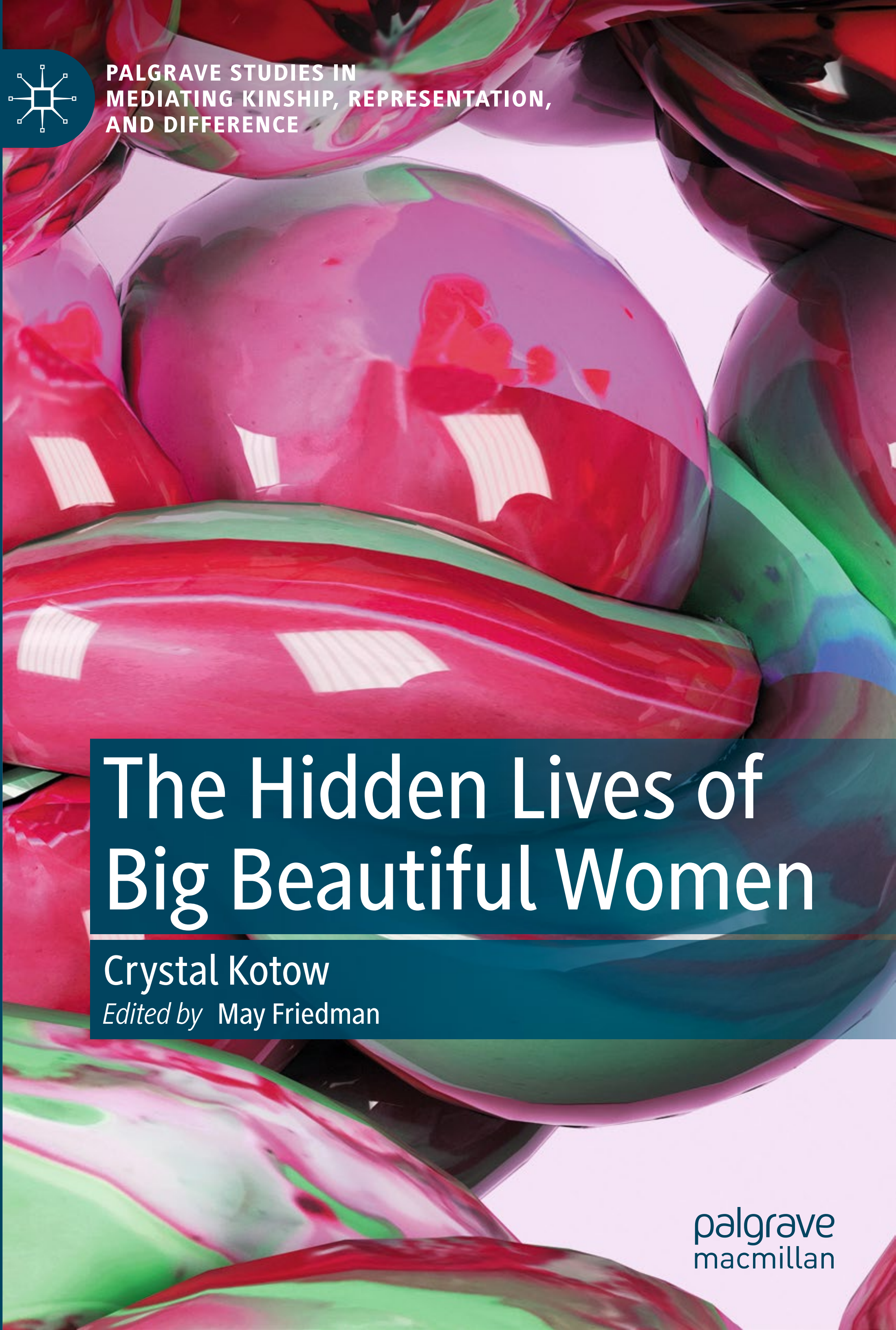

PALGRAVE STUDIES IN MEDIATING KINSHIP, REPRESENTATION, AND DIFFERENCE

The Hidden Lives of Big Beautiful Women

Crystal Kotow

Edited by May Friedman

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Preface

Crystal Kotow was my very dear student, colleague, collaborator, co-conspirator and friend, and the world is a sadder place without her. I first met Crystal in 2015 and quickly came to appreciate her warmth, brilliance and razor wit. We overlapped in a range of academic settings and I was stretched and enriched by every interaction. Crystal's brain was truly incandescent. Notably, however, Crystal's enormous intellect was matched by her endless compassion: Crystal dismissed the usual expectations for snooty academics and instead led with both a huge brain AND a huge heart.

