on Country Music Television (CMT):

18) Recent bear-sightings on CMT:

Many have been mentioning Aaron Tippin and others on CMT. Next time you see an Alan Jackson video, have a look for the guy in his band who plays electric guitar. WOOF-O-RAMA! He appears **very** briefly near the end of the Summertime Blues video with little clothing and covered in mud! Since Jackson has his band members in many of his videos, this is a bear to look out for...

The author follows the regular pattern of introducing the bear, noting that he is attractive (WOOF-O-RAMA!) and informing others about where he can be found. The author notes excitement that the guitarist is “covered in mud”, a fact that reinforces bear ideologies of masculinity as natural and unrestrained. The descriptions of men in bear sightings typically go into more detail, usually focusing on the man’s beard or chest hair. Although sexual objectification is often associated with male discourse that indexes masculinity (e.g. Kiesling 2001), the language used in bear sightings often include forms of camp that are typically interpreted as indexing femininity. In the following example, also from 1995, the author describes a photograph of (television actor and former professional football player) Fred Dryer using the camp trope of treating a quotidian interaction as performance:

19) Hello, Bear Fans, this is your roving reporter (or should that be 'raving reporter?') with yet another sensational Ursine sighting -- this one in the annals of daily journalism. Look on page 3D of today's (4/27/95 -

Thursday) USA Today. You can't miss it; just find Connie Chung and look south! A shirtless Fred Dryer! Talk about a bodaciously hairy set of ta-tas! Ka-Thump, Ka-Thump, Ka-Thump -- my heart beats loudly. Dark glasses... Receding hairline... Tatoo... [sic] His nips look T and E -- that's Taut and Erect to you uninitiated. Ultimately delectable. Run -- don't walk -- to your nearest newsstand.

The author begins with language that indexes the stance of a sports or news reporter (*Bear Fans, your roving reporter*), marking the speech as a conscious performance. The repeated use of exclamation marks, the inclusion of sound effects (Ka-thump) and the reference to advertising in the final line (*Run – don't walk*) all index the type of exaggerated citational performance associated with camp (Harvey 2002).

Although they may be presented in a camp style, celebrity bear sightings typically reinforced bear ideologies of desire that privilege working-class masculinity. The public figures in bear sightings are almost universally associated with working-class tastes, including figures from country music, football, professional wrestling, or popular television shows (like *Home Improvement* or *Magnum P.I.*). Although working-class men have long been eroticized among gay men, celebrity bear sightings link desire for working-class men with the enjoyment of working-class forms of entertainment. Thus, in addition to conveying the idea that working-class men are sexually desirable, celebrity bear sightings suggest that the observer participates in working-class pastimes. This allows the bear observer to index working-class sensibilities as part of their own identity.

Bear sightings are important in challenging the dominant ideologies of desire in gay culture, which marginalize heavysset and hairy men. Like *BEAR* magazine, these bear sightings provide a set of citations involving contexts in which larger, hairy men are contextually positioned as objects of desire. Given that many men who are drawn to bear identity have experienced rejection and sexual isolation within the gay community, the

sightings create a social context in which they can recognize themselves as sexually attractive. As such, they play a crucial role in both formulating bear resistance to “body fascism” and in making bear identity desirable for men who have been excluded from dominant gay contexts.

3.0 Appropriations of class and region in bear discourse

3.1 Bear appropriations of class

The ideology of ‘naturalness’ permeates bear culture and distinguishes it from other gay male subcultures that emphasize meticulous self-presentation and conscious performance. However, there are certainly normative assumptions about what it means to be natural that revolve around rejecting middle-class conventions and adopting a working-class style. The working-class orientation is often seen as a conscious effort to performatively assert a masculine identity and to draw on ideologies linking sexuality and class (see Ortner 2006). However, the move to index working-class masculinity is also directly related to the issues of body size. In discussing the possibility of fat and weight being a form of masculine drag, Lawrence Mass suggests that the relationship between weight and masculinity is not unique to bear culture:

For many gay men, bigness has always been a feature of masculinity. Why and where that comes from I’m not sure, but women view bigness similarly. One archetype of masculinity is bigness – for example, football players, construction workers, weightlifters. On the other hand, plenty of gay men are attracted to pretty boys, mainly because they see them as masculine. (Suresha 2002: 178-9).