The book you're holding is a product of Crystal's heart and mind—fuelled by her passions for theory and justice, tangible evidence of her commitment to make the world a better place. Crystal lived in the world as a superfat woman and experienced all the shit that this embodiment gets targeted for. Significantly, however, Crystal came to also understand all the beauty of her embodiment—the generosity of her ample body, the joy of fat life. Some of the origins of this transcendence came in Crystal's exploration of the BBW—Big Beautiful Woman—community, a space for fat women and their admirers. As Crystal would be the first to convey, this space was complicated and imperfect, never immune from the misogyny, racism and other evils of the world outside it. At the same time, BBW space offers gifts that are not readily available outside of its community, opportunities and connections and access to joy and desirability that are often presented as antithetical to fat existence.

Crystal participated in BBW space as both an insider and a critical observer[1]. The participant ethnography which emerged from her research is remarkable in showcasing a corner of the universe that is underdiscussed and often reviled. In exploring BBW “bashes”—weekend-long gatherings for folks within the community—Crystal was able to humanize an experience that has often lived as a punchline. The result is a rich mine of stories and encounters that are truly heartfelt and thicken our understanding of fatness, sexuality, desire, race, gender, kin and beyond. Crystal’s work brings BBW space into three dimensions, not hesitating to explore the challenges in this community, but also shedding light on the unparalleled gifts that this space can offer.

In March 2022, Crystal died, suddenly and without warning. We don’t know why she was taken from us. As I’ve written elsewhere,

> Living in a larger body is hard on one’s heart, though not in the ways we are often told. Rather than suggesting that our cardiovascular health is irreparably compromised, I would argue instead that being fat often hurts our feelings, exposes our vulnerabilities, leaves us reeling from insults to our souls. (Friedman, 2021, p. 150)

Crystal was brave and astonishing, but the world is deeply difficult for people of size. As she wrote, “weight stigma has been identified as an independent risk factor for various physical health outcomes like diabetes and heart disease—no matter the person’s body size” (Chap. 2, p. 10). We’ll never know all that she experienced, only that the world is poorer, sadder, lesser, without her.

I was lucky enough to be a member of Crystal’s doctoral committee culminating in her stupendous defence in August 2020. I don’t know that she ever fully understood how extraordinary her work was. When I learned she was gone, I looked back through our texts and found the following message that I sent as I read the dissertation: “Crystal, I’m just starting to read through and wanted to say: This is utterly, utterly brilliant. I want this to be a book and I want to buy and teach that book endlessly. I am seriously awestruck.”

I don’t do grief well. I tend to try to bully grief into submission, to try to force it to respect my timelines, to act instead of feel (spoiler: this works about as well as you think it does). When I learned of Crystal’s death, in

[1] The research for this book was entirely undertaken prior to the COVID pandemic.

my frantic attempt to outrun grief I thought about this text, and our subsequent conversations about publishing her work, and knew that I wanted to honour her brilliance. While editing this book has not made me less sad—perhaps the opposite—it does salve one subset of grief at Crystal's loss: the fact that her extraordinary work will be seen beyond those on her doctoral committee, or those who knew her personally. Simply put: this work matters. It matters because Crystal mattered, and it's a way she can live on, but it also just matters on its own merits. We have a responsibility to know more than we do about the lives of fat people, to stretch our understandings beyond the cartoonish mockery which characterizes so much public engagement with fat. We need to think about sex, and desire, and the tensions between queer and het life, and the ways that race is performed or invisibilized in fat space. Exploring BBW bashes allows us to broaden our knowledge and deepen our understanding.

Mediating Kinship, Representation and Difference

This series on Mediating Kinship, Representation and Difference aims to explore how people who have been historically characterized as Other are held in kin relationships and how they may be prevented from doing so. In addition, the series aims to explore the impacts of technologies on kin creation and destruction. BBW communities gather in person but are held together by a glue of cyber connections, through endless engagement on Facebook groups, through texts and chats, by poring over websites for pictures before, during and after bashes, and beyond. It's not an overstatement to say that the Internet has allowed fat people and their admirers to connect much more readily and thoroughly than would have been possible in an earlier era. Yet these surface analyses of kinship, technology and difference merely scratch the surface of thinking through how these themes present and recur throughout this book, and it is to these themes that I now turn.