Bear appropriation of working-class signs exploits associations between class, body type, and masculinity in broader social discourse. Through indexical analogy, bears are able to adopt elements of working-class culture in order to index a masculine identity, allowing men to view themselves as sexually attractive despite the fact that they are highly

marginalized within gay culture because of their weight or hairiness. Within dominant gay male ideologies of the body, heavysset men are typically viewed as “soft” and naturally effeminate, while within heterosexual ideologies heavysset men are clearly masculine as long as they are working class or use their size in physical labor or athletics. As working-class men may be simultaneously seen as overweight and masculine, it is not surprising that bears would adopt a working-class aesthetic.

Bear culture is indeed overflowing with signs that index working-class identity. Bear erotica and pornography almost always involves working-class contexts or characters. Film titles include *Big Bear Trucking Company*, *Country Bears in Heat*, *Grease Monkey Bears*, and *Workman’s Compensation*. The covers of early issues of *BEAR* magazine usually portray men in baseball caps, often wearing shirts with the sleeves torn off, both clothing styles that index white working-class identity in the United States. The eroticized working class images in bear magazines reflect broader stereotypes of working-class style as evidence by public figures such as Larry the Cable Guy (a comedian who performs as part of the “Blue Collar Comedy Tour”)³. The following pictures contain some of the most common features that overlap between bear and working-class style: baseball caps, torn shirt sleeves, facial hair and in the case of American Bear, a tractor:

Figure 4.2: *American Bear* magazine

Figure 4.3: Larry the Cable Guy

There are also t-shirts marketed to bears that modify the commercial logos of companies associated with the working class, such as *John Bear* (based on the John Deere farm equipment company) and *Bear Depot* (based on the Home Depot hardware store). There are two bear cookbooks, both by P. J. Gray, that include numerous working-class references. The first volume includes “Serving suggestion: with beer” after every recipe (including desserts), referring to the bear and working-class preference for beer. The second volume notes that “no bear kitchen is complete” without microwave popcorn, bisquick (an instant biscuit mix), Velveeta (cheese), cornflakes, cream of mushroom soup, ground beef, or cool whip. With the possible exception of microwave popcorn and cornflakes, all of these foods are stereotypically associated with white working-class dietary habits. The recipes are also rooted in stereotypes of the white working class. Examples include “hobo hash,” “cheesy sausage balls,” “potato chip cookies,” “candy bar smoothies,” “bacon hash browns,” and “tater tot casserole.” The class orientations of bear culture are evident in a poster for a party in Los Angeles sponsored by Redneck Bear, a clothing company that sells clothes intended for the bear community (see below):