Kinship

Crystal's heartfelt words tell the story of a community, rife with all the family squabbles and steamy makeups of any community. A supple understanding of kinship encompasses an awareness of BBW life, considers the need for kin among folks who are the recipients of rage and rejection, including often from their families of origin. Indeed, a major theme of this work is its focus on community as a fundamental reason why people participate in BBW bashes.

Crystal notes, “BBW community constitutes trauma culture—a collectivity of people who inhabit shame-prone identities who align with each other because of shame-based trauma they have faced living as fat in a fatphobic society” (Chap. 2, p. 17). In common with all communities—and all intersectional ideas of identity—despite shared trauma, these communities are not monolithic in their experiences and ideas. That said, the shared feeling of “being normal” that is so well articulated in this book’s analysis nonetheless does provide a breeding ground for intimate connection.

Towards the end of the book Crystal reflects on her experiences in BBW spaces, beginning with attending a party and leaving with an abiding, life-long friendship. As she notes,

> Over the next nine years, I would continue to meet an assortment of other politicized fat (and fat-allied) feminists through the BBW community, my fat activism, and my fat studies academic endeavours. I now refer to them as my village…The village has played a significant part in my ability to persist in the face of sudden and extreme mental and physical health issues and they are the reason I can celebrate over 10 years free from dieting and intentional weight loss, all of which has very likely saved my life. We are committed to growth and accountability and I am thankful every day for being lucky enough to be part of this community. (Chap. 5, p. 68)

Yet the analysis of kin doesn’t stop in thinking through community. Perhaps the most compelling view of kinship which is offered by this book comes in its consideration of the relationship with one’s own body as its own form of kinship. Without reifying mind–body dualism, for many larger folks, the body is viewed as a reviled and disparate entity from the essential self. The book details a range of ways in which fat people—especially fat, female-identified people—are alienated from the body, taught to view it as an enemy or a demon to be tamed. Taking up Massumi’s work on affect (1995), the book explores fat activism generally, and BBW space in particular, as a way of growing relationship with the body, of healing and reconciling mind–body relationships.

Finally, this exploration of BBW space provides a temporal disruption of the usual expectations of heterosexual partnership and family making. The book looks at the ways that sexual engagement and development may be different for fat folks, and the ways that bash culture, by virtue of being highly sexualized, may also result in an atemporal revisioning of sexual partnership. This analysis draws from Ahmed's work on happiness scripts that seek to disrupt capitalist notions of success (2010b). The book explores the overlaps between BBW and swinger spaces and the ways that casual approaches to hooking up may be freeing while simultaneously potentially allowing for misogynist tropes to flourish.

While so much of the framing of BBW is around rapacious sexual relations, the soft underbelly is the opportunity for deep and sustained connections, connections that feel awfully like family: the ways, as one of Crystal's participants notes, that "fat network activates" (page). Like family, these networks are sometimes fraught, but as with many families, they are essential to the tug which pulls participants back to these spaces nonetheless. The book explores in- and out-group conflicts, including, notably, the deep tensions in the community around weight loss surgeries and other technologies of diet culture. These are painful schisms that speak to the profound traumas fat people face. Fat folks respond to these traumas in a range of ways—by learning to adore our fat bodies or by trying to bully them into submission (and in truth, we are all always engaged in some aspect of both behaviours). The strong feelings that our relationships with our bodies engender result in tensions. The book views some of these tensions through the lens of gynaeopticon, the specific ways in which women[2] watch other women, with a particular focus on diet culture. In reckoning with our own and others' behaviours we alienate one another but may also find the building blocks for authentic connection. Fundamentally, then, this book describes a huge, multifunctional, overwhelming state of kinship, replete with internal dramas and tensions and held together by a deep well of love.

Technology

It is impossible to think about the politics surrounding fat people without a deep awareness of the impact of self-regulation and surveillance, what Foucault called a "strategic force that permeates the whole of social life" (Vintges, 2012). The maintenance and containment of fat is a fundamental technology of the self (Foucault, 1994) that frames the situation of fat

[2] See page 4 for Crystal's analysis of the word "woman" and how it is deployed in an inclusive fashion within her research.

people in society. This book abounds with acknowledgements of these technologies: thinking about shapewear and the literal design of textiles and materials to constrain and re-design flesh; fat fashion as a site of anguish and redemption; and other engagements with self-acceptance through interactions with selfies, with mirrors, with the gaze of others. Indeed, as Crystal articulates, the tensions around hierarchies of attractiveness are not removed from spaces that cater to fat people, but are only circumscribed by new aesthetic logics. Yet the impact of technologies on fat is not limited to self-regulation.

The kin networks which are detailed above arise at BBW bashes but often have their origins in cyber space. As the book documents, the connections and relationships which may (or may not) flourish at bashes are often seeded in online networking which occurs prior; connections are maintained through online contact long after the bashes end. As with many other identity-based communities (and arguably more so for trauma cultures), the community is circumscribed by technological and virtual contact. It is impossible to untangle the threads of kinship and technology in thinking of BBW spaces. As the fat network activates, community is both deployed and potentially held in tension: as many participants in this project detail, a growing body acceptance came from engagement in fat activist spaces, yet so many fat spaces, both online and offline, continue to be framed around commitment to self-regulation. Fundamentally, the fat body is constantly in a state of reflection.

In the space between the self and other, the containment of fat flesh is subjected to the technologies of the obesity assemblage (Rich et al., 2010), frames which provide a narrative of fatness that is profoundly dangerous, perverse and Other. As the book details, engagements in public life consistently position the fat body in relation to both space and people in ways that implicate technologies of containment. Travel and the navigation of public transit, an awareness of the limitations of restaurants and chairs—literally the most basic technologies that govern daily existence require endless planning and self-awareness for people of size.

The technologies of capitalism are also at play. Fat fashion, as referenced above, may provide (or deny) opportunities for identity formation, but also requires interactions with commerce, including navigating the "fat tax" which adds a premium to clothes for larger bodies. Extra seats on planes, extra sturdy and expensive sofas and mattresses—all inflate the costs of daily life. These financial outlays are not as costly, however, as the endless psychic expense of experiencing weight stigma and fat hatred on an ongoing basis.

In the face of the exhaustion of self-scrutiny and maintenance it is unsurprising that virtually all fat people are enmeshed with diet cultures. At the same time, this analysis invites suspicion: perhaps the multi-billion dollar diet industry has invented technologies of self-hatred rather than arising as a natural extension of our desire to be smaller? Indeed, as is well documented here, the ever unspooling technologies of weight loss, most notably in the realm of bariatric surgeries, feast on ensuring that all bodies are imperfect, especially, as Crystal writes, the farther they transgress against the thin, white, able, male ideal. The diet complex requires Foucault's normalizing gaze in order to keep its market captive.

There are deep tensions in the community around the desire to alter the fat body vs. embracing and accepting its immutability. As Crystal articulates, bash spaces are increasingly colonized by discussion of weight loss surgeries which alter the spaces psychically but also visually in the inclusion of increasing numbers of post-op bodies. Reflecting on the politics of BBW is therefore irreparably imbedded in discussions of the ways that literal and figurative tools are deployed against bodies in aid of containment and constraint. In other words, the framing of fat bodies as fundamentally sites of difference *requires* the deployment of technology as a disciplinary mechanism. It is to this analysis of difference, then, that I now turn.

Difference

As is so beautifully demonstrated in this book, to be fat is to be fundamentally different. Social policies, public spaces, cultural expectations and normative timelines are all predicated on thinner bodies, despite the fact that the numeric majority of humans in North America are now configured towards some degree of fatness. If we all look and live fat, however, the public articulation of belonging is nonetheless powerfully organized around expectations of thinness, and the sanctions that are therefore imposed on fat bodies are endless. Fat hatred pervades every aspect of fat life, cradle to grave; the impact of fat stigma, as Crystal skilfully argues, may contribute to fat death. We live in a world that reviles the notion of taking up space—especially and perniciously for female-identified people—and the penalty for failing to adhere to this edict is swift and constant. All of this exists in a space of what Berlant terms "crisis ordinariness"

(2011). It is therefore unsurprising that BBW spaces are sites of relief, are spaces where taken for granted anxieties and considerations can be put aside briefly in the context of an environment designed with big bodies as (more of) the default.