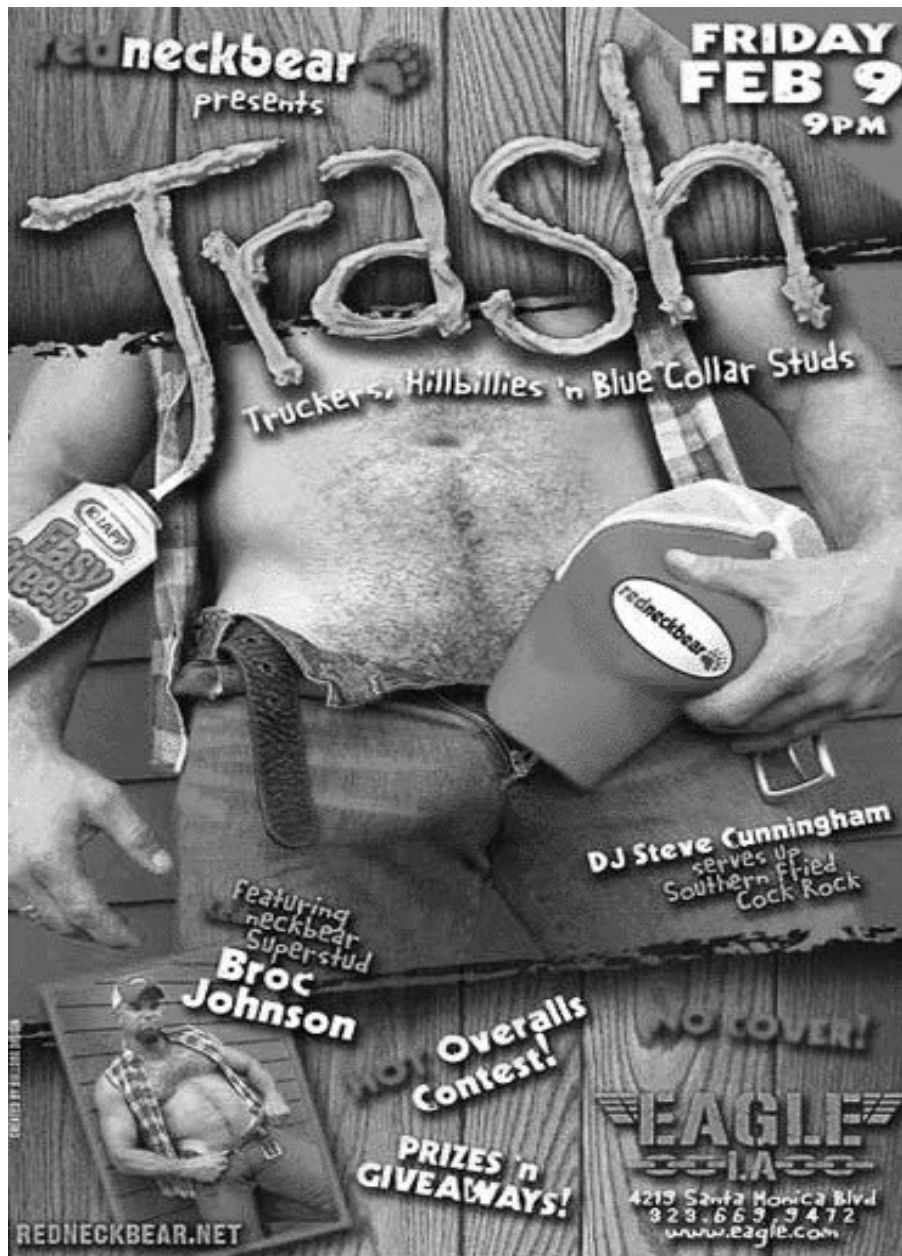


Figure 4.4: Flier for “Trash” party at the Los Angeles Eagle (2007)

The party is called “Trash,” a play on the “white trash” slur used against the white working class and the party claims to be intended for “truckers, hillbillies, and blue-collar studs.” The title of the party is written in canned spray cheese (often associated with the white working class), the music is “Southern fried rock,” and there is a “Hot overalls contest.” All of these signs index stereotypes of Southern white working-class men.

Just as ideologies of gender are highly contested and widely discussed among bears, bears regularly consider the social implications of their appropriation of working-class culture. Eric Rofes raised the issue of class in the first collection published on bear theory (Wright's *The bear book*):

I observe the participation of middle-class, upper-middle-class, and upper-class men in the rapidly expanding and diversifying subcultures of Bears with great interest. How have we come to comprise a large portion of a community whose symbols, rituals, references and collective culture appear rooted in working-class, white trash, and lower-middle-class populations? What does it mean that we wear grease monkey suits, sleeveless sweatshirts, combat fatigues, thermal underwear, or football jerseys? How have specific artifacts and symbols of white working-class masculinities become a part of the collective landscape of middle-class bears' imaginations? (Rofes 1997: 90)

In particular, Rofes questions the social meaning of bear appropriations from the working class. Rofes interprets this appropriation in terms of Bourdieu's concept of *symbolic violence*, suggesting that middle-class bear appropriations of working-class signs might reinforce and contribute to the social domination of the working class:

Are middle-class Bears imposters, theatrically assuming the costumes and body hexis of working-class men?...Is a contemporary American culture of yuppies in country-western wear, white adolescents in modified gansta-rap gear, and queer academics and computer technocrats in workingmen's clothing simply sublimating (or exacerbating?) class warfare through masquerade? And what kinds of symbolic violence are visited upon authentically poor and working class men through these attempts at impersonation and ventriloquism? (Rofes 1997: 92)

Rofes suggests that the working-class orientation of bear culture may be no different from other types of appropriation from socially marginalized groups, arguing that white middle-class men who suffer from both anxieties over economic security and discrimination based on sexual orientation "may be drawn to Bear spaces and texts as site for a reaffirmation of class privilege (and race privilege) through the apparent discovery

of “comfort” and erotic fulfillment in the celebration of white working-class masculinities.” (Rofes 1997: 97)

The view of bear culture as attractive for white middle-class men because it reaffirms class and race privilege raises the issue of the response to bear culture from working-class men and men of color. One might expect that the middle-class appropriations common in bear culture could alienate working-class men and many read Rofes’ discussion of class as suggesting exactly that. However, there are numerous (white) working-class men who self-identify as bears. Indeed, there are perhaps more white working-class men involved in bear subculture than in leather or circuit subculture. In his discussion of Provincetown’s Bear Week, Sullivan argues against the stereotype of all bears as middle-class men dressing up like straight working-class men:

Upper middle class and middle class bears tend to idealize the working class stiff; and working class bears, for the first time perhaps, find their natural state of physical being publicly celebrated rather than ignored. I made a point of asking multiple bears during Bear Week what they did for a living. Yes, there were architects and designers and writers. But there were also computer technicians, delivery truck drivers, construction workers, salesmen, and so on. Again, what we’re seeing, I think, is another manifestation of the growth and breadth of gay culture in the new millennium. (Sullivan 2008)

Although Sullivan sees the inclusion of working-class men as a broadening of gay culture, it is unreasonable to assume that there have not always been working-class gay men. Working-class gay men have, however, been highly marginalized by gay culture, particularly in the post-Stonewall era. It is this very marginalization that makes bear identity attractive to some working-class men. In an interview with Ron Suresha, Rofes raises this possibility in response to those who assume that bear culture alienates working-class men:

But I disagree with people...who argue that working-class men do not feel comfortable in this subculture. Working-class men have been part of this subculture – in fact, have been part of building this subculture – for a while. For a lot of my friends who are lower-middle class, or working class who were raised poor, Bear spaces are the only sites where they feel comfortable. Now, I'm sure there are some working-class guys who respond to all these middle-class guys, all these doctors and lawyers pretending to be stevedores and dock workers and stuff. But truly speaking, I think the working-class people are more comfortable because those sites look more like the places they came from. And I think this is particularly true for rural men. In my year living in Maine, I found there were a lot of Bears living there, many of whom don't even know they're Bears. It's just the way Maine men look. (Suresha 2002: 11)

Given that much of gay culture is oriented towards middle-class aspirations, working class men may find bear culture a welcoming space in which they are not only accepted, but highly valued.⁴ However, bear appropriations may make some working-class men uncomfortable in bear social contexts. As with the bear sightings, Rofes comment about bears who “don't even know they're bears” serves to essentialize bear identity as independent of actual participation in bear culture by allowing the identity label to apply to men who may very well be heterosexuals who have never even heard of bear subculture.

In terms of men of color and the question of race privilege, bears have had a similarly mixed reaction. In the United States, bear identity is not uncommon among Latino and Arab American men, but Asian American, Native American and (especially) African American bears are much rarer (see Suresha 2002: 256ff). Like issues of gender and class, questions of race are regularly considered in bear culture and books in “bear theory” usually contain discussions by bears of color concerning the issue of race within the bear community. There are various reasons why bears of color might not find bear culture particularly attractive. Asian and Native American bears, who may be less likely

to have large amounts of body hair, may find the emphasis on hairiness among bears alienating. For all minority bears, the emphasis on white working-class culture may also be alienating. Although bear culture involves a range of working-class elements, it is particularly focused on Southern, rural, “hillbilly” working-class culture. Given the widespread stereotype of working-class Southerners as racists and the history of racism in the South, it may be that the predominance of signs indexing Southern working-class identity indexically evokes racism regardless of the actual attitudes towards race that individual bears may have.

3.2 Regional identity and Mock Hillbilly

The appropriation of Southern rural identities is one area that bears have not written about extensively. However, stereotypes of Southerners, particularly “hillbillies,” are so common in bear culture that critics of bears have suggested that bears are performing some sort of hillbilly drag. Harris, a strong critic of bears (and every other gay subculture), uses the hillbilly stereotype to criticize the lack of authenticity in bear culture:

If you skin the bear, you find, not a toothless hillbilly with a shotgun and a still, but the typical age-obsessed queen with a subscription to *House Beautiful* and a Japanese tea garden. Just as the tattoo has become a brooch, so the bear’s fur is really a mink stole. It is ultimately impossible to imprison the bourgeois body, to deprive it of its lotions, starve it of its eaux de colognes and depilatories, and stuff it in the hair shirt of apelike masculinity (Harris 1997:108)

Although bears certainly don’t present themselves as “toothless hillbillies,” representations of the working-class in the bear imagination are closely tied with negative stereotypes associated with poor and rural Southerners, through categories such as *white trash*, *rednecks*, and *hillbillies*. It may be that these stereotypes are imagined some

prototypical form of white working-class culture, making them obvious choices for indexing working-class identity. As noted, there are numerous examples of bear appropriations tied to regional identity. Bear music is predominantly country or bluegrass music historically associated with the South. In Gray's bear cookbooks (Gray 2003, 2005), Southern recipes figure predominantly, including biscuits and gravy, peach pie, hush puppies, and "Kentucky pie" (basically a pecan pie with Bourbon added). The "Redneck Bear" company markets t-shirts and baseball caps featuring themes related to redneck and hillbilly stereotypes. The company's logo features the "stars and bars" of the Confederate flag, evoking the stereotype of rednecks as inherently racist. The company's products include camouflage t-shirts with "INBRED" or "HICK" written on them. The Southern "hillbilly" stereotype also surfaces in the language used by participants on the BML, which often involves what might be called Mock Hillbilly.

BML contributors frequently use non-standard orthographies (such as *yer* for *your/you're*) that index working-class, Southern, and rural identities. Although many participants on the BML never use non-standard orthographies in their postings, the practice is fairly common and occurs elsewhere in informal bear writing. In a paper called "Now yer talkin' Bear," John Moran noted the use of similar orthographic practices in *BEAR* magazine (Moran 1991). The non-standard spellings used on the BML are those typically used to represent forms of Appalachian and Ozark speech stereotypically associated with "hillbilly" identity, such as the spellings used in the Mock Hillbilly of comic strips like *Li'l Abner* or *Barney Google and Snuffy Smith*. Some of the spellings represent actual dialectal variation, but others are examples of eye dialect (Ives 1950, Preston 1982, 1985). Preston (1982) describes eye-dialect as follows:

...forms such as *sez* and *wuz* are known as EYE-DIALECT – forms which reflect no phonological difference from their standard counterparts *says* and *was*. These last forms serve mainly to denigrate the speaker so represented by making him or her appear boorish, uneducated, rustic, gangsterish, and so on, and it is the claim of this study that nearly ALL respellings share in this defamation of character. (Preston 1985: 328)

Although Preston argues that examples of eye-dialect (indeed, all non-standard spellings) are intended to denigrate speakers of non-standard varieties, the contributors to the BML do not use respellings (including eye-dialect) to represent the speech of some other group, but typically use non-standard spellings as a form of self-presentation. The non-standard orthographies on the BML include a mix of eye-dialect and forms that seem intended to represent “hillbilly” speech (e.g. *figger* for *figure*, *kin* for *can*, etc). Common dialect forms include *yer* for *your/you’re* and *fer* for *for*, both of which seem to represent a reduced (schwa) vowel, a common feature in the casual speech of most speaker of American English. Other forms, like *wuz* for *was* and *wunderful* for *wonderful*, do not represent any distinction from the pronunciation in standard American English. Another common feature is to represent the *-ing* suffix as ending with an alveolar rather than velar nasal (e.g. *-in’* or *-in*), another feature that is typical of casual speech in all American dialects.