While thus far I have focused on the ways that BBW networks, as explored by Crystal, have allowed for connection and community, they are nonetheless deeply heterogenous spaces. Ideologically, in terms of orientation to diet culture and body sovereignty, but also in terms of the demographics contained therein. Crystal notes that based on the rampant heterosexism that pervades BBW bashes, she expected a largely straight set of participants and was surprised that more than half of the folks she interviewed self-identified as outside of straight identifiers (queer, bisexual, pansexual). At the same time, as Crystal freely states, her snowball sample led her towards those who shared her political orientations, so it's possible that the people who gravitated to her study were those who were more critical, queerer, otherwise more self-conscious about difference.

One major limitation of this book is that the majority of participants with whom Crystal spoke were white. While this accurately maps onto the demographic characteristics of those who attend bashes, it doesn't begin to explore why these spaces remain so white (though Crystal notes that male admirers who attend skew towards Blackness, which also warrants further discussion). Crystal saw this as a possible necessary avenue for future research, and the door remains open to consider why many spaces of fat reclamation, BBW and beyond, remain doggedly white. This is especially notable given two things: the origins of fat activism in Black feminist thought (Strings, 2019) and the pernicious focus of obesity discourses against Black, Indigenous and other People of Colour (Harrison, 2021). It is not an overstatement to suggest that anti-fat rhetoric is squarely targeting non-white bodies, especially with the focus on self-regulation that is merely a tired re-branding of the same discourses that have been aimed at Black, brown and Indigenous folks throughout modernist and colonial eras.

Scholars in fat studies are repeatedly told that this field is an indulgence that focuses on a white girl problem (even/especially when we are not white ourselves!), despite the rampant structural racism we see within obesity discourses and public policies (Friedman & Meerai, 2022). Nonetheless, access to specifically fat affirming spaces seems to skew towards whiteness on the part of the fat people involved. As Crystal notes,

> One of the questions that requires further investigation is why bashes tend to be spaces occupied most prominently by white women—in other words, what is it about bashes that does not speak to the interests of Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color? I suggest that this overview of some of the ways bashes are shaped/informed by white supremacy gives us insight. While I can understand how white supremacy influences my own bash experiences (to a limited extent at this point), I can only begin to imagine how these processes might impact Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color who choose to attend. (Chap. 4, p. 49)

It is absolutely impossible to talk about fat liberation without talking about its enmeshment with other liberation struggles and, perhaps most importantly, the struggles for racial justice and Indigenous sovereignty. While this book begins to consider the intrinsic relationship between these struggles, a greater awareness of how fat hatred affects all bodies, and why some are not welcomed (or do not feel safe) in the safe/r spaces of places like BBW spaces, is essential. I hope that Crystal's concluding remarks about opportunities for further research will be seen as a call to other scholars to take up this work and extend it further.

Conclusion

This book is lightly edited from the version of the project that comprised Crystal's PhD dissertation, re-framed very slightly to allow the primary research to take centre stage. After introducing the project, Crystal gave space to the theoretical underpinnings of the research as well as clarifying the methods used. The bulk of the book, however, is in Chaps. 4 and 5 which explore the experiences of Crystal and her participants at BBW bashes. These chapters are seemingly in contradiction to one another: Chap. 4 seeks to expose the ways that BBW bashes seemingly undermine the project of fat liberation, while Chap. 5 considers all the ways that bashes may bolster the livability of fat humanity. Fundamentally, as Crystal continuously learned, bashes are not a singular thing. They are exploitative and fetishistic, grounded in logics of white supremacy and steeped in diet culture. At the same time, as I've briefly explored above, they allow community and access to desire and sexuality that is often excised from the lives of fat people outside of these spaces.

The gift Crystal offers in this book is an opportunity to dive deeply into a space that has been woefully underexplored. BBW spaces offer an awareness to our understanding of fat life that is difficult to access elsewhere. At the same time, this book is the view of an insider, not a predatory expose, but instead a committed gaze that is part call-out, part love letter, by someone who was integral to this community.

Crystal cites Deleuze's work on body becoming, the ways that bodies are always becoming other than what they are. In sitting closely with Crystal's words, I feel myself altered and hope that, in the reading, you, too, will *become*, will be altered and allow some of the grace and deep knowing that this book offers into your awareness and understanding.