In some cases, the respellings produce a form of double-voicing (Bakhtin 1981) that could be interpreted as representing the speech of someone other than the author himself, as in the following example (from 1995) in which the contributor is discussing a gay country music singer. After explaining how he ran across the bearish singer while shopping for CDs, the author describes the singer’s music as follows:

20) If a cowboy bear with a good, warm, MALE voice and good band who's singin' 'bout his daddy, his BOYfriend what done left him but thass awright 'cuz he's done gone out an' he's kickin' up his heels with a buncha

other fellers, AND fallin' in love in a pickup truck headed for California with a big butch baby with brown eyes isn't self-explanatory, there's no use in trying to figger it out.

Some of the respellings represent Southern speech (*thass awright* for *that's all right* and *figger* for *figure*), but others are general casual speech forms common to most dialects of American English (*in'* for *ing* and *an'* for *and*). The posting also includes non-standard grammar that reflects stereotypes of Southern (particularly "hillbilly") speech. Indeed, the phrase *he's done gone out an' he's kickin' up his heels* is ungrammatical in Southern speech and clearly marks a non-native speaker producing an exaggerated stereotype. In Southern White Vernacular English and African American English (see Green 2002), the completive aspect marker *done* normally occurs without the auxiliary *has* (e.g. *he done gone*) unless the sentence is intended to be emphatic, in which case the auxiliary occurs in the full form (e.g. *he HAS done gone* [or *HAVE done gone* in African American English]). The use of a contracted auxiliary (*he's done gone out*) is quite awkward and very atypical of dialects where the completive aspect marker *done* occurs. Moreover, the combination of the completive marker *done* with progressive *he's kickin' up his heels* does not make sense as the "going out" would have to be entirely completed, but the (progressive) "kicking up heels" is on-going. Although the non-standard speech is presented in the author's own voice (as the singer is in the third person), the non-standard forms only occur in the discussion of the singer (and not in the rest of the posting). Thus, the non-standard spelling and grammar index the singer's identity rather than that of the author, adding to the construction of the singer as a "bear" by marking him as rural and working-class.

Most examples of non-standard orthographies and grammar are presented as the representing the authors' own language. In the posting below, for example, the author (who is from Massachusetts) uses the words *mosey* and *if'n*, both associated with "hillbilly" speech:

21) But that was years and years ago; nowadays I have to turn to the Country Music channel or mosey on down to the hardware store if'n I want to get a glimpse of some real bear between not-quite-monthly visits with Stephen.

In the following example (from 1994), the author uses respellings in discussing a relationship that has gone sour:

22) I've been datin this dude, well, er, I guess jes hangin out, since June. Things were gettin kinda heavy fer awhile, but I never really saw the signs. Like, say, the night he was down at the bar and calls me about midnite and asks if he kin come over. I dunno, mebbe not_that_bad...but I wuz hung up major big time on the dude. He wuz gettin real deep inside, and stuff.

Here, the author uses eye-dialect (*fer* for *for* and *wuz* for *was*) and other respellings (*mebbe* for *maybe*, *jes* for *just*, *kin* for *can*, etc) to represent his own speech. Of course, the use of eye-dialect does not reflect any actual forms in the author's speech, but it is highly unlikely that any of the other respellings reflect naturally-occurring forms for the author either. In another posting by the same author (from the same year), he presents himself as neither Southern nor working-class, referring to himself as a "beer snob":

23) Okay gang, I've lurked around long enuf! Yeah, my intro wuz posted back in March, but I've been quiet fer so long...

Now you've made it to the topic that I consider myself the eternal student of: BEER!! (Didn't Jesus say something about 'When any two or more are gathered in the name of beer'?!? If not, he wuz misquoted!)

;{}#

I am the bartender's bane that when walking into a bar I've never been to before, will ask, "What kind of non-industrial beer do you have?"

Luckily, the LoneStar carries Sierra Nevada Pale Ale and you kin find Guinness in several bars in San Francisco. I guess you can consider me a barfly and a beer snob. Unfortunately, in gay bars this doesn't seem to cut it...<sigh>.

Although the author uses eye-dialect (*enuf* for *enough* and more uses of *wuz*), his writing style changes dramatically in the final paragraph (following the emoticon representing a winking, smiling face with a moustache and a beard). Although beer is the drink of choice for bears because of its association with the working class, asking a bartender “What kind of non-industrial beer do you have?” clearly indexes a middle-class identity. In a rural Southern context, this question would likely provoke laughter (if not violence). The use of eye-dialect as a form of self-presentation by a middle-class man from San Francisco serves to indexically link the author with the working class without actually claiming to be working class himself.

The combination of writing in a style that indexes a lack of sophistication or education with decidedly middle-class sensibilities is also seen in the following posting (from 1995) about potentially using the bear codes to convey the sort of bear one desires in addition to representing one's self:

24) (Here's my patentable suggestion for using bearcodes, which I'll give away: let's not just list our own. How about following it with an "ISO" code, so others can know at a glance not just who you are, but what yer looking for, as well?)

I.e.: Me: B0 t+ f- w g+ k+ e+ c(d-) r p (I ferget the rest)
ISO: B0-6 (or so) >t >=(f w g k) d++ >=e+ >=r

In other words, I like 'em big, hairy, touchy, dominant, and outdoorsy. I don't know of a code for well-read, but that would help, too. After all, you've got to be able to talk in the morning.

Here the use of *yer*, *ferget*, and *I like 'em big* index working-class identity, although the author states that he is searching for a partner who is well-read, suggesting that the author considers himself educated and sophisticated despite representing his own speech with Mock Hillbilly.

The combination of non-standard orthographies with middle-class sensibilities creates indexical disjunctures that distinguish bears from both heterosexual working-class men and gay men who may have middle-class aspirations. These indexical disjunctures often involve combining non-standard respellings with language that indexes gay and/or middle-class identities, as in the following example (from 1995):

25) I respond well to: older, educated, aggressive, somewhat intimidating, well hung men who do not smoke. Furriness is wonderful, but not a fetish. Confidence, *savoir faire*, and a capacity for rough affection are BIG stimulants.

In this example, the author uses the eye-dialect form *wunderful* (for *wonderful*) with the French borrowing *savoir faire* in the following sentence. The use of French is a traditional characteristic of camp style used to index an aristocratic stance as a form of parody (Harvey 2000: 243, 2002:1153). The combination of French (indexing sophistication and aristocracy) with eye-dialect indexing a lack of education and sophistication, produces an indexical disjuncture. This disjuncture allows the author to index working-class and upper/middle-class identities in succession to convey bear working-class orientation without fully marking himself as truly middle-class.

Bear indexical disjunctures may also combine respellings with stereotypically gay forms, as in the following example from 1994:

26) THANX to all my SouthBay buddies for makin my last Wednesday Bingo/Bear nite a serious drunken extravaganza!

The cake was fab (Thanx, Troy...what wuz that Bear made out of anyway?!?) and the company...well...the usual <snicker>. Yer all tops in my book!! Four stars...(really!)<g>.