Toronto, ON, Canada May Friedman
June 2023

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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

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

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In general, BBW community events are body positive social spaces where fat people and their admirers and allies can gather to relax, dance, mingle, drink, eat comfortably, and enjoy themselves. In June 2016, five years after that first party, I attended a BBW bash. BBW bashes are different from BBW parties. Parties are one-night affairs held every once in a while, and bashes last anywhere from two days to an entire week. Bashes are held all over the United States and, at the time of this writing, there is one Canadian bash held in Niagara Falls each summer. The activities offered at bashes depend on the organizer, but often include some or all of the following: community-building sessions, education and learning sessions, pool parties, vendor fairs, themed parties, and dances.

Over the last nine years, there have been times when my relationship with the BBW community has been fraught with inner conflict. My feminist politics run counter to much of what I observed happening in BBW social spaces, both online and in person. Primarily, I was frustrated by these spaces that were overflowing with potential for fat liberation, but that ultimately put power over fat women's sexual subjectivity in the hands of men who admired and desired them. This particular feature of fat-specific social spaces has been critiqued by Samantha Murray (2005) who is skeptical of events that allow fat women to experience themselves as sexual subjects because the events are focused on beauty and attractiveness of female bodies as defined by men. I have never been able to keep my politics to myself—this was especially true when I was in my 20s and had the energy to argue—so I made a reputation for myself as a "difficult" woman. In fact, that's probably putting it lightly. In spite of all of this, I am happier to be a member of the BBW community now than I have ever been. Certain things haven't changed. BBW social spaces are simultaneously predicated on the values of acceptance while also being spaces in which there remains a strong undercurrent of societal issues like misogyny, fatphobia,[1] racism, ableism, and homophobia that loosely shape the atmosphere similarly to the way they significantly shape ideologies that organize broader society. But certain other things remain the draw, including

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

a sense of fat community and the ability to feel "normal," as well as the education and community-building events offered at some bashes. I also still really like to let loose and party in a safer-for-me space every now and then.

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

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

I want to draw attention to use of the word "woman" throughout this book. It's a loaded, complicated term that has, historically, been used to enact violence. It has also been used to organize through solidarity and reclamation. "Woman" is not a monolithic category, but feminism has a history of collapsing women under an umbrella that includes a wide range of experiences and intersections, including the experiences of trans men, trans women, non-binary, and gender non-conforming folks who (may) all have access to the category "woman" in different ways. It is my intention here to acknowledge that "woman" is a porous description and an unstable and open category containing many diversities and gender identifications. I do not use this language lightly, understanding this term can be contested. I examine various feminist texts in the following chapters that gloss over a wide range of experiences and intersections by using the term "woman"; however, my use of the word both in recruiting participants and in the analysis presented in this book intends to capture all and any experiences of and orientation toward a womanhood that is inclusive of anyone who navigates (or has navigated) this world as a woman. My use of the term woman as a gender category is inspired by queer and transgender theorists whose work rejects gender essentialism and the heteronormative gender binary (Butler, 1999; Feinberg, 1993; Halberstam, 2012; Mock, 2014; Serano, 2007).

Contextualizing the Research

Charlotte Cooper (2016) refers to BBW culture as a "major site of fat activism in the West" (p. 53)—an assertion I consider in more depth in Chap. 5. But for now I will say that I suppose she is right insofar as the existence of spaces where fat people are given agency over their bodies, are allowed to feel free in their bodies, and to have experiences that are coded as "normal" by the broader culture is truly radical under the current anti-fat regime. This research builds on the ever-growing academic literature produced in fat studies by fat academics. Thus far, there has been no in-depth academic study of BBW community like what I have undertaken; however, in 2012, Rachel Colls published her study of LargeLife, a UK-based BBW group that held parties at a club in London. Colls (2012) attended four club nights, observed and interpreted social interaction, interviewed the owner of the group, and conducted informal interviews with attendees at each club night in the interest of exploring "what is accepted or acceptable in such a space, who or what is 'doing' the accepting and what the risks are for fat, female bodies and a re-framing of fatness more generally when designating acceptance according to a particular space and to 'an' admiring audience" (Colls, 2012, p. 19). She reported that while BBW social events do offer people in the BBW community the