Here, the author combines stereotypically gay male lexical items like *extravaganza* and *fab* (i.e. *fabulous*) with forms of eye-dialect that index working-class identity (*wuz* and *yer*). This mix of signs that index working-class and gay male identities is a hallmark of bear identity. Postings to the BML may go even further, drawing from a wide range of indexical signs, as in the following example from 1995 (CC Tx refers to the city of Corpus Christi, Texas where the author was attending the annual meeting of the American Library Association):

27) Oy Vey!! I'm glad I don't have your nerve in my tooth - yer a kinky li'l pervert! Uh, look me up if yer ever cursed w/travelling to CC Tx - ask at the Hidden Door, they'll tell ya where to find me. (Um, don't pay ANY attention to the rumors of a parking deck being built adjacent to my bedroom, or of the apartment downstairs being redecorated with an enforced ceiling - they're lies, all lies!!) I've got an addition to the list of Cons:

If you're travelling with someone else, and you and a bear de jour decide to fuck your brains out like a couple of weasels, be considerate of your travelling companion trying to sleep in the next bed (when he starts to holler "Will you two shuttup fucking so damn loud!!!!") - throw another pillow at him to put over his head!!

The author of this posting begins with *Oy Vey!!* which typically indexes Jewish identity, quickly switching into the non-standard orthographies that index rural Southern working-class identity (*yer*, *li'l*). The parenthetical statement includes forms typical of the conscious performance and exaggeration associated with camp citations of femininity, including the emphasis on *ANY* and the final *lies, all lies!!* (see Harvey 2002). The opening sentence in the second paragraph combines a French borrowing *de jour* which indexes middle-class sophistication with the contrastingly coarse *fuck your brains out*.

These indexical disjunctures allow contributors to the BML to index a polyphonous identity in which working-class signs are woven together with forms that index gay and middle-class identities. Much like the use of “white women’s language” by African American drag queens is used to index a middle-class identity that the drag queens themselves do not necessarily claim for themselves (see Chapter One), the use of eye-dialect and non-standard orthography and grammar allows bears to index a working-class identity without actually intending to represent themselves as working-class.

4.0 Conclusion

Bear appropriations of working-class signs demonstrate that sexual identity need not be expressed only through gender. Forms that index gender in bear culture include both normative and non-normative stances towards the expression of gender identity. Bears may dress like working-class heterosexual men while calling each other “girlfriend” and using feminine pronouns. In addition to male-oriented activities like camping or watching sports, bears participate in activities typically associated with women, like cooking, knitting, or sewing. This suggest that bear identity is founded in class as much as (if not more than) in gender.

Although there have been numerous attempts to create welcoming spaces for overweight gay men, none have been nearly as successful as the bear movement. The linking of body type with working-class signs allows bears to reposition large bodies within a context in which weight can be interpreted as an index of masculinity and sexual desirability. Following the lead of feminist writers who challenge hegemonic domination over women’s bodies, bear use their working-class orientation as a form of resistance against dominant gay-male ideologies of desire that marginalize heavysset men. Through

the use of eye-dialect, non-standard orthographies, and Mock Hillbilly, some contributors to the BML indexically link themselves with the Southern working class while maintaining their own middle-class identities.

Although eye-dialect, non-standard respelling are almost always used to denigrate marginalized social groups, the bear use of Mock Hillbilly is not so straight-forward. The fact that bears use these forms of language to represent themselves suggests that one can exploit potential indexical meanings of mock varieties as a potential form of resistance. Much like Elaine Chun's work on the use of Mock Asian by comedian Margaret Cho (Chun 2008), the bear use of Mock Hillbilly is open to competing interpretations. Although it may be offensive to some to see forms historically associated with the marginalization of Southern mountain populations, the use of Mock Hillbilly is integral to bear resistance to hegemonic ideologies within the gay community that marginalize both heavyset and working-class gay men.

1. *Felice di essere grosso, contento di essere peloso, orgoglioso di essere omosessuale.*
2. Although the bear flag is sometimes interpreted as representing the colors of actual bear fur, it includes a stripe that matches the typical skin color of white people which does not occur in the fur of bears in nature.
3. Larry the Cable Guy has also been criticized for appropriating and performing a stereotyped Southern working-class identity when he actually from Nebraska (i.e. he is not Southern).

4. Particularly for Southern white gay men who have emigrated from the South, bear culture may be attractive because it highly values rural Southern identities that are often stigmatized in hegemonic (white) gay culture outside of the South.